

HOLLY GESTURED EXCITEDLY towards the rocky point of our new anchorage.

“I think I see whales!”

We all spied their rounded backs, and congratulated Holly on her perceptiveness. I thought they looked like beluga whales. For several minutes we marveled at the creatures.

Then Chris became skeptical. “They look like rocks.”

“No,” Holly defended. “They’re whales. Even Daddy said so.”

“It *is* strange that they’re not moving,” Jaja said.

I took out the binoculars. Through the lenses, the whales revealed their true identities: Three smooth rocks that were uncovered by the falling tide. A slight surge spilled over them, giving the appearance of motion. I scanned the mirrorlike bay, wondering if there were more hidden rocks. Jaja and I had sounded the bottom for our swinging radius, but we did not know what hazards lay outside of this circle.

The next morning, I was awakened by the familiar sound of ice scraping against the hull. I went on deck to investigate. For some reason, the sun’s

glare on the water was excessively blinding. All I could see were small bits of ice bobbing harmlessly next to *Driver*'s hull.

"No big deal," I thought.

The air temperature hovered around 36 degrees Fahrenheit, but the sun's rays felt warm on my skin. The wind was still calm, and I wondered if this would be the day we would reach 80 degrees north latitude.

My pupils finally contracted allowing me to gaze across the fjord toward the magnificent glacier. I gaped. My brain could not comprehend what my eyes were telling it. Just 100 feet from *Driver*, the entire sheet of winter ice that had filled the cove near the edge of the glacier had broken loose. It was drifting up the fjord. The sheet was at least three feet thick, flat as a pancake, and had the surface area of a stadium parking lot—a monster slab that probably weighed a zillion pounds. Watching it slide by slowly, I contemplated its untold tons of inertia. Suddenly, I realized with a sickening awareness that the ice was not only drifting past *Driver*, it was also drifting *toward* us. The current was sucking the slab into the indentation.

"My God," I whispered out loud. "*We're going to be crushed!*"

In a split second, I visualized the ice slab sweeping through our anchorage. It would smash into *Driver* and bulldoze her sideways onto the rocky beach. My imagination envisioned what would happen as the keel touched bottom. We would heel over. With the ice pushing on the hull, *Driver* might be rolled on her side until the mast and rigging caught in the rocks.

The safe right-angle escape to deeper water that we had envisioned earlier was already blocked by the ice sheet. I looked toward the rocky point. Going that way was the closest and the most logical option for getting away from the drifting slab. But we would have to get there before the slab hit the point and sealed off the gap. I wondered if we dared run the gauntlet. Were the belugas the only shallow rocks beneath the milky blue water? My mind was transported back to the uncharted, rock-strewn waters off Cape Borthen, north of Hornsund. My pulse increased. I looked at the moving vise closing on us by the second. I yelled into the cabin.

"Jaja!"

Over the years, Jaja and I have learned to recognize the messages contained in the simple recitation of each another's name. We can pack a lot of meaning into a single word. Jaja bolted out of bed, put on warm clothes, and raced outside before answering.

Pointing to the approaching ice, I explained the situation. Jaja blinked against the glare and ran forward to begin leveraging the anchor aboard. I went below, put on warm clothes, and started the engine.

The slab was closing fast. Breathless, we took turns at the anchor windlass. My worst fear was that the anchor might catch under the ice, forcing us

to abandon 220 feet of chain plus a 44-pound anchor. Fortunately, when the chain hung straight down, indicating that the anchor was directly beneath *Driver's* bow, we still had three feet of clear water between our hull and the edge of the ice slab. My mouth was dry, and I was sweating.

We raised the anchor into the bow roller and motored slowly toward the point knowing that the beluga rocks were there somewhere under the falling tide. The depth held steady at 25 feet, then jumped abruptly. When it reached seven feet, I put the engine in reverse to bring us to a stop. We couldn't chance running aground now. Full of glacial runoff, the water was nearly opaque. Jaja jumped into the dinghy and rowed ahead to sound the bottom with an oar. *Driver* was close enough to the beach that I could see polar bear tracks in the snow without binoculars. I brought the gun on deck.

When Jaja was five boatlengths away from *Driver*, I was startled by a sickening crash. In my peripheral vision, I caught a blur of white leaping out of the water. I swung the gun around, wondering if I would be able to hit a swimming polar bear now that the gun sight was missing. I made the barrel an extension of my eye.

Then I relaxed the tension in my trigger finger. The ice slab had hit the submerged beluga rocks forcing a ragged section of ice to be thrust into the air. I looked at Jaja. She was standing up in the dinghy with an oar poised like a spear. She lowered it slowly.

"Everything OK over there?" I shouted.

She waved and resumed sounding between the rocks and the shoreline.

When Jaja's six-foot-long oar went barely halfway into the water, I swore involuntarily. Too shallow. Defeated, Jaja came back to *Driver*. With our forward escape sealed off, we had only one option—motor toward the back of the unsurveyed indentation and try to skirt behind the approaching ice-vice. Proceeding at dead slow, I glued my eyes to the depthsounder while Jaja perched on the bow and looked in vain for rocks. Our objective was to keep moving and win the race with the ice. We had to get behind the slab before it squashed us against the rocky beach like a mussel shell hit by a hammer.

I glanced upwards to rest my throbbing eyes. The white mountains stood out sharply against the blue sky, and the nunataks—mountain peaks poking out of the glacier—were perched like islands in a frozen sea. The pastel blue ice of the glacial wall rose to incredible heights, forming cathedral towers with buttresslike supports. The towers and buttresses seemed ready to collapse at any moment, but the Gothic pieces of ice clung tenaciously. It was almost as if the glacier dared me to look away and miss the mind-blowing spectacle of ice crashing into the water.

I glanced back at the depthsounder and immediately forgot the beauty around us. Eighteen feet...16...12...9...9...8...7.5...7...6.5. With barely six

inches of water under the keel, we continued to glide along gracefully, defying the odds of running aground. Suddenly, the depth shot back to 20 feet, sending a thrill through my body. But it was too soon to celebrate. Just as quickly, the numbers sank back to less than 8 feet, betraying another rock.

Five minutes went by. The depths oscillated up and down. As the ice slab drifted nearer, we were forced closer to the beach. I was too focused on survival to contemplate the insanity of our anchoring so near a glacier in the first place. Instead, I just shook my head angrily. "Of all possible moments, why did the winter ice have to break loose this morning?"

The minutes crawled by. I held the tiller steady, keeping the ice slab a scant six inches from our hull. We were approaching the rear edge of the ice—close to breaking free. Once we got behind the slab, we could turn at a right angle, away from the beach, and aim for deeper water in the fjord.

"Kill that thought," I told myself. "*We haven't made it yet.*"

"Take the engine out of gear!" Jaja shouted from the bow rail.

I dove for the throttle and pulled the lever into neutral as a large piece of protruding underwater ice slammed into our hull. *Driver* lurched as if she had struck bottom and stopped cold in her tracks.

"*This might be the end,*" I thought. The ice was now scraping against the hull. It began to push us sideways. I looked over the side to make sure no ice was near the propeller. Then I put the engine in reverse. *Driver* backed away from the slab. I glanced at the sounder: 12 feet. There was still hope.

Tentatively, I eased us forward again parallel to the ice. The depth increased to 30 feet. We were just one boatlength from the rear of the slab. Then we saw a second, enormous slab 100 yards behind the first one. Apparently, the ice sheet had broken into a few very large pieces when it started to drift. We would have to navigate the ice-clogged waters between the two slabs. There, the icy chunks were densely packed, and were bigger than the ones with which we had experimented in Kongs Fjord. We would just have to do our best. This was our chance to escape to deep water—assuming no more rocks or shoals blocked the way.

As the corner of the first slab came abeam of us, I turned *Driver* slowly and aimed toward the middle of the fjord. My mouth was as dry as stale bread. *Driver* banged into a large chunk. I caught Jaja's eye.

"Keep going," she said.

Another piece clunked into the bow and scraped along the hull. I tried to think of other cruising experiences that I could relate to the nightmare, but nothing came to mind. We had woven our way through extensive coral reefs on *Direction*, but in all our years of sailing we had never actually hit one. Our experiences this morning superseded all others. The present was unique.

"Dave! Neutral!"

My hand found the throttle in a flash, and I slipped the engine out of gear. The hull bumped the ice.

After a moment Jaja hollered. "All clear."

For several more minutes, we negotiated the scattered ice between the two menacing floes. Finally, like coming off a bumpy, dirt road onto a newly paved highway, we left the slabs and icy debris behind. *Driver* glided smoothly through ice-free water. When we found the 300-foot depth curve in the middle of the fjord, I was so relieved I felt like yelling. But I was afraid to open my sticky mouth for fear of slurring my words.

Jaja walked back to the cockpit, put her hand on my shoulder, and said nonchalantly, "Want a coffee?"

I nodded and braved three words. "Make it strong."