

Antarctic Winter

„Zulu-Papa-1 X-Ray-Echo-Delta. Eduardo, can you hear me? We’ve got bad news. Freydis is stranded. We’re OK. So’s Adélie, our cat.”

This radio message was our first link with the outside world since the accident. Our failure had now been spread abroad.

That 24 May 1991 will always be our Black Friday. Until Thursday we had been circumnavigators with the ambition of spending winter on Deception, an island in the Antarctic Ocean. On Saturday we were shipwrecked.

The hurricane had taken us by surprise at our destination. Later we realized that penguins are better weathermen than barometers and that it is significant when an unusually large gathering of these funny creatures pushes its way into the most sheltered bay in the area. At the time, suspecting nothing, we enjoyed this memorable encounter – hundreds of gentoos splashing in the Antarctic Ocean, watching an East Frisian couple sweating and sooty, shoveling coal by the hundred-weight from an abandoned camp. "Ark, ark," was their comment on our efforts. The weather was fine as we left, heading for our home bay, the dinghy with the coal boxes in tow. Within ten minutes the temperature dropped to an Antarctic low, the sudden gusts of wind making the air inhumanly cold. The spray was blown horizontally across the crater lake and across our boat. With the savage wailing of the wind in our ears we raced on westwards, driven by the winds. Far off we could see our goal, a bright red buoy bobbing up and down between the white caps. There safety was waiting: our winter quarters, with the roaring fire beside which our cat Adélie, traveling companion since Argentina, would stretch herself and purr. Then that fateful moment. Casting anchor, a manoeuvre we had mastered long ago even in heavy weather, failed. Erich used the boathook to get hold of the rope, but as the boat reared up it was jerked away from him. The "full power in reverse" manoeuvre came too late. Ninety meters of chain and the anchor disappeared irretrievably into the depths.

The hurricane, which was to rage for two days, then really got going. *Freydis* was dashed against the sand, shaken about and pushed across stones. The breakers beat like rammers against the boat’s hull and lifted the 25 ton boat half a meter into the air only to drop her with a jerk back onto the sand and stones. Icy water rushed into the yacht. In horror we watched as, gurgling noisily, it took possession of our home. We tried to seal the leaks, we pumped until we were bathed in perspiration. Finally we had to give in to the force of this saltwater deluge. In the saloon the cushions arched and started to move as though by magic. Bottles of washing-up liquid, woolen socks, packets of dried yeast, plastic bags, shrink-wrapped emergency rockets, the echo sounder, packets of soup, floorboards – everything came floating past us like the contents of an enormous stew.

Nightfall, accompanied by exhaustion, fear and hunger, completed the nightmare. For 15 hours we did not dare leave the boat. With numb fingers we put on several layers of dry clothing, wrapped ourselves in our sleeping bags and crawled into the upper berths. Around midnight, we heard a dull thud on deck. Could it be the wind generator torn from its fittings by the continual bumping of the boat? In the meantime the water was overflowing into the galley and the port berths. On the starboard side it had reached the navigation cupboard in which we kept our treasures: charts, spare parts, binoculars, sextants.

We wondered if we could afford to wait for daylight, and what would happen if the boat capsized or broke up amid the breakers and trapped us. At seven in the morning, when the water had reached the level of the upper berth, Erich made a decision: "We must leave the boat if we don't want to drown or freeze to death." At that crucial moment I was seized by panic. But we had no choice. We crawled up on deck, our legs numb with cold. To reach the open air we had to pass through what resembled a limestone cave with grotesque stalactite and stalagmite walls. The lamp at the top was still burning, eerily lighting up icicles which were hanging from the roof of the deckhouse as thick as an arm. The stern was buried beneath a wall of ice.

About 20-30 meters separated us from land. In between lay the rough waters, an icy hell. Erich was the first to jump. A few short, but terrifying seconds after he had disappeared into the raging icy mass I heard his voice: "I can stand, come on!" I let myself fall in and fought for my life through the chaos of the roaring seas. Then I felt ground underfoot and a pull on the lifeline to which we were both attached. We burrowed our way through a large mound of snow in front of the base, found the door handle and were safe.

Being stranded in the safest natural harbour in the polar region was a bitter and surprising end to the long journey from Leer in East Frisia via Rio de Janeiro and through the most dangerous sailing waters in the world: the Roaring Forties, the Furious Fifties, the Screaming Sixties. For over a year we had lived on board like nomads. The six months together on this volcanic island at the southern tip of the globe was to be the climax of our carefully prepared journey.

On a sailing trip ten years earlier we had experienced the fascination of the Antarctic for the first time. We had always wanted to return. We were not aiming to test the limits of our capacity as is fashionable today. We wanted to experience the nature and solitude of the Antarctic first hand, but with some degree of comfort. It was our dream to have time to ourselves and for each other. And afterwards we wanted to sail on, perhaps via South Africa to New Zealand-and now this. Never before had I felt so much at the mercy of the forces of nature, nor felt nature to be so hostile. She had transformed our *Freydis*, which had borne us 140 000 miles over the oceans of the world, into a large lump of ice, a wreck between rocks and glaciers.

Should we call it a day, get the helicopter to pick us up, run away? Our “winter palace” on land was fully equipped. The last load of coal we had wanted to collect that fateful day was all that was missing. We decided to stay.

Named after the Viking heroine who, as the leader of an expedition almost 1 000 years ago was the first woman to reach America, *Freydis* had long since become a part of us. Every holiday, every spare minute after work, we had lived for this boat. It was her 13th year.

Often enough our sailing holiday adventure was reduced to nothing more than a mad rush, a host of chores: buying provisions, phone calls, changing money, repairs, bunkering water and diesel, customs clearance. But then moments always came which repaid us. The long watches during which I had all the time in the world to contemplate the continual changes in the seascape around me. A clear, starry sky and the Southern Cross showing us the way, picture book scenes with the sun disappearing into the silvery sea like a bloodred ball—a spectacle never trite or commonplace.

In the best moments I felt reconciled, safe and sound and at one with nature, which meant me no harm. For example, in the bay of Caletta Valdez, just below the 40th parallel, where I lay on the beach, cheek to cheek with little baby sea elephants. They let me stroke them, one of them patting me chummily with its long black pectoral fins. A few days later we chanced upon a “maternity ward” of right whales. Frisky calves were jumping out of the water and playing with the cow whales, large gentle animals which can grow to 20 meters long and weigh up to 20 tons. And there was *Freydis* sailing in the midst of all this.

At the end of February we took on the dreaded Drake’s Passage with its reputation for monstrous seas and capsized yachts. It was stormy, got bitterly cold and our cat was transformed from a mascot into a seasick patient. But after four days of exertion we had completed the crossing. Stormbirds circled our boat, dolphins swam on ahead. This passage seemed as horrifying to me as the Styx separating the underworld from the land of the living.

The first icebergs jogged laboriously past us. Jagged black lava rocks towered up out of the water: Deception, our destination, lay ahead. Sixty million years ago in this region red hot masses rose out of the bowels of the earth to form huge mountains in the sea, the South Shetland Islands as they are now called. Deception, the last island in the chain, lies somewhat apart from the rest. It owes its present form to a second massive eruption in which the mountain blew its summit into the air. All that remained was a frayed edge of jagged rocks which surround the the world’s most impressive crater lake. The lake is linked to the open sea by a small opening. As we sailed through, two black, wet seals were sitting at the black, wet entrance as though representing Cerberus, the double-headed hellhound.

Fog and clouds of sulphur floated slowly over the water. Here Antarctic cold is united with fire from the interior of the earth. On pitch-black beaches ridges of baked krill had been formed by the tide, Seawater bubbled up from holes in the sand and fountains of steam rose from the depths like white torches. Penguins trotted hurriedly up the slope to cool their feet higher up in the snow. An icy wind blew over us and blackish-brown skuas danced in the air to its plaintive cry, hovering over our heads like avenging spirits.

We climbed a cone-shaped heap of ash. The Antarctic sun beat down with all its force and scorched our numb skins. From the top we admired the splendid view over mountains, bays, lagoons and fresh water lakes, and then discovered to our surprise that we were not the only tourists on this, one of the world's loneliest promontories. As we were about to mingle, eager for a swim, with the penguins and the seals in the volcanically-heated Pendulum Cove, we came across the aging and well-to-do passengers of the luxury cruiser *Society Explorer* enjoying the most exclusive bathing experience in the world, one of the highlights of their tour. While their bellies were roasting in the burning sand, their backs were being deep-frozen by the oncoming waves.

In summer Argentinian scientists work on the island. On our excursions we got to know Professor Viramonte, an internationally acclaimed volcanologist who was there to investigate the "most dangerous volcanic activity in the world." He explained that the mixture of magma and sea water could lead to the most colossal explosion. When this happens, sea waves caused by overheated vapors and toxic gasses carry off with them everything within a kilometer of the centre of the eruption.

Remains of bases cling to the dark mountain slopes like memorials to past volcanic eruptions-the last major one in 1970. Ruins, stray stones and lumps of rock tell of the enormous force of the explosions, of hot gases and red hot rivers of lava. This was the destination of our dreams? The Argentinians, who were going home in a few days, generously offered us their base for the winter. That sounded better than Erich's idea of choosing one of the ruins as our land base.

Before starting to test the experience of being alone we left Deception one more time. After we had seen our fellow sailors off on King George Island on the last plane of the season heading for civilization, we set out on a sailing tour "Around the World in 40 days" to international Antarctic bases. Ten years earlier as yachtsmen and strangers we had been made welcome guests. Although tourism around the South Pole had increased we were again hospitably received.

On the birthday of Marsh, the Chilean base, we were among the 50 spectators to drink to the draw in the match between Chile and Uruguay for the Antarctic football cup with pisco sour, a drink made of grape spirit, sugar, eggs, lemon juice and fresh snow. We made friends with John and Anne who were on the sixth continent on behalf of Greenpeace, and received from them instructions on sorting and weighing

our rubbish and making a note of how we disposed of it. We visited the Chinese base, Great Wall, where base physician Dr Lin Ying presented me with an assortment of acupuncture needles-just in case "anything on Deception island should give you a headache."

A few days later the director of the Soviet base, Bellingshausen, entertained us with vodka, tea, marinated mushrooms and smoked fish sandwiches. This was followed by a barbecue at the Argentinian base Jubany. There we enjoyed such long-forgotten luxuries as a shower, warm bed and a washing machine.

The Poles, who had converted their Arctowsky into a cosy hut, welcomed us with Szegedin goulash and Polish folk music, played on the harmonium by their 70-year-old mechanic.

Finally we looked in on the Brazilians. They had heated their base to such an extent that we felt we had been transferred to an institute for tropical studies. Palm hearts, guavas, figs and a coconut cake were served-the illusion of a tropical island set in ice was perfect.

Antarctica is the only continent where no passport is required, no visa, no ship's papers, where there is no customs clearance and where no explanations are necessary. A world beyond political problems? I had the feeling that respect for the majesty of nature leads people to treat each other the way people should-humanely. Friendliness, concern for others, tolerance, a sense of humor and helpfulness seem more important in the Antarctic. We returned our new friends' kindness by offering them day trips on *Freydis*. This was a welcome change for our hosts whose daily routine at the base was often monotonous.

When we returned to Deception at the beginning of May the sun was shining, the sky was blue and a light wind was blowing from the east. It made one wonder how the island had earned itself this name-could it cheat and deceive, or even disappoint as its name in Spanish suggests? The volcanic landscape showed itself in all its splendor: the glassy crater lake sparkled a deep blue and was surrounded by glittering white mountains which sported the original pitch-black fall of their lava folds. Penguins were taking their morning walk along the heated lakeside promenade in front of the two storey red corrugated iron shed: our winter quarters.

As we entered the 150 square meter living section it was freezing cold, gloomy and deathly silent. We soon changed that. The most attractive room with its sofa and two comfortable armchairs, a desk and a number of other chairs we chose as the lounge. We each made for ourselves a corner with a desk and two crates placed on top of each other as bookshelves. The beds were put against the wall to the kitchen. The move began. With the help of the dinghy we brought boxes, chests, bags and sea bags on land, stuffed with food, clothing, bed linen, books, plates, cups, pots, pans and music cassettes. Every time we went through the biting cold our backs became rounder. It took us two days just to transfer our Norwegian multi-fuel

furnace to the base with the sled, to furnish a connection to the chimney and get it going. It was worth it. We succeeded in raising the temperature in our lounge from -5°C to $+10^{\circ}\text{C}$.

We soon felt like the lords of an impregnable fortress. In a shed near the base we could get water from a 20-meter deep well which did not freeze over. The way to the well was to become arduous but collecting and thawing snow would have been more complicated.

Happy days in May flew past, filled with the most basic necessities for ensuring survival.

I cooked lavish meals on the old gas stove which even had a baking oven. We were filled with a feeling of wellbeing as we ate our supper by the light of the freshly installed 12-volt bulbs, rested by the warm, cosy stove we had installed ourselves, while outside it was freezing cold, drank the unchlorinated water from the well, got in touch with friends via an aerial we had set up ourselves- and , not least, it was a relief no longer having to do with storms and seasickness on *Freydis*. It only remained to stock up on coal, we thought, and winter could come. When it came it was worse than we had ever imagined. It began with that black Friday and went on for over six months.

The worst part there were the nights immediately after the shipwreck. Every night I dug sleeping pills out of the first aid box since this was the only way that I could get enough sleep to be able to cope with the next day`s hard work. In this remote corner of the earth we had hoped to find leisure, peace, a place to meditate, to take in the magnificence of nature with the changing seasons, to watch seals and whales and then enjoy a swim in the volcanically-heated Fumarole Bay. Instead every spare minute was taken up by *Freydis*. We were obsessed with the possibility of getting her afloat again.

We gained access to the wreck, which looked like a freezer lying on its side, by crossing the sea which had in the meantime frozen solid. We hacked at the ice, bailed out the boat and salvaged foodstuffs and personal belongings: salty and in some cases unrecognizable lumps of ice stained with diesel oil. Comfort and help came from all our new friends. Hector from the Chilean base came in a helicopter with a motor pump from the Chinese. "We heard you needed help and we came!" Vladimir, the leader of the Russian base, laughed over the radio link. The Uruguayans lent us their technician Luis.

With Luis`s help we succeeded in only three days in pumping the water out of the boat and sealing it. Then the ice became our ally. The crater lake froze over so that the *Freydis* was no longer exposed to the ravages of storms.

But the rescue operation was still a race against time: as the days went by the salt ate further into our electric contacts, the ball-bearings, tools, winding and cylinder

heads. Although we knew what was at stake, it took an enormous effort every morning to go out into the bitter cold. From nine to five we hacked our equipment out of *Freydis'* hull. Then we continued the work at home in the base. Every rescued object was first soaked in heated fresh water, whether it be clothing, shoes, sleeping bags, typewriter, radio transmitter, welding set, batteries, battery charger, spare diesel engine, gas stove or dynamos.

On the sixth day after the shipwreck I heard Erich laugh for the first time, suddenly and for no apparent reason. It was a sign of relief. We looked at each other and both laughed, about the irony of this position in which fate had brought us more worry and work than ever before, in the very place where we had hoped to lead a life far removed from nerve-shattering stress situations. We worked like slaves for another four weeks. And then our efforts were rewarded, our attempts to revive the main engine, which had been standing in ice and water, showed signs of success.

On 21 June, around half past eleven in the morning, the sun rose laboriously to appear just above the edge of the crater. At two o'clock it took its leave of us again. It was the shortest day in the southern hemisphere, the winter solstice, time to take stock so far. Why had we brought all these books with us, the music cassettes, the games, skis, the cinecamera? We decided to go on working hard for another four weeks and then to allow ourselves time for leisure. I began to enjoy our new life in the loneliness of the Antarctic in spite of all the adversities and dangers.

In the month which followed our daily routine consisted of reading and writing, thinking things over and planning, working on the things we had salvaged. We listened to music, cooked, played with Adélie and went on excursions whenever the weather permitted.

Most of the seals, penguins and sea birds which had occupied the beach and the sea in large numbers on our arrival had in the meantime moved north, to the edge of the pack ice where the open sea provides them with plenty of food even in winter, but not all of them had gone. Those who remained were admitted into our "club for those wintering on Deception." Besides Erich, Adélie and me, three snowwhite Antarctic doves or palomitas, which were forever begging from us, were among our members. We named them Kuttel, Daddel and Du (the name of a seaman in well-known poems by Joachim Ringelnatz). As they walked round the house they often knocked on the window with their beaks. A strange sight- the special white-out light conditions, in which contrasts disappear, often made them almost invisible. All one could see sometimes were two grey feet running across a white background with a red-grey beak hovering above them. Two big, greedy Dominican gulls fought with them over meagre morsels. We called them Neidhard and Gierlinde (Greedheart and Envylina). Two stately Weddell seals were also members of our exclusive club, splendid specimens with a thick glossy coat of hair, grey at the top, lighter lower down, with silvery spots and stripes. Transuse (Lazy Blubber) preferred to lie on the frozen edge of our Fumarole Bay. Robbe Pierre (brand of sealing wax) liked to doze close by *Freydis*. The four inseparable gentoos,

Kreti and Pleti, Hinz and Kunz completed the club. They looked so similar we could not tell them apart (hence their names which translate to Tom, Dick and Harry).

After storms or very cold days I always called a meeting with cat food and sardines to see whether all had survived. Almost until the end we were present in full numbers. Then one of the penguins went missing. It was the only one of us not to survive the winter.

And yet the conditions were more than severe. In the North Atlantic and around Tierra del Fuego cyclones are automatically followed by periods of fine weather. However, we experienced one storm after the other without a break, sometimes coming from the left, sometimes from the right, and always gale force seven, eight or stronger. From one second to the next absolute chaos would reign outside. The base shook in all its joints, snow and pieces of ice came crashing against the windows. Flames and smoke from the stove were driven back into the lounge. Every few minutes a heavy gust of wind pounded overhead, sounding with its uncanny roaring, rumbling and rolling like a goods train thundering past directly above our heads.

On 6 August we measured the lowest temperature at -27°C . That may not sound so bad, but when the wind chill factor was considered our table showed -70°C . As we shoveled the snow away in our eight meter long snow tunnel to fetch water I was sometimes frightened to death. Blizzards raged as we burrowed our way like moles through the avalanches of snow. We could only stay outside for a minute or two. Even so, Erich's nose became frostbitten.

As we waited for spring our diary entries became repetitive: "Rejoicing too early. Storm again, all day long, all night, will there never be an end to this?" Or "Winter has returned. Storm all night, all day. And it is dreadfully cold again." Or "I would never have thought that anywhere in the world there could be such a centre of all-pervading storms. "These storms, which reminded us of the night of our shipwreck, did not leave me unmoved. I felt that we were in great danger. I lay awake for hours, tossing and turning. In the morning I felt completely limp.

But one day spring did finally come. The animals returned from the warmer northern region. One morning towards the end of September I went for a walk. It was windless, the expanse of sky was evenly tinted a raspberry-red color. The snow and ice looked pink too, everything was as clear as crystal. Not far from our base I discovered one of our seals with a tiny, dark bundle at her side. She must have just given birth. I ran up to her, lay down on the ice like a seal and watched her offspring. The little ball of fur had already found its mother's teats. Milk ran out of its mouth as it stared at me with a look of amazement.

Suddenly a feeling of intense happiness came over me. The calm all round, the pink of the sky which grew brighter and brighter as it heralded the rising sun, the big fat seal sleeping peacefully and the little one which was moving about and making a

noise as it suckled- they were like a small universe in its own right. That seemed wonderful to me, it seemed to have a deeper significance. I felt reconciled with nature which had been evil and hostile to me throughout the winter. I crept away silently, convinced suddenly that this idyll was the remains of a lost paradise.

The whole winter we had been waiting in anxious expectation for it to thaw. For three months a thick crust of snow and ice had prevented us from entering the ship. From November onwards the weather conditions made it possible for us to keep the entrance to the ship clear and finish the repairs. And exactly six months to the day after the shipwreck we experienced a pleasant surprise. The hull had come away from the ice and with a gap of a hand's width on either side of it *Freydis* was afloat. This Viking, whom we had almost given up, who had been lying motionless in an icy sleep for six months had risen again and was moving about and stretching herself in her cold, narrow vault.

The ice melted slowly along the shore. At low water we managed to dig the yacht out of the volcanic gravel. Then at high tide we succeeded in pulling her to the edge of the ice with the spare anchor. *Freydis* was afloat again, but the ice on the crater lake was still blocking the way to the open sea. It was another three weeks before the Chilean steamship *Lautaro* managed to get through to *Freydis*. Two divers helped us find and salvage the lost anchor.

Small icebergs and large ice floes bumped hard against *Freydis*'s hull, the wind picked up and the captain of the *Lautaro* became impatient to leave. He had offered to take us in tow as far as the base Prat. We would have liked the departure from our crater, which we loved and hated so, to have been more leisurely, but suddenly everything was moving very quickly. Our brief look back was not one in anger, but in gratitude, with nostalgia and in awe in the face of Nature which will always have the last word. The "island of disappointment" had not disappointed or deceived us- it had never promised anything. A bad shipwreck, raging storms, ice and bitter cold had all been attacks on our lives- the island had been honest, however, it had not fooled us. And there had been compensations: helpfulness, understanding, human kindness, the experience of wonderful natural phenomena and not least of all, it had also added to our own personal relationship.

Long after the shipwreck the damp calendar page marking the day of the disaster was still hanging inside the boat. There was a whale's fluke on it which, when I looked at it, seemed to wink at me encouragingly. Black Friday had passed. We are alive and happy in spite of our misfortunes. We sailed with *Freydis* back to Tierra del Fuego. And the volcano on Deception is rumbling- the Argentinian scientists who arrived four weeks after our departure were immediately picked up and taken home again.