

COMPLETE SERIES

The
Princess
of the Bottom
of the
World

DAN LINEHAN

A MULTIMEDIA SERIAL NOVEL BASED ON TRUE ADVENTURES

Praise for *The Princess of the Bottom of the World*

“I loved going on the journey with Scott and the group. I was brought so close to the land and the wildlife by Scott’s descriptions, which can only be accomplished by someone with a heart invested in them. This beautiful travelogue swept me away.”

—Mary Ackerman (nurse practitioner and book club member)

“I especially like Melina and Cassandra, who were both hard working, smart, personable, independent, risk takers, passionate, uninhibited, playful, and lived in the moment.”

—Connie Clark (dean of health sciences and book club member)

“This is a great story! It was an adventure from the start! I like Scott, young and old, for his gumption and romanticism and resourcefulness and adventuresomeness, his humor and playfulness, his combination of regard for safety and protocols with his occasional interest in ignoring those very things. I like his sensuality and brains.”

—Mary Rakow (author and editor)

“*The Princess of the Bottom of the World* reads like a collaboration between Paul Theroux, Rachel Carson, and Robert James Waller.”

—Dan Bergmann (scientist and educator)

“Scott’s narrative voice is compelling, and imparts so much personality that I felt like I had gone on the expedition with him. And I was definitely craving Malbec (one of my favorite wines, too) the entire time!”

—Deborah Steinberg (writer and editor)

“In my preschool classroom, nature plays a big part of the curriculum. I was pleased to see that you included some stories that reflected Scott’s childhood interest in nature. We need to work hard to cultivate young children’s interest in nature so they will become better caretakers of our planet. So after reading *The Princess of the Bottom of the World*, I’ll be working on how to appropriately include climate change in the curriculum.”

—Pat Padilla (teacher and book club member)

“It’s really wonderful how strongly you express Scott’s emotions and excitement over every glacier. And all his descriptions are so vivid, right down to the feathers of the black-browed albatross. Whew, it’s a powerful ending and I am still crying!”

—Gail Cheeseman (cofounder of Cheesemans’ Ecology Safaris)

The Princess of the Bottom of the World

by Dan Linehan

Over the years working on *The Princess of the Bottom of the World*, I've had help in many ways from many people. Thank you all! I wish to dedicate this work to poet and writing instructor David Gitin. His teaching and guidance allowed me to emerge as a writer. I miss my good friend.

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Though a work of fiction, *The Princess of the Bottom of the World* is a seven-episode series of multimedia novellas based on the author's true adventures to Antarctica and the surrounding regions, time living abroad in Argentina, work with science and engineering, and nearly two decades of professional writing about the only world that we can call home.

This episode is best read with an image capable reader. Photos in high resolution are available online by visiting the [Multimedia Traveling Companion](#), which also includes additional photos, video footage, and more behind-the-scenes materials.

The series is not intended for all ages. Episodes can contain strong language, mature situations and themes, and/or sexual content.

Cover photo by Dan Linehan

Cover and logo designs by James Linehan

Spanish translation assistance by Gisela Zunino (Buenos Aires)

For Episode 1, photo reproductions of the mural "Tango" (Buenos Aires) in Chapter 2 and the unnamed hanging artwork (Ushuaia) in Chapter 3 are used with the permission of Munu Actis Goretta. The mermaid mural on the external wall of the Museo del Fin del Mundo (Ushuaia) in Chapter 6 was painted around 2005 by an unknown artist. Its photo reproduction is used with the permission of the Museo del Fin del Mundo.

Publication Acknowledgments

Excerpts: “Beagle Channel,” “Buenos Aires,” “The Other Side of the Comet,” and “Hit Play” (*Homestead Review*, 2015); “Grytviken” (*Porter Gulch Review*, 2015); “Surfing on Rocks of Ice” (*Catamaran Literary Reader*, 2015); “An International Scene” (*Ping-Pong*, 2015); and “Fish, Frogs, and Alluvial Fans” (*Caustic Frolic*, 2019).

Poems: “Cats and Dogs” (*Monterey Poetry Review*, 2007); “Constellations” (installation at Residencia Corazón, La Plata, Argentina, 2013); and “Beagle Channel” and “Trece Fuegos” (*Homestead Review*, 2007)

Photographs: “Sunset in Beagle Channel” and “Street Art in Buenos Aires” (*Homestead Review*, 2015); “Dog in Ushuaia” (*Monterey Poetry Review*, 2007); and “Elephant Seals and Zodiacs” (*Hilltromper*, 2015)

Version C06

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The
Princess
of the Bottom
of the
World

EPISODE 1

Journey to the Bottom of the World

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Reached by helicopter, Le Cloche Summit overlooks the Argentine port of Ushuaia, which is the southernmost city in the world. Beyond Ushuaia run the Beagle Channel and the Andes Mountains in Chile. (Photo by Dan Linehan)

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1.1 / If Not for Cosmos



Viewed from aboard a ship anchored in the Beagle Channel, the fiery Sun sets as a sliver of the Moon rises. A wanderer will soon make its stellar dance across the night sky. (Photo by Dan Linehan)

DAY 27: BEAGLE CHANNEL, ARGENTINA

Bang, bang, bang.

I looked up from the expedition gear cluttering the floor and draped over everywhere else. The sudden sounds stopped me from puzzling how to pack up the mess. At this stage in the voyage, I was used to the occasional alarm. Sometimes a drill. Mostly a wildlife spotting. I checked the porthole right away, now an instinct. Nothing but quiet and calm darkness. After being aboard a ship, which was like a pinpoint of floating light on a vast sea, night after night, I'd learned that the dark took on many distinctions. Sometimes it was not really darkness at all. The Eskimos in the Arctic had many words for snow. How many words for night had I already encountered? Now, I didn't feel the motion of the waves.

Bang, bang, bang . . . BANG!

I opened the door. Cassandra, bundled for the freezing cold, radiated her excitement.

Our ship, the M/V *Southern Aurora*, was anchored in the Beagle Channel for the night. Because the seas of the Drake Passage were unusually calm, we had made the crossing from

Antarctica to Ushuaia, Argentina, in less than two days. The port had no room because of our early arrival.

“Scott, get your jacket. Come outside. Hurry,” she demanded in her heavy Chilean accent.

Cassandra had a beauty that effervesced. It was the way she talked, the way she moved, the way she held herself. She didn’t just walk. She half danced and half bounded from place to place. But now she acted in a way I had never seen before.

On land, Cassandra wouldn’t have given the impression that she made her living sailing on the highest of all the seas. She was by no means fragile, but her delicate-looking frame didn’t appear sturdy enough to be making such voyages. It only took a minute or two after meeting her to understand that she was indeed built to weather anything in her way. This was only the second time in twenty-five days that she had come to my cabin door. I felt my blood surge. I got to see her again. I knew each time could be the last.

“It’s over here somewhere,” I said, not wanting to look away from her light brown eyes or her long, dark brown hair freed from the ponytail I always saw her wear, until this moment.

“Hurry. Hurry.”

“What’s going on?”

“Just get your jacket and come on, before everyone else ruins it,” Cassandra answered.

“I’m looking for it.”

She spotted a tiny part of the jacket underneath a pile of folded clothes, rushed in, yanked it, sending everything else flying, grabbed my hand, and pulled me out of the cabin.

We weaved through the narrow passageways. We were strangely soft and fluffy in our clothing compared to the metal structure around us, which seemed too massive and heavy for a ship that was buoyant in water.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Cassandra unlatched a square-shaped steel door that looked like it was sealing off the entrance to a dungeon. Using both arms and all her weight, she budged open the bulky door. It led outside, midway along the left side of the ship. She took my hand again. I did not mind the tow one bit.

“Stay down,” she said. I complied.

We passed a row of bright portholes belonging to the lounge. The expedition members and staff inside enjoyed themselves as if nothing unusual were happening.

“Don’t let them see us,” Cassandra said, with her voice just above the sounds of the water’s calmness. “Keep low.”

“I am keeping low. This better be good.”

She turned and answered with only a crooked eye and mischievous half smile as if to say, *It’s always good with me.*

Just before we reached the rear observation deck, Cassandra said, “Close your eyes, Scott. Don’t look yet.”

“You’re not planning to toss me overboard, are you?”

“Yes. Now keep quiet or else I’ll get caught. And stop peeking.”

I felt the roughened surface of the deck more than ever as I let my boots drag a little to be sure of my footing. She guided me to the railing. I seized it with both hands. Not that I didn’t trust her. I’d picked up the habit—which I learned the hard way—of always needing to have at least one hand holding on to the ship while I moved about or it rocked around.

“Okay, you can look.”

We were in the channel where the closest lights onshore were miles and miles away. This was the same water that Charles Darwin sailed through, his ship the channel’s namesake.

“What, no plank? No sword to poke me over with?”

“Shush. Look over there,” Cassandra said, pointing up to the heavens above the right side of the ship.

How could I have missed it? How could such a thing sneak into the night sky so unannounced? The McNaught Comet streaked across the Solar System, its tail a wake of ice and rock shimmering in sunlight emanated by the Sun hiding on the dark side of Earth. Moving thousands and thousands of miles per hour, the comet looked as motionless as the Moon.

Out of nowhere, she handed me binoculars. I was used to her magic tricks. I felt the warmth she transferred to them radiate to my hands, up my arms, and into my chest.

“It’s amazing,” I said. “I once saw a comet while on an airplane. It was Hale-Bopp, I think. But it was nothing like this. Have you seen a comet before?”

“Yes. I have a telescope home at Chile.”

We huddled close, sharing the binoculars and watching the comet for an hour. Orion’s Belt, the Southern Cross, and the Milky Way seemed brighter than I had ever seen. We were, after all, anchored in the middle of the Beagle Channel, waiting to get into Puerto Ushuaia. Hardly any light shone from our ship or a nearby fishing boat. We talked about the silver ring on her finger, my silver hoop earring, and the healing powers her mother claimed silver possessed. In her late 20s, she was the oldest of five. I was the oldest of six.

With all the matter of the cosmos above us, I could not think of anything else except her. Standing close to her, it was as if we had stood together since before all the stars that we watched that night began to shine. But Cassandra needed to go. She had to work early in the morning. We had already said goodbye for the night more than two hours ago. All this time with me could cause her trouble.

We climbed down to the next deck and slowly walked alongside the handrail to the front of the ship. An officer making his rounds said hello but did not make a fuss about seeing Cassandra with me.

I turned to watch the officer disappear into the metal catacombs. “I’m not going to get you in trouble, am I?”

“I’ll be okay.”

Approaching a secluded section of the ship, I took Cassandra by the arm, tugged her into the darkness, and kissed her. She resisted a little at first, but her kiss grew from timid to tender. She

pulled away, looking over my shoulder. This was dangerous for her. No one else walked nearby. I wrapped my arms around her once more. This kiss far outshined the first.

If the port hadn't been so crowded, our first kiss and those that followed would never have happened. Though we had been at sea together for weeks, the start of our romance had taken until now. My heart had needed time to defrost, taking the cue from all the melting glaciers I had witnessed. I didn't realize what a heating effect Cassandra had become until it was almost too late.

The crew was forbidden from getting involved with the passengers. If Cassandra and I got caught, nothing would happen to me. She, on the other hand, would lose her job as well as any other chance to work aboard a ship this season.

1.2 / The Other Side of the Comet



In the San Telmo neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina, tango is sung in cafes and danced in plazas. A section of a street art mural painted by an artist collective, featuring Munu Actis Goretta, Rafael Landea, Irene Luparia, and Raúl Ruiz, captures the essence of this city life. (Photo by Dan Linehan)

PRESENT DAY: BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

On the edge of his bed, Scott Sullivan sits, facing the bedroom window of his third-story apartment, troubled by the many, many years that have passed since the night anchored in the Beagle Channel. He pours the last of the water from a clear glass pitcher into a wine glass, resting on a slightly tilted, tile-covered nightstand.

He lives in an apartment in the San Telmo *barrio* of Buenos Aires. The neighborhood is a mix of older buildings as varied as the dispositions of Argentine rulers. Outside on lively cobblestone and paved streets, in any direction or distance, it is easy for him to find a cafe with his favorite meal and drink of empanadas and Malbec wine. Although not all empanadas are equal, finding good *vino tinto* is never difficult.

His bedroom window seals tightly when it's closed, and a thick strap to its right rolls and unrolls a hefty set of exterior blinds made of large wooden slats, which keep out all light and most noise and cold. But now, there isn't any reason to keep any of these away.

A drawn, woven shade blows from the windowsill when the breeze stirs. As the breeze grows silent and the shade falls back, the wooden rod sewn into the bottom of the shade makes a gentle thud when it taps the sill. He listens to this tapping as words in Spanish from people on the street drift up, and he allows himself to be mesmerized by the sounds and the rhythm.

As the window shade lifts, a momentary pulse of light filters in. He watches his reflection in a small mirror to the left of the window come and go, come and go, reaches to his face, and traces along the creases. The wrinkles must surely be cracks in the mirror.

“Damn mirror. Keeps breaking,” Scott says out loud, though he has given up trying to fool himself. There used to be a day when he always felt and looked much younger than his age. Now, it is apparent to him that the balance has shifted way too far in the opposite direction.

The other side of the room is alive with photographs of whales, seals, albatrosses, and penguins. Icebergs and glaciers and vast expanses of frozen land. The photographs stretch the length of the low, but long, dresser in several successively higher rows like a series of mountain ridges growing in size. None of the photographs show people, but each snapshot is still a storyteller to him. Looking them over, he says, “Hello, friends. My old friends.”

The tapping of the window shade becomes louder. He sees the image of himself as a younger man when he was handsome and his long hair and close-cropped beard were fully brown and tinged with red. Back then, adventures always propelled him. *Where is that man?* He looks at a photograph of a comet hanging on the wall. It is here that he finds that man again.

He pulls down the photograph of the McNaught Comet—largest of only three photographs hanging on his walls—stares, sighs, then turns it over. Taped to the back of the picture frame is a DVD in a paper sleeve, but his bedroom doesn’t have a DVD player, television, or computer.

He walks out of his apartment, through the flimsy door, and hesitates to shut it behind him. He sighs again and slowly seals off his refuge. He trembles slightly as he inserts the skeleton key. But to him, it feels as if he’s locking the door using a key made with a soft rubber spine, not a metal one. The staircase to the second floor has tall, narrow steps. Walking down is always harder because the steps are notched at the bottom, so there’s an overhang to slip the toes of shoes under on the way up. But no such advantage is afforded on the way down. Scott takes these stairs sideways then heads down the hallway to a marbled staircase that takes a quarter spiral turn to the ground floor. Its inside track is utterly unnavigable because of how closely spaced the steps are, but the steps along the outside track are wide enough to easily accommodate even those in a less than sober state. Though the wine from last night has worn off, he still wobbles. Scott reaches for an elusive railing to stabilize himself before remembering that it remains affixed only to a ship from his memories. He clenches the DVD with both hands.

In the downstairs commons, the television is off, and people are milling around as usual. The room has tables, chairs, and sofas for the residents to gather and socialize. He switches on the television and DVD player and pulls the DVD from its sleeve. “Melina,” in red indelible marker, is written on the DVD.

* * *

In a lone chair pulled in front of the television, Scott fumbles to press play on the DVD player. Even after so many years have passed since he last watched the video, the button is almost too painful for his fingertip to touch. Somewhere deep inside, Scott has believed that he’d never

again see the video. Logic and willpower did not inform this belief. Not only will he have no choice but to watch it, he'll also have to suffer through it in a public space. Scott has not thought such an intrusion into the most intimate moments of his life was possible. Until now. His most guarded and buried memories are about to be released and exposed in a room with strangers because of a personal request that he finds unimaginable to negotiate or refuse. Throughout all the dangers Scott has faced over his lifetime, he has never felt so vulnerable.

Contact brings the screen alive, showing a side view of a young man inside a hotel room sitting at a simple desk and typing on his laptop. He searches for songs. His brown hair is long and wild, and he has a full beard like a mariner. He wears blue jeans and a dark blue sweater with two white, horizontal stripes. He wears eyeglasses but still looks rugged. A tall, half-full bottle of water, two empty wine glasses with drops of red inside still wet, an empty bottle of Malbec, and a vase with wilted flowers cover the rest of the desk. Behind him are two large windows, but the curtains are drawn. The young man on the screen is Scott from a long time ago—fifteen days after having kissed Cassandra under the McNaught Comet.

Melina Hernandez, a filmmaker from La Plata, Argentina, films him. As a child, she lived in Canada while her father attended graduate school. So her English is fairly good. Melina's accent has always seemed slightly French to Scott, even though she is a Spanish speaker. He remembers how she would pronounce "that" as "dat." Back in time, this sound was so intensely evocative to him that it made his insides resonate with breathless desire. Melina hides behind the camera. "I Melt with You" by Modern English plays on his laptop. Hearing this song, he remembers they loved the same music. The playlist became the soundtrack for their lives. But in the video, Scott doesn't sing along with these words. He sings a different song.

SCOTT (singing):
"Lay, Lady, Lay."

MELINA:
So, Scott?

Scott turns to the camera as Melina zooms in for a close-up. His hair reaches to the middle of his shoulder blades.

MELINA:
Tell me, why do you have your hair long?

SCOTT (singing):
Stay for a while.

MELINA:
Why?

SCOTT:
Because when I'm in Antarctica and the Sun is really hot and direct—and with the hole in the ozone layer—it keeps

me from getting sunburned. I wear my bandana and *mi* hat,
my hat.

He covers his mouth and nose with one hand and his forehead
with the other.

SCOTT:

And I look like a *bandido* because I rob fat American
tourists, who are on big cruise ships. They are very
gordo and dumb.

His smile isn't from the trouble of the past but from the
trouble to come.

1.3 / Fish, Frogs, and Alluvial Fans



Adorning Ushuaia's international airport, a wall hanging by artist Munu Actis Goretta portrays liberty and resistance as well as a reminder of Argentina's past struggle against unspeakable injustices. (Photo by Dan Linehan)

DAYS 1–2: EN ROUTE

A song wasn't what got me aboard the first airplane, mile zero, the start of a meandering journey to Antarctica, but a different kind of transmission that I ended up hearing from a radio station inside a log cabin surrounded by giant coastal redwood trees. How I came to hear it was not a mystery by any stretch. Tracing back, it made perfect sense. It would have been impossible, though, to predict how I would end up here. My life to this point had been dedicated to preparing for this moment. Only now did I begin to recognize it. And with time to sink in, I would finally understand the magnitude.

It had poured nonstop throughout the night before but began to clear as I left early in the morning from my home in Monterey, California. I usually slept great in the rain but instead had chosen to sacrifice rest for more last-minute preparations. With a little more than thirty hours of travel ahead of me, I had plenty of time on my four crisscrossed flights to play catch-up. Flying to Los Angeles, to Washington, D.C., to Buenos Aires, and then to Ushuaia would sadly be the protracted yet most expedient way for me to reach the *Southern Aurora* bound for Antarctica, a

frozen land changing faster than any other place on Earth. I wanted to see it happening for myself by stepping onto its inhospitable ice. I wanted to write about it.

With my head pressed against the airliner window, my eyes drifted aimlessly as I huffed pained breaths at the countryside below. During the previous flight—a puddle jumper from Monterey—rough turbulence had rattled us most of the way. My lingering nausea finally began to subside. I typically didn't get airsick. Motion sick in a car as a backseat passenger, sometimes. But seasickness was a near certainty in water with waves not much bigger than ripples. Soon I'd be sailing the roughest water on the planet. What the hell was I thinking?

Somewhere, down there, our jet-speed shadow traced east over land contours as we flew over a high desert speckled with Joshua trees and craggy rock outcrops. At least I'd seen river systems while flying south along the coast from Monterey to Los Angeles. Now water conveyance occurred not between riverbanks but inside concrete aqueducts. Rivers didn't belong to deserts. I was not sure uncovered aqueducts did either. This was no place for the streams and rivers I'd known back when I was a kid. I wondered if the ones near my old home still flowed or if anything still lived in them. I missed them and the time when my major concerns were finding bait for hooks or tying the right knot on spinners or fish-shaped lures so that they wouldn't slip off if they got snagged when I dared to cast too close to partially submerged branches and fallen tree trunks. Those were the places fish liked to hide. I never worried about catching them. Always did.

As the coast and Los Angeles disappeared in our contrails, salt flats and dry lakes became sand dunes and solidified lava flows, then mesas and plateaus, then small mountains with alluvial fans that looked like glaciers running down a mountain. Only, alluvial fans were made from sediments of sand and soil, not deposits of ice and snow. As we cut across the top of Arizona and into New Mexico, the scorched, rocky terrain had the color of fire until we reached the nearly impenetrable wall formed by the Rocky Mountains, a more than 3,000-mile-long range that ran deep into Canada to the north and stopped shy of the Mexican border to the south. But even Mount Elbert, the tallest peak of the range at 14,440 feet, could not touch us, cruising up at an altitude of 7 miles, giving us about 4 miles of clearance.

It was not too high to miss seeing the dehydrated rivers like the once-mighty Colorado River that, in 1998, had stopped flowing all the way to the sea. This river had made its way into the Sea of Cortez for 6 million years. Now the siphoned-off Colorado River became a trickle and evaporated into nothingness more than 70 miles from the seashore.

The Rockies formed a continental divide, which our jetliner stepped over like it was a street-side curb. Butted against these mountains stretched the undulating and roaming Great Plains, their tan, dry, and grassy vastness blanketing much of Middle America. This series of geological transitions reminded me of the stages of life. Often they were abrupt and immediate, like the boundaries between the coasts, deserts, mountains, and plains. For my life they certainly were. How easy it was to look out the window of the airplane to see my insides spread out across the terrain below.

* * *

I was born in Miami, Florida, but my family moved to Long Island when I was five. Growing up in Long Island was a fantastic experience. The island looked like a fish. At the head were two of

the five boroughs of New York City: the top of the mouth was Queens and the bottom was Brooklyn. The north fork of the tail ended at Orient Point, while Montauk Point lay at the end of the south fork. I was from Smithtown, which was about halfway girth- and lengthwise.

Smithtown's claim to fame was a large bronze statue commemorating the bull that the town founder purportedly rode during a summer solstice in order to claim land from the Native Americans, which was hard for me to wrap my head around on so many levels. The years have given the bull a light bluish-green veneer. But inebriated townsfolk, or sometimes jealous relatives from neighboring towns without bovine monuments, often ritualistically painted the bull's bullhood in flashy colors.

Even though I was landlocked as a kid, I was never far from water. Our house was surrounded by parks and undeveloped land with water all around. And though my friends and I knew the woods like the backs of our hands, it never stopped us from exploring or fishing or concocting some mission of vital importance that justifiably allowed us to return late for dinner.

My upbringing was camping, sloshing through swamps and bogs and mud, climbing trees, and throwing dirt bombs from mud forts during the summer and snowballs from forts made of snow during the winter. It wasn't considered growing up in the country. You could consider it growing up in the wild.

But for as much time as I spent in the outdoors, I knew nothing about the environment and did not realize when I first heard the word. The environment was always something that just was. It never had to come in for dinner. Already made of dirt, the environment never had to wash it off from every surface. But more important, the environment always seemed much larger than I was, vastly more formidable, and simply able to fend for itself without care. It never had to go to bed early because it didn't come home in time for dinner or fail to wash up.

What I remembered most from this time was being outdoors and loving it. Back then, I took the fish for granted. I took the frogs for granted. I took all the animals for granted. I really had to stretch my memory to recall my first outreach on behalf of wildlife.

One morning, while in my late teens, I'd woken up early to go fishing with Eddie, one of my younger brothers, at nearby Blydenburgh Park. Just past the skunk cabbage and muck at the swampy eastern edge of Stump Pond, we usually caught largemouth bass and sometimes reeled in bluegills and yellow perch. The pond was at the headwaters of the Nissequogue River, which flowed into Long Island Sound.

As we started casting from shore, we noticed a large American bullfrog sitting right along the edge of the water. I caught all kinds of snakes and turtles and lizards and frogs. Never a bullfrog, though. Usually the much smaller pickerel frogs and Fowler's toads.

I crept up to give it a try. Somehow I was able to reason that instead of trying to grab where the bullfrog was, I should try to catch where the frog might be—in the air—once it jumped. I was dumbfounded and a hundred times more astounded than that bullfrog when I actually managed to snatch it around its waist mid-jump. I certainly would have garnered the highest admiration of Steinbeck's Mack and the boys, even after the grand success of their own frog-collecting foray within the pages of *Cannery Row*.

It didn't take more than a few microseconds to hatch my plan. My sister, Marie, was a big fan of Kermit the Frog. So, I hightailed it out of the park, leaving my fishing gear with my

brother, jumped on my bike, and pedaled like mad with the giant frog in my hand as its long legs dangled in the airstream. I ran into my house and snuck up to my sister's room.

My good luck held out. Not only was my sister asleep, she faced me and slept near the edge of the bed. I got real close and put the bullfrog a few inches from her nose. I started calling softly, "Marie, Marie, Marie," until she woke up . . . and screamed.

Knowing a little of my family history explained a lot. I was the oldest brother, and she was the only girl of six. Out of all us, she was the one to become a herpetologist with a side expertise in bats. I liked to think I'd had a helpful influence on her career choice. You never knew what experiences would make lifelong impacts on kids.

At one time or another I had just about every kind of pet there was. Snakes, lizards, salamanders, frogs, toads, fish, hermit crabs, guinea pigs, dogs, ants (yes, an actual ant farm), birds, and so on. I spent hours in an exotic bird store in town and even helped out. When I was too young to work for cash, I worked in a pet shop for store credit. My mother drew the line at a large, hairy, fanged tarantula. She made sure my father drove me back to the pet shop right away to return it.

I still loved animals, but had since become less enthused about animals as pets. I preferred to use my time and energy to help them prosper in the wild because this was where they needed our help the most.

* * *

Before becoming a freelance writer, I had worked as a microchip engineer for a company based in Silicon Valley. My master's degree was in materials science, which was the study of the composition, structure, and properties of stuff. It didn't go to waste after I switched careers. Exactly the opposite. This background provided me with an uncommon insight into how and why the world functioned as it did. Much of my writing was for educational publishing companies, where I covered the hard sciences, like physics and chemistry. Though, I often softened up with poetry, journalism, and other forms of writing.

As my focus shifted more and more to the environmental and natural sciences, exposure to the heated subject of climate change was inevitable. How could we humans possibly cause changes to the atmosphere and climate on such a global scale?

Looking up, the sky seemed to reach all the way to the stars. This was an illusion. In reality the atmosphere around Earth was more like a single thin layer of plastic wrap that tightly covered a basketball. Hadn't the air pollution we produced caused holes in the ozone layer high above the surface of Earth? Hadn't the smoke from burning coal turned water in the clouds into acid that then rained down from the sky very far from the source of the smoke? Once pollution restrictions were put in place, then these problems began to reverse. Even the horrendous, human-caused smog that choked Los Angeles greatly relaxed its death grip on the city after tighter emission standards were adopted. Was climate change that much of a stretch from these problems? I needed to know more.

One did not just simply buy a ticket to Antarctica. No airliners flew there. No hotels existed there. And just plain roughing it was the surest way to freeze to death. So, I kept my eyes and ears open for opportunities while mulling over how to pull off something like this.

Living on the Monterey Peninsula, I was surrounded by the rugged and rocky Pacific Ocean coastline. Like back in the wilds during my youth, only now the animals seemed grown-up in size compared to the neighborhood animals of Smithtown. Sea lions, harbor seals, and sea otters frolicked, brown pelicans flew in breathless formations, forty or more cormorants laced through the sky like a strand of long, black hair, porpoises and dolphins splashed by the shore, and whales spouted as they cruised up and down the coast. At 2,600 miles from where I grew up, I was home again in the outdoors. I no longer had to worry about being late for dinner, just cooking it.

I listened to KZSC all the time, a radio station nestled in a forest of redwoods along the coast and run by college students from the University of California, Santa Cruz. The signal came in strong, since Santa Cruz was on the other side of Monterey Bay. As I edited material about food webs for fourth graders in my home office, which doubled as my kitchen, I heard the most wonderful public service announcement between songs. The DJ announced an expedition to Antarctica that was a fundraiser for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Right away I looked into the company running it and found that Ecological Expeditions, based in Northern California, had a great reputation for its focus on wildlife, the environment, and conservation. It had a staff of world-class guides and experts. One guide had had a nature documentary made about him. Another, a professional wildlife photographer, had shot the cover photo of a penguin on an iceberg for a news magazine's global warming issue. I learned that people from all over the world had signed aboard. They were serious naturalists, birders, and photographers. Even the head veterinarian of a zoo had joined up. For the people on this expedition, it wasn't about what the ride was like. The opportunities at the destinations were what mattered.

Nearly the perfect solution, the expedition would do all the hard work for me—the itinerary planning and travel arrangements. All I needed to do was come up with the funding, which I did by working even more like a madman. For the cost of the expedition, I could have bought a snazzy new car. Not that I would have bought one with the money anyway.

My friend Ann helped put it into perspective by saying, “This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing. How many people get the chance to do something like this? Car? Cars are everywhere. Who cares? Later in life when you look back, what are you going to want to remember? The cars you had or this?”

The expedition would begin at the end of the year, wintertime here but summer in the southern hemisphere. I had plenty of time to prepare. I did have one big problem with it, which was that we would first stop off at the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. We weren't going to Antarctica straight away. I had heard about the Falklands years ago in the news because of the Falklands War between Argentina and the United Kingdom. But I couldn't recall hearing about South Georgia, let alone show anyone where it was on a map. I needed education about the environment being most impacted by climate change, and I was about to get it. I just had to suffer through these two detours first.

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A late inbound aircraft had delayed my third leg. We left D.C. two hours behind schedule, and had Buenos Aires been my final destination, I wouldn't have been too concerned. But I had one

more flight to catch and needed to switch between Aeropuerto Internacional de Ezeiza, the inland international airport on the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires, and Aeroparque Jorge Newbery, the regional airport on the northeastern side near the heart of the city and along Río de la Plata.

Crossing from one end of a familiar city to the other was hassle enough, but I had never been to Buenos Aires before, or South America for that matter, and spoke barely enough Spanish to order Mexican food. Things had the potential to get messy *mucho rápido*. There wasn't much I could do while sitting sky-high, so I traded worry for a mixture of drinks and attempted sleep.

My plan to talk with the pilots before and after each of the flights had worked so far. Intrigued by my mission, they readily gave me details about the amount of fuel burned by the aircraft, distance traveled, and number of passengers. With this information, I figured out how many gallons of jet fuel each passenger used for each mile flown. Then I combined the numbers from all my flights to determine the amount of jet fuel it took to get my butt from Monterey all the way down to Ushuaia, at the southern tip of South America.

I would eventually figure out that for my part, it took 157 gallons of jet fuel, or nearly four full barrels, to make a one-way journey that spanned 8,850 miles. So, I had a personal fuel efficiency of about 56 miles per gallon.

Even when flying between two major cities within a country, airlines complicated things. Monterey and Ushuaia were small cities, but each had its own airport. If I had flown direct instead of taking four flights, then I would have saved 1,850 miles, almost a barrel of fuel, and three layover headaches. This difference in distance equated to more than halfway from one coast of the US to the other.

Ecological Expeditions provided a way for people to get carbon offsets that would cancel out their share of greenhouse gas pollution produced during the expedition. This excited me a lot. To encourage this option, the company also offered to pay half of the cost. So I paid only \$25, a small fraction of the price tag, to protect a balancing amount of carbon-sequestering ancient and majestic rainforest trees from being chopped down and hacked apart. Spared from greedy chainsaws, this luscious patch of greenery would now remain alive to gobble up carbon dioxide equal to my portion of burned fossil fuel on the flights and aboard the ship. I wondered how many others had also chosen this carbon footprint mitigation. Surely everyone.

Now drowsiness invaded my thoughts as the airliner dashed over the occasional high-flying clouds. I would set sail in two days. In less than three weeks, I'd be in Antarctica. It was still hard to sleep.

What kind of penguins would I see? I only really knew of the emperor penguins, but we were going to the Antarctic Peninsula, not the South Pole. To say they were the same place would be like saying I'd visit the North Pole by only traveling to Alaska. I figured there wouldn't be much wildlife.

I tried to imagine what it would be like slip-sliding across icy glaciers and seeing landscapes that were nothing but white patterns and geometries like snowflakes when viewed under a microscope, a place where ice-crystal castles reigned over a frozen frontier kingdom.

Would the wind sound like a breeze through chandeliers or constantly moan like when air flowed over the opening of a glass bottle? Would there be whiteout blizzards? Would I be warm

enough? Many better-prepared explorers froze to death in this bitterly relentless and unforgiving land. I could not start soon enough. I closed my eyes.

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Spanish was now the official language. I looked at my brand-new, smashing explorer's watch, which had both a digital readout and a clock dial. Always good to have a backup. I had plenty of time to make my connection. I got my bags, exchanged \$40 for Argentine pesos in the terminal, and caught a taxi to venture through the vivacious streets of Buenos Aires. The taxi driver made super time. Being so sleep-deprived, all I remember of the ride was a blur.

Several delays pushed the flight to Ushuaia back by hours, which gave me a chance to meet the expedition leader. Slender and clean-shaven, Ron wore a red stocking cap that covered his short, black hair. Around the same age as I was, he looked far less Yukon-like than I had imagined and seemed nowhere near as weary as I felt.

"Fifty people from our group are on this flight," he had told me. Knowing this came in handy when we finally departed on the Argentine airliner. I couldn't have been alone in thinking that the flight attendant had just served the strangest looking five-layer sandwich. It looked like a cheap pastry in a way. But it had uniform pieces of bread, ham, bread, cheese, and bread compressed to a thickness of half an inch, as if it had been extruded and then stamped with a rectangular cookie cutter to remove the crust from all three slices of bread. *What is this strange Argentine delicacy?* I wondered. I asked the flight attendant, practicing my Spanish. She looked at me like I was either an idiot, hammered, or poorly executing the lamest excuse in the world just to talk with her.

"*Sandwich,*" she said, rolling her eyes, and then walked away.

Okay, it may have been called a sandwich, but it still tasted and looked a hell of a lot different from the ham and cheese sandwiches I'd eaten before. Maybe it was the accent. The flight attendant was a very cute Argentine for sure and was the one who helped me get my questions about fuel usage to the pilots. But I still felt like a dumbass. Time for another drink.

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Flying into Ushuaia so late at night robbed us of a view that would later become one of my most treasured. We landed in low visibility due to cloudy weather. I had no idea what to expect from the southernmost city in the world. In my mind, Ushuaia was going to be a small, rough, hardy port city with swinging-door saloons and drunken sailors brawling in the streets, as freighters and fishing boat captains sought to replenish their supplies . . . and crew. Mixed in would be a few wide-eyed tourists who had just landed on the dirt airstrip. I'd hear foghorns and see the beams from lighthouses.

When I stepped out of the jet bridge leading from our airliner, I entered one of the most beautiful airports I had ever seen. Aeropuerto Internacional de Ushuaia resembled a mountaintop resort, even though we were at sea level. It was a stunning combination of open space and modernism that maintained a rustic, ski-chalet look. Lattices of giant wooden beams vaulting the ceilings and the copious use of glass added to the expansive feel without diminishing its warmth.

Ron reminded me that now, after midnight, was not the time to gawk. With our gear, we packed onto an awaiting bus. After a few minutes, we reached the port and pulled into the Hotel Albatros. Except for us unloading—and being encouraged to move along—the waterfront was empty and uneventful. Across the street, the still, dim silhouettes of the superstructures from only the largest ships protruded above the few buildings and trees that stood in the way. My first adventure, a day and a half long, was now in the books. I was ready for a bed and a shower, though hazy on the order.