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The Ice

Written by Laline Paull

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LALINE PAULL

THE ICE

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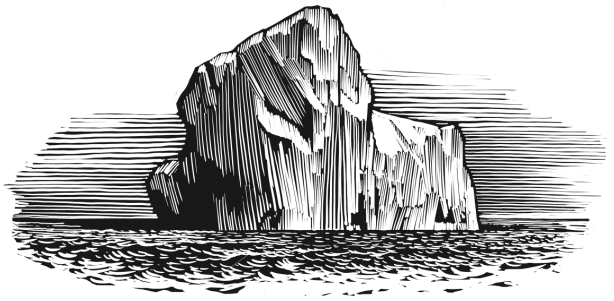
For my brothers


R U
ARCTIC
OCEAN
NORTH
POLE
BERING
SEA
ARCTIC
OCEAN
ALASKA
PACIFIC
OCEAN
NORTH AMERICA


SSIA
EUROPE
BARENTS SEA
SVALBARD
NORWAY
OSLO
LONGYEARBYEN
LONDON
GREENLAND
ATLANTIC OCEAN
BAFFIN BAY
500M

Among dogs are found characters almost as various as among men. *Some dogs do not give a damn what they eat; some will eat their own mothers, as I have often witnessed, and others will starve to death before touching the bodies of their team-mates. Again, some refuse to eat the meat while it is still warm, but perhaps after it is cold they forget what it is and devour it greedily.*

Arctic Adventure: My Life in the Frozen North (1936)
Peter Freuchen



1

They were rich, they were ready, they were ravenous for bear. Nine days into their fourteen-day voyage on the *Vanir*, the most expensive cruise ship in the Arctic, the passengers' initial excitement had turned to patience, then frustration, and now, a creeping sense of defeat. As sophisticated travellers they knew money didn't guarantee polar bear sightings – but they still believed in the natural law that wealth meant entitlement. *Ursus maritimus* sightings very much included.

'Realm of the Ice King' stated the brochure, featuring competition-winning photographs of sparkling ice and polar bears with cubs and kills, taken by recent passengers on this very route. But now instead of high blue heavens, the skies were overcast. Instead of a crisp and exhilarating minus three or even ten degrees (they were eager to test their new clothing), they suffered a vile gusty swelter that turned the Arctic dank as an English summer, and for which no combination of clothing was right. Plus the endless daylight was oppressive – medication schedules went awry and it was always and never time for a coffee to wake up, or a drink to ease down.

There were several lawyers among the passengers. They invited the tour leader to the bar to look at the brochure and hear their formal complaint. The voyage was misrepresented. They had been mis-sold. Enough with the beach landings to stare at derelict huts and piles of whaling junk. Enough birds too, that didn't fob them off. What they'd all paid for were sightings of live ice-obligate mammals. That was the

primary focus of the text and image of the brochure, a sales document with a legal duty to accuracy. No icebergs either, just some dirty glaciers. They were considering a class action for compensation of time and money.

The passengers repaired to the salon and put on the compilation film that had become their envious obsession. In this footage, recent and very much more fortunate passengers had seen all the wildlife the Arctic could offer, from vast haul-outs of walrus, to pods of various whales so close you could see the barnacles on the fins. But most of all, they had seen the great apex predator, the polar bear.

With the blinds down to keep out the bullying daylight, the passengers stared avidly at the on-screen polar bears; the one standing on a crimson mat of ice ripping flesh from a red rack of seal carcass, then the mother and her yearling swimming between the floes. Best of all was the large male standing on his hind legs, staring into the camera, his muzzle bright red. *That* was what they wanted.

The tour leader ran to the bridge to confer with the captain and the ice-pilot, who by law they were still required to employ, even though the summer sea ice was two years gone. They stared out at the grey chop of the Barents Sea. All knew, though they would not say for fear of their jobs, that the animals had all but vanished and the footage in the salon was several years old. There was one solution, prohibited, but every tour company knew it as a last resort. Send up a drone and find a bear.

Two miles away around the coast, down a deep M-shaped fjord, a large silvery wood cabin blended with the dark cobble of its beach. Modern extensions at its rear and sides were made of the very rock of the mountain that rose up behind it, and a close look would reveal several windows that reflected sea, sky and rock. But no one did look, in that intrusive unwelcome way, because this was Midgard Lodge in Midgardfjorden, and by direct intervention of Oslo, to the Sysselmann's office in Svalbard, special rules applied.

Most outraging to those who knew of it, was the one which flouted a major conservation regulation and allowed Midgard Lodge occasional helicopter flights between Longyearbyen airport and the tiny

beach in front of the Lodge, which was just large enough to land a twelve-person Dauphin.

The second was that no cruise ship penetrate the Wijdefjorden system past a certain point, thereby closing the spectacular rock stratification of Midgardfjord and its peculiar forked glacier Midgardbreen, one side blue, one white, off to tourism.

The third, which caused the autocratic Sysselmann the most disquiet, was that these diktats were verified at the highest level but relayed verbally, via a female assistant defence minister. She refused to confirm them in writing and though the Sysselmann had not heard of her, she was rather too well informed about him. She reassured him that the one occasion when cupidity had got the better of him, was not significant at all. His record was otherwise spotless, his patriotism unquestioned, and he could rely on her appreciation at the end of his tenure. The Sysselmann duly made sure Mrs Larssen's requests were observed, and in consequence, Midgard Lodge was not.

Except for today, when general manager Danny Long, on duty in the cabin office looking down the fjord, felt his instinct tweak him to take another look at the AIS radar screen. He had just checked it at mid-scale, taking in the little coloured arrowheads that showed, variously, pink and purple for fishing and sailing vessels, green for cargo, and god forbid, red for tankers coming in too close. He looked at the screen more closely. He could feel something was off.

He clicked on the green arrows and saw what he expected – Asian cargo ships on the new TransPolar route. He clicked a couple at random: the *Hao Puren*: Rotterdam to Shanghai. The *Zheng He*, going the other way, Dalian to Algiers. A couple of others – everything moving smoothly.

Then he studied the dotted blue arrows of the cruise ships. Now the ice-free and liquid North Pole was just another bit of sea and offered no photo opportunities, Svalbard's stunning coastline was clogged in the summer. All captains tried to stagger their route to minimise bottlenecks, but because of the rarity of animal sightings, the tour operators had an agreement to share the information with each other on Channel 16 – despite this leading to what amounted to a cruise ship race to be second at the kill. The coastguard policed what it could, and was glad of Midgard Lodge's ability to offer search and rescue – but both knew that would be a last resort.

There: he saw it. The tiny blue cursor which had crossed into Midgard's unofficially restricted area. He clicked. Passenger cruise ship *Vanir*, he knew it. High staff-to-passenger ratio, regular circuit – except today. Probably after a bear. There was a huge male passing through, he'd seen it standing in silhouette on the fjord's bone.

He would report the ship's transgression later, but for now the protocol was to ensure front-of-house was neat and clean, everything quiet. Keeping an eye on the *Vanir*'s position, he hit a speed-dial on the iridium phone never far from his hand. A moment later, the phone flashed back at him. Message received, they would stay out until further notice. Then Long called down to reception and was pleased to hear everything was in hand. He returned to the screen, watching the little blue cursor slowly blinking around the headland, coming closer.

When the bear was young and the snow fell clean and white, his fur showed creamy, even pale yellow at times. Now the snow had a greyish tinge, causing him to shine even brighter against it. He had grown long yellow guard hairs on his massive forelegs, increasing his appearance of power, and when the sun shone through them it gave him a gold aura. He was following the scented track of a female in oestrus who had passed by, but paused to watch the ship heaving into the narrow mouth of the fjord, its engine thundering the water, its fuel stinking the air.

The deck was crowded with people, bare-skinned faces with shiny black insect eyes turned towards him. Their human body smells mingled with the smell of food from the ship, and metal, and fuel. The engine sound died down and the vibrations slowed then stopped. The voices faded.

The black walls of the fjord held the Arctic silence, until the bear lifted his white anvil of a head, black nostrils flaring for more information. His every move drew clicks and whirrs from the ship, becoming a frenzy as a curl of wind tickled him with a clue, and he lay down and rolled in the female's trail.

On the bridge with the captain, the tour leader looked down at the entranced passengers, and relaxed. The bear was massive by any standards and on the most photogenic port side of the Midgardbreen

glacier, where the ice terminus was blue and formed a cliff above the water. On the other side of the black bone of rock, the glacier was younger white ice and debouched in a relatively gentle slope down to the cobbled beach. With a start, the tour operator noticed the silver-grey wood cabin, extending back into the mountain.

'Is this the British guy's place? I heard it'd been sold – what goes on here?' Neither the Norwegian captain nor ice-pilot replied. They had crossed a line to find her passengers their bear. Svalbard had many enigmatic structures. No comment.

Crowded at the rail, excited as schoolchildren and all thoughts of class actions gone from their minds, the passengers of the *Vanir* were busy changing lenses and exclaiming in wonder. The bear was as huge and charismatic a celebrity as they could dream of, they guessed him at eleven or twelve feet, nearly a ton, maybe more. Through powerful telephoto lenses they saw his duelling scars, and the way he stood up on his hind legs, the edge of his pelt shining gold around him. He stared straight back with knowing black eyes, and they felt a euphoric jolt of fear. He could kill them.

Without warning the white god dropped to all fours and changed into a frightened animal, running for the edge of the glacier. In consternation the passengers watched him stagger and clamber to where the jagged peaks threw knives of shadow. They groaned in disappointment, they scanned around for what had scared their bear, but though their hi-mag lenses probed the darkness of the lower crags and pored across the bright rock striations that pulsed strange colours, nothing moved. They stared at the layers of rock and tried to appreciate the earth's history laid bare. But they felt angry and tiny.

Someone shouted out: there! that puff of snow higher up the glacier – surely too far and they had not seen him run – but they focused in hope. They gasped in wonder as a hundred hidden chimneys below the surface puffed out more sparkling ice-smoke. The air clenched and the sea sighed. The *Vanir* lifted as a great pressure wave passed through the water.

And then it started. First a distant boom, a detonation deep inside the glacier. Nothing, for a few long seconds, then a huge tearing,

cracking sound that shook the air, before time stretched and the blue snout of the glacier, sliding belly down from the ice cap, moaned and pushed out over the water, a blue bulge of ice filled with energy – and then with thunderous bangs like car-crashes it exploded all along its front, hurling shards of ice into the air and seismic bursts into the water so that the reinforced steel hull of the *Vanir* vibrated with the charge.

Wraiths of glittering ice-dust drifted over the sea. The passengers gripped each other as the *Vanir* lifted and fell again, and the shards of ice so small as they splashed, rolled out into the fjord as icebergs tall as the ship.

And then, as they watched, something happened that made no sense at all.

In front of the still-shuddering glacier, an invisible hand pinched a fold of sea like cloth then pulled it high into the air in a fistful of waterfalls. Out of the dazzling torrent something bright turquoise blue emerged: a great sapphire castle with turrets and minarets, throwing sparkling foam and mist as it cleared the water for one long stupendous second.

All of the passengers on the *Vanir* screamed and shouted as their eyes brimmed with wonders – some saw the streak of gold glowing deep within the frozen blue, some the detail of the minarets, some saw gargoyles' faces in the ice – but their voices were lost in the roaring sound as the vision leaned and fell, making a great bowl of the sea in which it twisted and rolled over, completely inverting itself.

All they saw now was a dark blue ice floe the size of an ice-rink, its pinnacles and spires forever hidden. Like a sentient thing, it glided towards the *Vanir*, a peculiar ridge of water pushing the ship aside as if to clear its way. Unearthly and real, the great dark floe followed the other icebergs out towards the mouth of Midgardfjorden, and the open sea beyond.

The passengers of the *Vanir* had no more words, but one of them, Trudie Burke, was making a convulsive, almost sexual sound. Oh, she kept whispering, still filming everything, the calving ongoing within her. Her lens followed the newborn icebergs, the whirling eddies in the water, and back to the glacier face. She filmed the water slapping and rocking at its base, and the cave of deepening blue ice where the water

surged and circled. Something swirled at its centre, making the current waver. Something that had not been there a moment ago.

Without taking her eye from the viewfinder, she reached out a hand for her husband. She pulled him towards her and gave him the camera, still recording. She pointed to the red shape rocking just below the surface.

'John,' she said softly, 'is that a body?'

There is one place on the coast of which they stood in some dread – *the great glacier of Puisortok. Travelling in early summer in their umiaks, they necessarily hug the coast, and utilize the narrow leads that exist between the pack-ice and the glacier. The literal meaning of the name is "the thing that comes up", as this peculiar glacier often calves by huge pieces breaking off underwater, which come to the top and shoot like breaching whales into the air. Instant destruction is the penalty for misjudgement or mere bad luck.*

I remember an old hunter saying: "Do not speak, do not eat, until Puisortok is passed."

Northern Lights: The Official Account of the British Arctic Air-Route Expedition 1930–31 (1932)
Frederick Spencer Chapman



2

The calving of the Midgard glacier was a tiny stitch in a larger pattern. While the male corpse it disgorged was already in Tromsø and under autopsy, all around the Arctic Circle scientists were recording calving events of unprecedented magnitude. This apparently synchronised new behaviour of the ice was strongly active for about seventy hours in Greenland, Nunavut Arctic Canada, Alaska and Russia, before stopping as abruptly as it started.

Twenty-seven degrees south in London, the Saharan dust storm that had blown over Europe for the last three days also ceased, leaving a fine gritty red film on cars smart and shabby, on the window sills of palaces and high-rises and added respiratory patients to overcrowded A&E departments and private surgeries alike. Entrepreneurial Londoners sold white paper masks by tube stations and only the reckless still went running.

Age fifty (but looking younger) and mindful of what happened to his mental state without hard exercise, Sean Cawson was one of them. Although his knees now protested and his thoughts clawed at him for the first two or three miles, afterwards he felt good, and that was rare. He left Martine sleeping, or pretending to, and slipped out of the apartment. He knew last night's conversation was only on pause. He would have to deal with it before long.

He jogged past the neighbour's door, smelling coffee and hearing their new baby crying. His was almost grown up, and hated him. At

the beginning, Martine had said she wasn't interested in family life, and he'd been relieved: one failure was enough. Now she'd changed her mind, and he felt slightly betrayed.

He pulled the heavy black door shut and stood for a moment on the empty street while he chose his running music. It was early but muggy, the sky was grey and no birds flew. The white porch pillars of the houses were shaded with the ochre Saharan dust, which also grouted the black and white tiles underfoot and gave an autumnal cast to the plane trees of the communal garden. As he chose a random mix and set off to the park, London looked and felt wrong.

The music matched it – harsh declamatory rap in African-inflected French that fitted the dislocated feel of the city. His feet caught the hard pounding rhythm and as he entered the park by the Kensington Palace gate he felt fierce and strong. The grass was browned with dust as if it had been passed under some great grill, and he left a trail rising behind him. If there was a good gym he might have used it, but the kind of place he had in mind, that stank of effort and crackled with energy – those places belonged to a distant world.

The water of the Serpentine was a dull grey mirror to the June sky. Sean's lungs and muscles were burning, but his will was breaking through his resistance. As if in reward, there ahead of him was one of his favourite sights, one of the privileges of early risers in certain parts of London: a troupe of army horses being exercised. Sometimes he'd pause to watch them cantering on the sand track that ran alongside Park Lane, a powerful river of satiny chestnut and bay muscle. The heavy rhythmic vibration of their hooves into the earth had risen through his feet into his body and connected him to some elusive feeling he could not name – but today he knew it. That lost feeling of wildness inside him, like a wolf hunting.

It was a crazy thought and the horses would easily outstrip him, but he wanted to run alongside them. He pushed himself harder, the punching syllables of the French rap synching with his muscles. He could smell the fragrance of the animals as he cut across the grass, he was straining with the effort but in his mind he was a wolf cutting them off as they turned on the sand track for their canter – he would sprint and burn himself out until they left him behind—

His phone buzzed from his arm holster. There were only two people he set to bypass his Do Not Disturb – his estranged daughter Rosie,

who never called, and the other whose name now flashed on the screen, his mentor Joe Kingsmith.

'Joe!' he panted. 'I'll call you back. I'm doing something crazy …' The riders were gathering up their horses, the animals were stamping, knowing what was coming.

'Don't, Sean, stay: it's an emergency.'

Sean stopped short.

'Joe, I'm here. What's happened? Are you hurt?'

'Me? No. Sean, are you home?'

'I'm in the park – what's happened?'

'Sean boy, I'd have called you at home but no one has a landline any more. I want someone there with you.'

Sean stood still. 'Tell me.'

There was a silence, and by its quality, Sean guessed Kingsmith was airborne. He tried to slow his breathing.

'Sean, I am so, so sorry. I've just spoken with Danny at Midgard. Tom's body washed out of the Midgard glacier two days ago—'

'What?' Sean heard the words clearly, but his mind rejected them.

'They had the positive ID this morning. It's definitely him. I'm so sorry, Sean. I wanted to be the one to tell you.'

The park vanished. Sean's world contracted to the rumble of Kingsmith's voice. 'Out of the glacier?' He felt stupid and slow.

'Shit. I knew I shouldn't have told you on the phone, but how else?'

Sean stared like a blind man. 'No, it's fine. Tell me everything.'

'I don't know that much. There was this huge calving almost in front of Midgard Lodge – that's when his body came out. Some cruise ship was down there and saw it all. Danny got sent away by the coastguard when he went to look, they were holding it as a crime scene—'

'A crime scene?' Sean came back into his body. 'There was no *crime*, everyone knows that!' He was shouting but he couldn't do anything about it.

'Sean boy, I'm trying to tell you, will you please listen? They call it that for protocol when they want to record everything. Of course there was no crime. Now I know you haven't been up there for a while, but Midgard is still a business and this could have a PR effect, so we need to handle it right.'

'They're sure it's Tom?'

'One hundred per cent. They had a good idea it could be and they matched DNA with a family member, apparently.'

'No one told me. No one's rung. They've known for two days?'

'I guess you haven't been in touch so much lately. We knew he was dead but … this is still a big shock.' Kingsmith paused. 'Sean?'

Sean walked away from the people coming towards him, out onto the great grassy plain of the park, the horses forgotten. 'Yes. We knew.' He sank to his knees on the dusty red grass.

'Sean.' Kingsmith's voice was kinder, quieter. 'Without a body to mourn, people are in limbo. They can't move on.'

Sean felt the fingers in his right hand start to burn, as if they still had frostbite. He stuffed them into his left armpit. He was shaking, but not from cold.

'Danny should have called me.'

'I wanted to be the one. I only know because I had to call him about something.'

'What thing?'

'Look: I completely get why you haven't been up there. But you've got a lot of catching up to do, and now isn't the right time. I'm glad you're interested again, but you've got an awesome team taking care of things so don't even worry right now.'

'I should be helping bring him back, I should be there.'

'You can't do anything: it's all in progress. You weren't next of kin, but I guess they'll be in touch with you, they'll be able to have a funeral at last. And an inquest, but that's separate.'

'An *inquest*?' The word was so ugly. 'But we know what happened, I've said it all, we've been through it.'

'I know, but it's what happens when someone's brought home. Same in the States as in the UK – just a formality. I'll be there to support you, I promise … Sean, can you hear me?'

'Yes.' The grey sky pulsed above him.

'You get yourself home, get back to Martine. She's got a good head on her shoulders, she'll know what to do. Sean, say something.'

'What were you talking to Danny about?'

He heard Kingsmith's bark of a laugh.

'Boy, are you persistent! But I've always liked that. OK, mea culpa, I put in a retreat, very small and last minute, a favour for a pal. I saw

a void in the schedule and he's paying top dollar. But this is hardly the time—'

'I'm still the CEO. Everything goes through me.'

'And if you are thinking like that at a time like this, you are the right man for the job. Point taken. Sean? You're breaking up but I hope you can still hear me: you need to speak to your friend in Oslo, about keeping traffic away from Midgard – it's important—'

The phone connection dropped out – Kingsmith's signature goodbye – and the French rap blasted back into Sean's skull. He ripped out the earphones and found himself alone on the dusty red plain of Hyde Park, trembling and burning.

Martine was in the wet-room shower when he came in, sweat-soaked like it was raining. Still in his clothes, he walked into the torrent and held her. She smiled, her eyes closed – and then she looked and saw his stricken face.

'Oh my god, what's happened? Tell me – has something happened to Rosie?'

Sean hit his forehead against the streaming wall. 'They've found Tom.'

'Stop! Come here.' She held him to her, keeping them under the streaming hot water, undressing him until he was naked. She kicked the clothes away from the drain and held him until he stopped shaking, then she turned off the water and helped him out and into a robe. As she put on her own, he went into the kitchen. She followed, watching while he took a bottle of vodka from the freezer and poured a big slug into a tumbler.

'Don't,' she said. 'Handle it without that.'

He knocked it back. Then he told her, in the barest detail, about Kingsmith's call, and the facts he knew, including the fact of the inquest. Martine nodded slowly.

'I'm so sorry, my darling. But Joe's absolutely right: this is closure at last, and if there's an inquest we'll get through it. I need to plan how we handle it. First thing is I'll work on a statement on your behalf, and then we've got a bit of time.'

Sean listened to her as she walked around their dressing room

preparing for work, thinking aloud. Joe was right, she had a good head on her well-set shoulders, working out which journalists could be trusted, how she would cancel certain invitations so they were not seen out enjoying themselves for a while …

He wished she had burst into tears. He wished she cared more about Tom, and less about damage control. Her voice went on as he stared at the rails of his clothes. Martine had shared her space very fairly, and everything was well spaced, perfectly clean, flatteringly lit like an expensive boutique. She had even had a library built in the hall for all his polar books. Abruptly she pushed her scarf drawer shut.

'What am I doing,' she said, 'dressing for work? I'm staying with you.'

'No,' he said, getting up. 'You go. I'll be OK.' He pulled open a deep drawer and took out his Arctic travelling clothes, now alien with lack of use. 'I'm going to Midgard. I booked a seat on the afternoon flight.'

Martine held his arm. 'That's crazy. You're in shock. Look at yourself.'

He did. The mirror showed him a beautiful young woman standing there half-dressed, her dark hair wet, beside an older man who stared back at him, eyes haunted and dangerous. Sean turned away.

'Joe put in a retreat. Without telling me.'

Martine frowned. 'Really? He shouldn't do that.'

'It's because I haven't been there. I've dumped everything on the team.'

'No. You've delegated. You can't personally run every single one of your clubs, you pick right then you trust people.'

Sean threw some clothes into the bag and zipped it. 'I'm letting everyone down.'

Martine tried again, embracing him and pressing herself into him from behind.

'You're not! Forget about last night, forget all that. Just come back to bed and let me look after you.' She ran her hand down his chest and closed it over him. 'Be sad in my arms. I won't go in today.'

'No, go. I'll be OK.' He kissed her, to deflect the rejection. She stared at him in the mirror as he went out into the bedroom and found his car key. She followed.

'You can't drive, you've just had a huge vodka. And if you're on the afternoon flight you've got plenty of time – where are you going?'

Sean looked out into the square garden.

'It's bad to hear it on the phone.'

'Oh. I see.' She moved away.

'Martine, please, you know how fragile she is.'

'Actually no, I don't think she is, not at all.'

'She loved Tom as well.'

'Fine. But I think she was prepared to pull any stunt to try to stop you leaving. I think she's manipulative and angry and she's turned your own daughter against you, and *me*, and it's totally a mistake to keep being sentimental about a marriage that was over long before I came along.' She sighed. 'I'm sorry. That sounded harsh. I just want to protect you from more pain at a time like this.'

'You're right.'

'Yes, I am. But if you don't want me to stay with you today, or to come with you to Midgard, if you want to just be alone with the bad feelings—'

He pressed her hand to his chest. 'Something's clawing inside me.'

'Maybe the slug of vodka at seven thirty in the morning.'

'Yes! I'm a fucking mess, I told you I was a bad deal—'

'I never make bad deals.' Martine pulled back and looked in his eyes. 'But I do know that if you want healthy boundaries you'll have them, and if you want to put yourself through the wringer, you'll do that too.' She kissed him on the lips. 'So I really care that you're so sad, but as you won't let me help you, I am going to work. Let me know when you're back. I'll be here.'

He listened to her light step down the outer hall, then the click of the front door. He went back to the freezer, but stopped. Martine was right, of course. He was in a terrible state. And if he was going to drive, he should not have another.