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A Hairy Christmas Tale

By anyone's standards, the village of Fish Hoek in the Cape Peninsula is quiet. In fact, to coin someone's wry description, it's a place for "newly weds and nearly deads." Young Fish Hoekians are into hiking and surf-skiing; older ones, the church choir and bridge – you get the picture?

So imagine my shock when I found myself caught up in a Christmas Armageddon waged on the slopes of one of the comely mountains that overlook that sleepy little town. My Mum has lived there for the past 34 years and she greeted me at the end of my drive from Johannesburg with an incongruous black brick peeping from the pocket of her floral house-coat.

'What's that, and what's it for?' I asked.

'It's a two-way radio and I need it to keep comms with the neighbours - in case of attack,' she replied, before enunciating into the now-hissing device:

'Bravo Tango Oscar. Repeat, Brave Tango Oscar. For the rookies, that's BTO as in Bachman-Turner Overdrive: *'We Ain't Seen Nothing Yet.'* Do you copy?'

(OK, she didn't say that, but the *troopies* in the Rhodesian bush war allegedly coined the BTO abbreviation for 'all quiet' and I've always been tickled by their display of creative lateral thought!)

'Copy,' came the reply, 'but it's mayhem here. They've been into the kitchen, cleaned out the fridge, created havoc in the lounge and the family is completely traumatised. I'm going to stay until the kids calm down a bit.'

Next, another panting female voice announced to the expectant eavesdroppers: 'I've counted six so far and they're moving eastwards along Highway towards No. 67. Please can I have some help in heading them off?' In her next crossing, a short while later, her voice had gone up an octave: 'Oh Noooooo! They've found the veggie garden. He's on the roof with a mielie and the mums and babes are snacking on some carrots. It's a catastropheeeeeee!'

You guessed it – the street was under 'attack' by baboons, and this siege lasted about a week. Now let me say, unequivocally, that I'm greatly and sincerely admiring of the local street patrollers' efforts to keep the neighbourhood safe from attack - by any species of ape. But did they provide me with the best vicarious aural sport of the decade! Forget party telephone lines and phone-in radio shows, I got the finest entertainment in recent memory by tuning in to the harassed and breathless voices of the humanoids trying their

best to chase the primates up the mountain and away from our Christmas puddings. Back-up came in the form of a Mum-and-Dad's Army, lending dozens of eyes and ears to the campaign, reporting on every move made by the hairies, and getting thrills they haven't had since World War II.

Look, I'm taking the mickey here – and making light of what is hot, hard and sometimes dangerous work, because it's probably safer to go a round with a WWF Smackdown no-neck than have an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with a fully-grown male baboon. And as for seeing baboons-en-familie reclining on one's newly-covered patio furniture – well, the indignation that that induces is fully justified I'll grant you. But truly, listening in to the stalk-and-shoo games played out during the December holidays was absolutely hilarious - for everyone except the baboons, of course.

And that's the point. That's the sad point. Nothing overtly aggressive is done towards the baboons, but they're perpetually moved along, harried away from houses, chased off garbage bins, prevented from resting (and breast-feeding the youngsters) until they lose interest in what the local trash, kitchens and gardens may have to offer and head back up the hill. Their exhaustion is heart-rending to witness and one can almost hear them saying "Oh puleeeze, gimme a break!"

The experts are clear about the causes of this new form of urban warfare. For a start, the baboons have worked out that it takes a lot less effort to raid a dustbin than to forage in the fynbos. Secondly, their pantry has been drastically reduced of late. Development in the Cape Peninsula in the last three decades has been grossly avaricious, environmentally irresponsible and horrendously unsightly. You have to look no further than Fish Hoek to see The Houses That Greed Built – they're at least four times larger than those that the previous generation deemed adequate for family life. Capetonians have evidently decided that it's nicer to have a bunch of conspicuous consumers living next door than a troupe of baboons. Silly them. As for their town planners and municipalities – they should be shot at dawn.

In the war of attrition between the original habitants of this exquisite place and the Johnny-come-latelies, there are only losers. But it's as if Capetonians have only just woken up to that loss. Elsewhere in South Africa, baboons are classified as vermin - yet this handful are given the kind of 24-hour personal protection appropriate to royalty. The species that is currently being wiped out in the commercial forests of Mpumalanga is lovingly featured in the Cape's newspapers and magazines. How utterly absurd. It's as if we're trying to salve our conscience by frantically nursing the few iconic individuals left of a doomed tribe. I'm reminded of the 19th century Cree Indian prophecy that Anthea Torr (the editor of Biophile) quotes on all her Enchantrix products:

“Only after the last tree has been cut down,
Only after the last river has been poisoned;
Only after the last fish has been caught,
Will you find that money cannot be eaten.”