

THE CAULDRON OF CALAMITIES

BY Masha Nordbye

Difficulties are just things to overcome, after all...

Ernest Shackleton,
Antarctic Explorer

On an unseasonably cold January evening in Los Angeles, I excitedly boarded my flight to Barbados, located in the Lesser Antilles of the West Indies. After several years of unpredictable travel due to the pandemic, I had signed on for a leisurely Caribbean cruise (with only 60 guests); and, now with COVID cases declining and being triple vaccinated (and everyone onboard required to wear face masks), I surmised that my risk was fairly minimal. The voyage would depart from Bridgetown, the capital, and sail on to St Lucia, the Grenadines and Grenada, with final stops at the Dutch ABC islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.

Having just completed an intense work project, I looked forward to tranquil sailings amidst the tropical islands. But after landing, security informed me that I had taken an incorrect PCR test, and thus needed to repeat one at the airport. The other perplexed passengers that fared as I were grouped together at the far end of the terminal to wait for their results. I nervously watched a health official lead away a person, presumably to some quarantine hotel. With a sigh of relief after testing negative, little did I realize the dramatic fate that awaited me in the weeks to come.

I stood on deck as our sleek four-masted yacht unfurled its large white sails, which immediately caught the wind and billowed out over the sparkling blue waters of the Caribbean. It was hard to imagine that more than five hundred years earlier, Christopher Columbus, determined to find a new passage to Asia, had sailed across the Atlantic from Spain into these very waters. After ten long weeks at sea, the sailors finally sighted land in this yet uncharted expanse. Believing he had reached the Indies, Columbus called the inhabitants of the islands *Los Indios*, Spanish for Indians. The word Caribbean derives from the word *Caribales* or *Canibales*—after the Caribs, one of the West Indies indigenous tribes, thought at the time to practice cannibalism.

The French were the first Europeans to settle on Saint Lucia, and later signed a peace treaty with the resistant Caribs. It's claimed that the island got its name when French seamen were first shipwrecked on its shores on December 13, 1502—the feast day of the Virgin-Martyr of Syracuse, Sainte Alouise or St Lucy; today, it remains one of the ¹two countries in the world named after a woman. The large town of Soufrière, situated on the southwestern coast, derives its name from the many volcanic sulfur springs. Marie Joséphe Rose Tascher de La Pagerie—the future Joséphine Bonaparte and Empress of France—spent much of her childhood here. The French and British would go on to rule St Lucia seven times each, until it gained full independence in 1979.

¹ The second is Ireland, named after the Celtic goddess of fertility—Eire.

With a full day on the island and keen to explore, I set out on a hike to the picturesque *Gros* and *Petit Pitons*, whose two giant volcanic plugs loom up south of town. After several hours of walking, I cut through a forested path and came out upon a shimmering white-sand beach in front of the appropriately named Happiness Hotel with the Pitons as a stunning backdrop. After a heavenly swim in the warm waters, I hailed a small red water taxi to drop me back at the pier. Later, I would think about the numerous locals I had encountered along the way, wondering if one of them had been the culprit.

Once on the dock, I struck up a conversation with one of our staff, and listened with disbelief as he recounted a harrowing story. When working aboard a cruise during the first COVID lockdown he wasn't allowed to leave the ship for an *entire year* as his home country of the Philippines had closed its borders to all. A day earlier, our Indonesian chef told me his own traumatic pandemic tale. Around the same time, the vessel that he had been employed on had to make its way down the Suez Canal in order to eventually drop off crew in Mumbai and Jakarta; the chef finally made it home four months later. Boarding the water shuttle back to my own ship, the music speakers were prophetically blasting Bob Marley's *Everything's Gonna Be Alright*.

A day later, with all these crazy COVID stories still vivid in my mind, we arrived at St George's, the capital of Grenada. Alongside us was berthed a huge cruise liner, seemingly the size of a sideways-leaning Statue of Liberty. Even though Grenada still remained closed to tourists, the country was allowing passengers to shop inside a large mall at the end of the pier. And it had free WIFI. So the masses made a beeline for the interior bars, ordering frozen daiquiris while taking off their masks for the WIFI-infused alcoholic toasts. I took in the surreal scene and immediately did an about face and headed the other way for an outdoor stroll. Later, I would find out that many of the larger companies utilized trailing ghost ships, which took aboard positive cases. In this way, the ship could verify that all its passengers had tested negative, and thus be allowed to go ashore at scheduled ports-of-call.

After Grenada, it would take nearly thirty hours at sea to sail on to Kralendijk, Bonaire, located fifty miles south of Venezuela. I was excited to arrive as the entire coastline of Bonaire had been declared a marine sanctuary that contains some of the best reefs in the world with over fifty types of coral and four-hundred species of fish. I made several stellar dives and enjoyed an afternoon of kayaking around the many secluded beaches. In such a paradise, it was no small wonder that I wanted the trip to go on forever...and I'd very soon discover to be careful what you wished for. The next day was a stop in Willemstad, Curaçao. And then, on the following morning, we were scheduled to arrive at our last harbor in Oranjestad, Aruba.

Before disembarking, Aruba required that all passengers take a coronavirus test. I had my nasal swab, and then went up on deck for a morning cappuccino to await the result. In between sips, I suddenly caught sight of the manager anxiously walking towards me with a very alarmed look on his face. All I could think of was: *oh nooo*. He then uttered the dreaded words: "I'm so sorry to inform that you tested positive." And I was the only one on the entire ship that had! In one swift second, my island plans collapsed and any

discernible future intentions dissolved like water vapor into the cloud layers above. How could this be? I had absolutely no symptoms at all.

What next? Maximillian the Manager told me that since Aruba wouldn't allow me to disembark, I had to immediately proceed to my cabin and self isolate. About an hour later came a knock on my door. My delightful Indonesian hall attendants, Dedi and Nyulu, now attired in white disposable Hazmat suits with their faces covered with clear shields and double masks, were to escort me to a new location. As I walked through the corridors, with passengers gaping at the scene, I couldn't help but feel like Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, albeit now condemned with a big Scarlet C for COVID pinned heavily upon my chest.

Placed in an isolated cabin towards the bow of the ship with, thank goodness, a small porthole window, I was told that it was forbidden to leave the room; and, if I needed anything I was to call the front desk. As all the COVID protocols were changing daily, it turned out that the cruise company didn't quite know what to do with me. I suddenly felt part of some fictional-like medieval saga when weary passengers were forced to quarantine during the time of the bubonic plague. As I sat, trapped in my 10' x 15' now imagined prison cell, all these adventurous tales of past explorers—no longer experienced from pages of a book—were becoming frightfully real.

That afternoon, as I slowly morphed into a secret stowaway character out of a Dickens novel, I watched the next group of giddy tourists board for their ten-day voyage to Colombia, Panama and Costa Rica. Except for a few crewmembers, no one else was aware of my shameful existence. I spent the rest of the day alone in my room, sadly cancelling my Aruba flight home and pondering the many scenarios (after having been so careful) of how I might have contracted the virus. The next morning, the manager timidly knocked on my door, I guess hoping I was still alive.

It never entered my wildest imagination that I would end up being quarantined on a ship bound for Colombia. We now had two full days at sea; and, I soothed my psyche by telling myself that it wasn't that bad as no one else could leave the ship either. Begrudgingly, with no idea of how long this ordeal would last, I took stock of what I had to keep myself occupied. My books included one on quantum physics and *The Tibetan Book of the Living and Dying*. Certainly these were quite *apropos*—the first would take a while to even comprehend and the other a consolation to my dilemma that would hopefully have a positive outcome once I tested negative. Perhaps I could pretend my cabin was like a cave in the Himalayas, where I could quietly meditate and try for Nirvana?

By Day Three, and remaining thankfully asymptomatic (what would have happened if I had become really sick?), I was getting a bit antsy from lack of exercise. So, I began a regimen of sit-ups and yoga poses; and to keep a sense of humor, I even put the red rose from my room vase in my mouth and feigned Tango steps in front of the mirror. I didn't know if I was feeling nauseous from the virus, or just plain seasick from roiling around in the open sea. Another irony was my lack of appetite. I couldn't even put room service to

the test for the delicious dinners planned by a guest chef who had specially come aboard for this cruise from Louisiana.

On Day Four, after traversing the Atlantic, we entered the port of the Colombian town of Santa Maria. Longingly, with my little nose pressed up against the²sealed porthole, I watched the cheerful guests depart for their various land excursions. I felt like a dejected Cinderella who had to stay behind while everyone else was going out to have a ball. But, a few minutes later, I became very excited when the coast guard pulled up alongside my wee window, and the men waved at me. I almost shed a tear from the human contact.

The next morning we arrived in Cartagena, and I suggested that since I was currently in my fifth day of quarantine perhaps the captain could try and negotiate for my release. When the purser contacted Colombian custom officials, we heard back the excuse that unfortunately the ship had needed to make the request on the day upon first entering Colombian waters in Santa Maria. Thus, it was a resounding *no es posible!* It seemed I was merely at the mercy of each country's custom officials; and, this was at the whim of whoever was in charge on any given day. No one wanted to take responsibility of letting loose a recovering COVID body out upon the land.

After all the Colombian drama, Max the Manager, perhaps now pitying my protracted lock-up, offered to let me 'air 'out' on deck for an hour during the dark mantle of night. In the late evening, a crewmember came by to escort me to an upper deck while fastidiously observing my every move. But how could I escape? Unless I jumped and made a swim for Miami, where else could I go? Out of a scene from a Sci-Fi film, another fellow followed me from my room with some type of viral-sucking, blue-blinking vacuum machine, ostensibly to zap away any wayward viral particles emanating from my masked nostrils.

A place on an upper deck had been cordoned off for my private use, where I surreptitiously breathed in my first fresh air after five days of lock down. I didn't care that there were wild wind gusts and a light drizzle. Draped in a black sarong, here I was like an Emily Brontë character, delegated to roam the lonely moors all by her lonesome. Above me, several passengers curiously watched as a strangely cloaked creature jogged 'round and 'round while trying to keep her balance between the small swimming pool and two hot tubs whose waters were sloshing out on the deck under the hazy moon's pastel halo. And, the outdoor loudspeakers just happened to be playing *Don't worry about a thing. 'Cause every little thing gonna be alright!*

After being rejected by Colombia, I had more than two full days again isolated at sea as the trip headed nearly five hundred miles on to western Panama. The next morning, as I lay in my bed, bounced about by churning waves in a semi-lucid state, my mind wandered back two years when another cruise I was on had to flee Antarctica during the first pandemic lockdowns. Then, I was escaping an ice-bound land from an unknown deadly virus; and now, ironically, I was stuck aboard a ship in the tropics infected with it.

² Believe me, I seriously contemplated opening the screws of my sealed porthole with my Swiss Army Knife. But, with my cabin location at eye level with the sea, I envisioned the possibility of an embarrassing flooding disaster.

In March 2020, I departed Ushuaia, the world's southernmost city, on a 4000-mile voyage across Antarctic waters. When I set out there was only one confirmed case of coronavirus in all of Argentina. But, by the end of the trip and the unexpected shutdown of the world, I would feel most akin to Sir Ernest Shackleton, known for his death-defying escape out of this seventh continent.

After having sailed for several weeks over to South Georgia Island and then on to the Antarctic peninsula in our protective bubble, the captain suddenly received the startling news that Argentina, due to the surging viral outbreak, was about to close its borders. If we didn't make it back to Ushuaia's harbor within the next several days, the ship would be stranded in Antarctic waters. Even though our maximum speed was sixteen knots, this would not be a quick nor easy dash for the Drake Passage is one of the world's most perilous passages, owing to its deadly gales, towering waves and strong currents. The largest wave ever recorded was nearly eighty feet high, and the notorious Cape Horn Rollers awaited us at the other end.

And it was into these mythic waters that we forged ahead on a 700-mile journey north from Wilhelmina Bay. Over the next several days we'd be in an area where the Atlantic, Pacific and Southern Seas converge, creating a roaring mix of winds and currents that meet no resistance from any landmass on the planet. The next morning, with cloudy skies and increasing winds, our large vessel seemed to encounter Poseidon's wrath as giant waves surged up and crashed over the top of the upper decks. I began chewing anti-sea sickness tablets like tootsie rolls and, voluntarily, hunkered down and remained isolated in my cabin.

On December 5, 1914, Ernest Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic Expedition set off from South Georgia aboard the *Endurance* to attempt the first crossing of the Antarctic landmass. But their hopes were quelled when, one month later, heavy pack ice began to engulf the wooden ship (only sixty miles from their planned landings spot) until they could proceed no farther. The expedition members survived the dark winter by living in the ship's belly, nicknamed The Ritz. When the *Endurance* was finally crushed by the severe pressure of the moving ice and sank, the men set up base on the northward-drifting ice flows for nearly five months more. When they finally reached the barren Elephant Island, the men had not stood on solid ground for 497 days.

Realizing no chance of salvation, Shackleton decided to take one of the two lifeboats they had with them and make an attempt, with five other crewmembers, to crudely navigate the eight hundred miles to South Georgia Island, where several whaling stations were located. The rest of the men had to stay behind until a rescue hopefully occurred. The lifeboat sailed for sixteen terrifying days through some of the most tempestuous waters on earth to find a needle in a haystack. To this day, their miraculous success is considered one of the greatest small boat journeys ever undertaken. It took another three months before Shackleton was able to rescue his remaining twenty-two men at Elephant Island. And, astoundingly, every member of the expedition had survived.

It seemed like forever that we endured our own *Great Drake Shake* until we finally arrived safely in Ushuaia's harbor without much time to spare. After several days I made it out of Ushuaia on one of the last flights to Buenos Aires before all internal air travel within the country had halted. The capital was under mandatory lockdown and the gendarmerie patrolled the streets. Here I was in an empty B&B with 20-foot ceilings and crystal chandeliers, entirely alone with my twenty words of Spanish. I looked out upon the landmark building across the street. It was the Palacio Barolo, built in 1923 and inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*—the Barolo's structure is divided into Heaven, Hell and Purgatory.

Over the next few days as surrounding countries began to close their own airports to transiting planes, I sat helplessly as one flight after another was cancelled. Finally, after more nail-biting days, I was able to secure an escape on what turned out to be the last international flight out through Panama to Los Angeles. By embracing Ernest Shackleton's family motto *Fortitudine Vincimus*, I had learned the hard lesson of 'By Endurance We Conquer.' Later, on the very day I had made it home to Hollywood from the Caribbean, I read that a team of researchers had discovered the wreck of Shackleton's *Endurance*, located in Antarctica two miles down at the bottom of the Weddell Sea.

...A loud knock on the door jarred me back to my current Caribbean calamity. It was Dr. Danco who had come by to administer my daily test. With a wide grin behind his face shield, he heartily circled the cotton swab within each nostril. This, in turn, motivated me to sniff out some of my own research when I discovered that PCR tests are so sensitive that they can detect dead viral fragments in the body for up to ninety days. It was then that I realized that unless I tried to be more proactive, I could end up on this ship for a very long time. And, the next cruise was bound across the Atlantic to Portugal!

Here I was in the open sea bobbing about somewhere between Colombia and Costa Rica. The Tibetan book advised to meditate on the impermanence of life, which can certainly change in a fraction of a second from either racing through massive waves in the Drake Passage to just silently staring catatonically for days on end out through a small porthole window. Either way, I was certain it was time—come hell or high water—to visualize my own happy feet scampering once again upon the good earth.

When the ship contacted Panamanian customs, the good news was I could get off, but the bad news countered with the fact that I had to immediately transfer to a health facility. All I could imagine was to get placed into some type of Bubba's Quarantine Shack and keep testing positive for months. Rather than elect to stay isolated in my cabin or check into Bubba's, I thought now was the time to formulate a third alternative. Friends had recently emailed me from Mexico. They had tested positive a day before flying home and were not allowed to leave the country. So after five days of self-isolating in their hotel room, they got a doctor to write a letter, attesting that they had had no symptoms and tested negative with an antigen test. With this, they were allowed to depart, and re-enter the U.S.A.

So I contacted Maximillian and suggested we try to do the same. (I was sure, by this point, the ship was as eager to get rid of me, as I was to leave them.) So a similar letter was emailed off to the custom official in the early afternoon. And, as an added incentive, I had made a same-day plane reservation home; I wouldn't even have to overnight in the country. We were to arrive in western Panama the next day; and, I began doing everything I could think of to appease the gods and goddesses (short of lighting a bonfire) for my release.

After what seemed an excruciatingly long wait—at precisely 7:13pm—when I was up on deck for my nightly ‘air out,’ we got a reply. I had been given permission to disembark the following day without further quarantine. My knees buckled and I fell to the ground in a jubilant Leonard Cohen *hallelujah!* During the fourth and final voyage by Columbus to the Americas, and after battling a ferocious hurricane, the intrepid explorer sailed safely into the very same Boco del Toro archipelago on October 16, 1502. Here I was some 500 years later getting off my ship to gratefully stand upon the same solid ground.

After a week in isolation, I sprang up at 6:30am to pack, utterly paranoid that something would go wrong and I'd then be bound across the Atlantic for Europe. As if ending my last day in prison, I anxiously waited for a knock on the door to be released back into the world. Finally, around noon, it came, and I was escorted out to a small tender that motored me ashore. A custom's official then led me to a nondescript wooden building where I received a ‘Panama’ stamp in my passport and was free to go. It didn't matter that I had no idea of where the heck I was...I was *free* and unbound and could do anything I wanted—like joyfully watch the ship depart without me.

I took a taxi to the local airport and got the last seat on the afternoon flight out to Panama City. As I watched a group of sweaty Eastern European tourists, with drooping masks, chortling away in the packed waiting room, it suddenly dawned on me that I didn't have to feel paranoid anymore about catching COVID. I landed in the capital; and then, after taking an hour-long taxi ride to the other side of the city, I arrived at the international airport. Ironically, having come full circle, the seven-hour flight from Panama City to Los Angeles was the *exact same one* I had taken when I fled Antarctica and Buenos Aires two years earlier to make the long journey home.

Even though I hadn't been trapped amongst drifting Antarctic ice floes for months, nor encountered bloodthirsty cannibals while in the Caribbean, I did manage to escape my own cauldron of calamities to return to Hollywood and live to tell the tale.

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