The Beginning of the End of the World

Your world. Your life. Your future.
Now.

Fram with wind turbine

John Slade

The Beginning of the End of the World

John Slade

Copyright 2017 by John Slade

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without written permission from the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-893617-63-6

ISBN 978-1-893617-64-3

Thank you to the Fram Museum of Oslo, Norway
for the cover picture of the Fram,
taken by Fridtjof Nansen.

Background photo on cover by Vidar Lysvold
Facebook: Vidar Lysvolds Photopage
www.facebook.com/pages/Vidar-Lysvolds-Fotoside/261901667187560

John Slade Bøker
Moerveien 4
1430 Ås
Norway

www.johnsladeboker.no
jslade@dreamscape.com

Part I

Three Guests

Chapter One

She stood at the railing of the upper deck of a Norwegian research ship, staring across the choppy gray water of the Arctic Ocean at the ragged edge of the polar ice cap, no more than fifty meters away. The ship was moving slowly along the edge of the vast sheet of ice that stretched to the northern horizon. Flat chunks of ice which had broken off floated in the open water; the ship's steel hull cut through them easily as the vessel headed east, enabling the crew of scientists to survey the fragile edge of one of the most important features on planet Earth.

With binoculars, she could see cracks and fissures along the fringe of the ice cap, where the thin sheet of ice—no more than three meters thick—cracked and crumbled in the battering waves. Now she heard—she heard with her ears and she heard with her heart—a sound almost like the shot of a cannon, as a chunk of ice broke loose and floated away in the gray water.

That was the sound, she knew, of the beginning of the end of the world.

She looked over her shoulder at the deck behind her, where the other members of the international research team were going about their normal business: filming the ice cap with a camera mounted with a telephoto lens; watching for birds, watching for bears, for seals, for whales. One hardy group on the aft lower deck was laying out black rubber suits and scuba tanks in preparation for a dive into the frigid water.

But she saw no one else. She looked at her watch beneath the thick cuff of her red arctic jacket: a few minutes before ten o'clock. The pale yellow sun in early May was low in the misty blue sky to the south. Conditions were excellent for staring across the open water at the enormous sheet of ice that filled the northern horizon.

She was confident that her visitors would join her, here at the railing. Yes, she was almost certain that they would soon appear.

She was staring again through her binoculars at a ridge of ice where one sheet had angled up over another, when suddenly she knew, she knew . . .

She looked over her left shoulder saw him—how remarkably he looked like his pictures—wearing an old-fashioned sealskin coat and leggings, a fur hood, and boots perhaps of reindeer hide. His face was stern—always so stern in the pictures—though he nodded to her as he approached.

Thank you, she thought. Thank you, thank you.

Now he stood beside her, wrapped his fur mittens over the railing, and stared due north at the ragged edge of the sheet of ice which once, long ago, he had crossed on skis.

"Hello, Professor Nansen," she said, enormously glad to see him. "Welcome aboard the *Polar Star*."

He looked at her, his eyes no longer stern, but alert, with a hint of gratitude, and perhaps a measure of surprise at seeing a woman scientist on the deck of a research ship. "Professor Normann, I thank you for this opportunity."

"You are most welcome."

Then they stood, shoulder to shoulder, colleagues on a research expedition, staring across the open gray water at the ragged fringe of the polar ice cap. She handed him her binoculars, then she crossed the deck to a nearby equipment locker; she lifted the lid and took out one of the three pairs inside. She joined him again at the railing, where the two of them swept their binoculars back and forth, studying the ice with eyes that could read every crack, every fissure.

He felt—it gave him a deep, quiet happiness—the gentle rolling of the ship beneath his feet. How good to be at sea again.

He breathed the cold salty air. He listened to the immense silence, broken only by the lapping of the waves against hull beneath him, and by the low rumble of the ship's engine. And now by the call of one of the crew behind him, a strong voice, the voice of a man dedicated to his work.

He lowered his binoculars, turned and looked at the sun behind him, low above the silver-gray sea. Then he asked the woman standing beside him in her modern red jacket and hood, "What latitude are we at?"

She told him, for she had expected his question, "Seventy-nine degrees, twenty-four minutes."

He stared at her, astonished, baffled, almost ready to tell her that she certainly must be wrong . . . although he did not. "But we are sailing on open water, where there should be ice."

Her heart ached for him; she hated that he now had to learn how desperate the world had become.

"The ocean is warming. The water melts the ice from underneath. The polar ice cap shrinks around the edges, and melts from below. The ice cap is less than sixty percent of what it was in your time. Now even in the month of May, it is smaller than it was in August of 1893."

And then she heard it: like the shot of a cannon as another chunk broke loose. They both stared through their binoculars at the ice bobbing in open water—water which a century ago had been solid ice. She told him, "That was the sound of the beginning of the end of the world."

He looked at her, and she could see in his eyes that already he understood that the Arctic was changing, and that something was deeply, deeply wrong.

"The world is warming," she told him. "The oceans are warming. The ice is melting. And soon, the planet itself will become a very different planet."

She touched his arm with her padded glove. "That is why we asked you to come back. We hope that, somehow, you can help."

The man of science, the man who had made such great efforts to understand the Arctic world, asked her with a voice both incredulous and baffled, "But why? Why is the world warming?"

She hesitated. "Before I explain, I think that all three of you should be here. So that we can . . . learn together, and somehow respond together." She smiled, with a bit of hope in what she was proposing. "We shall be an international team."

"Ah," he said with satisfaction. "And from what countries shall they come from?"

"One from Russia. A man of science, a man of deep learning, from Russia."

"Well then. How nice it will be to speak with a Russian again."

"Yes. And one from America. Most definitely, a man of science. A man whose inquiring mind explored the early mysteries of electricity. A man whose generous heart prompted him to establish the first library in Philadelphia."

"Ah. How nice it will be to speak with an American again."

She looked over her shoulder, hoping that . . . Yes, there they were! Walking toward her were two figures clad in old fashioned fur coats and leggings. One was distinctly tall; he wore a hood over his head made of white fur, perhaps Arctic fox. The other was shorter, definitely a rounder figure; he wore the fur hat that had made him such a sensation in Paris years ago.

She saw in the eyes of the taller figure a keen alertness. He had a piercing stare which demanded to know what he could learn from the world, as he looked about him at this modern ship, at the open sea, at the distant sheet of ice.

She saw in the eyes of the shorter, rounder figure a glint of humor, and a deep, quiet wisdom, as he looked not at the ship nor the sea nor the ice, but at her. With a smile, he nodded his greeting. He was here; he was ready to help.

"Professor Nansen," she said, touching the arm of the man she had so admired even as a school girl, "may I introduce you to your colleagues?"

He turned from the sea to look at her, then turned fully around and faced the two gentlemen approaching him.

She called to them, "Welcome. Welcome. This is Professor Fridtjof Nansen of Norway. I am Professor Trude Normann, also of Norway. And you, sir," she said to the taller one, "must be Peter the Great."

Peter bowed and offered his fur mitten, marveling that his host—his hostess—on this ship was a woman.

Then Peter and Fridtjof shook hands.

"Dobra djen," said Fridjof in Russian. "Good day."

"Da!" said Peter with surprise. *"Dobra djen."*

Trude turned to the man who smiled at her, offering his warm friendship. He was clearly the oldest of the four of them. "And you, sir," she shook his hand, "must be Doctor Benjamin Franklin."

"Delighted to be here," he said. "Delighted to take another look at this good old world, and to see if we can make another bit of progress."

Doctor Franklin shook hands with Professor Nansen, who told him in excellent English, "I am very glad to meet you, sir. Our Norwegian constitution, you see, was fashioned in 1814 with the model of your American constitution of 1787 very much in mind."

"Good!" said Benjamin. "Our hope, even back then, was that we might have some positive influence out in the world beyond our shores."

Trude suggested, "Just to get a perspective on our places in the passage of time, I think it would be helpful to say that you, Peter, explored first Amsterdam and then London during your eighteen-month visit to western Europe in 1697-1698. You learned about shipbuilding in the Netherlands, and you learned about designing a city in Manchester, England. When you returned home to Russia, you used this new

knowledge to build Russia's first fleet of ships, and to build Russia's great seaport, Saint Petersburg."

"Yes," acknowledged Peter, "but do not forget that I hired experts in many fields who brought their skills to Russia: ship builders, architects, mechanical engineers, artillery officers, even sculptors. I did my best to educate my poor backward Russians. I opened schools where entirely new subjects were taught, and I invited even children to visit a museum of science."

"Ahhhhh," said Trude, "Peter, we need you today. We need you today."

She turned to Doctor Franklin. "And you, sir, visited London in 1725 to 1726, not so many years after Peter had been there. You learned about modern techniques in the printing trade, which enabled you, upon your return to Philadelphia, to establish your own newspaper, as well as an almanac in which you gave practical advice to the working man. You established the first library in Philadelphia, open to all citizens who would take the time to read a book. And you designed a far better stove, which produced more heat with much less smoke. It seems, Doctor Franklin, that even before your political contributions, your heart was devoted to improving the lives of your fellow Americans."

Ben smiled, thinking back to those times. "The key, my dear, is that they were willing to learn. And thus we made, in a few industrious decades, an astonishing amount of progress."

"Ben," she said, her heart gladdened by this enterprising man from a country now so troubled in these modern times, "we need you today. Oh, so urgently, we need you today."

Then she turned to Professor Nansen. "And you, my fellow Norwegian, you were in London many times, although your first visit was in 1889, following your trek on skis across Greenland. You addressed, if I am correct, the Royal Geographical Society and shared with them what you had learned from your crossing of the ice that capped the great hump of Greenland."

He nodded; that was correct.

She gestured toward the edge of the polar ice cap. "Later, in 1893 to 1896, you returned to the Arctic aboard the *Fram,* an innovative ship built with a rounded hull, constructed of strong, heavy beams of oak, so that the ship could survive becoming frozen into the ice of the polar ice cap. Rather than crush the sides of the ship, the ice lifted the round hull, and thus the *Fram* survived for almost three years—from September of 1893 to August of 1896—locked within the polar ice."

He nodded, this quiet man; that was correct.

"Your plan was to prove that the ice drifted from east to west, and thus the ship would drift with it from the waters above Siberia to the waters above Norway. Your hope was that this drifting voyage would take you far enough north that the ship would approach the North Pole. When you saw that the drifting ice carried you westward rather than to the north, you and your companion Hjalmar Johansen set out on skis—just the two of you alone, with twenty-eight dogs, three sleds, two kayaks, a tent, and provisions for a hundred days, as well as a Norwegian flag—to see if you could reach the very top of the world."

He nodded; that was correct. In his stern eyes, she saw a growing measure of respect.

"On the ninth of April, 1895, at 86 degrees, 4 minutes, you and Johansen realized that the distance was too great, and the difficulties with broken ice and deep cracks were so exhausting, that you had to begin the trek south with the hope of finding a cluster of islands, and shelter, and perhaps some human habitation."

He nodded. "We did not reach the very top of the planet, but we visited a place of many mysteries, a place of great beauty. We struggled, but we survived. We learned about that Arctic world—oh, we learned so much—and I put all of what we learned into several books."

Then he turned to the north and gestured with his arm toward the open gray water of the Arctic Ocean, and toward the ragged edge of the polar ice cap. "Now, Trude, you tell me that the polar ice cap is melting. Melting because the Arctic Ocean beneath it is warming. Warming because the entire world is warming." He looked at her with eyes filled with sadness—eyes that had witnessed so much sadness during his life—and now must witness even more sadness today. "Trude, please, explain to us what is happening to that world of many mysteries, and deep, lonely beauty, the world where once my beating, struggling heart was so profoundly happy."

The others took their places along the railing, facing north. Trude stood with Ben to her right, Fridtjof to her left, with Peter to his left. She walked to the equipment locker on the deck, lifted the lid and took out two pairs of binoculars. She gave them to Peter and to Ben, then she returned to her spot at the railing.