

Providence Bay

Tomorrow will be the solar eclipse. It is here, in Kamchatka and Chukotka, that the Moon shadow will touch the Earth, cross the Bering Strait, then move along Alaska shores and reach the north of Canada. Polar explorers, scientists and locals, Aeroflot's north route passengers, are in a rush. Some are rushing home, some to work, some to see the solar eclipse. But the North wouldn't be itself if it didn't make allowances into the plans and dreams of every person who happens to be here.

The people have been sitting in Anadyr for a week and every two hours they can hear the same thing, "Flight Anadyr - Providence, departure delayed due to weather conditions. Flight Anadyr - Magadan, departure delayed due to weather conditions... Flight..." The same thing in all directions.

People unwittingly start going into the twists and turns of the new science for them - meteorology. They hope to nose out a dreadful mystery of the weather which will take place in three or even five days. At least they won't have to wake up and listen attentively to the old loudspeaker whispering something from the dirty wall in the corner of the hall.

The word "sitting" doesn't really reflect reality. Most people have nothing to sit on. The lucky ones who have nestled down on a couple dozen chairs are sitting without standing up, pushing hard on their sacrum and forming an obtuse angle with their body - as long as

they could stretch out their legs. If they get up and go to the loo – that is it! The place would be lost. At night, to make their blood stream back from their legs, people carefully lift them up and place them on the shoulders and backs of those who are sitting in front of them, after which they fall asleep straight away. From the side it looks like slow motion of football fans chanting at a match when they are doing a Mexican wave standing up and lifting their arms and then sitting back down again. In the morning when the crackling sounds of the loud-speaker wakes everyone up on the dark coats and jackets of the people sitting “in the stalls” there are clearly seen light marks of the heels. But no one takes any notice.

Many people lie down on the cold stone floor on an underlaid newspaper and stretch out their legs delightedly. Some manage to take place in a ticket-booth. The floor there is wooden and plywood partitions protect from the dreadful mixture smells of cheap spirits from the airport buffet and long-worn boots, shoes, socks and footcloths.

In the morning people not “from the stalls” can go outside and walk around the two-storey wooden building of the airport. The amazing thing is they can’t see the colourful nature around them or feel the fresh air, everything looks grey and foggy to them, as if the Moon couldn’t wait for its time and has already obstructed the bright sun rays. In fact, it is the result of the protective mechanism working. The permanent uncertainty and knowing there is no way out don’t let the human receptors switch on. Not to relax before the continuing ordeal, the human nature blurs over the bright colours, smoothens the lie of the ground and creates something similar to an invisible shell around. People can only distinctly hear the roar of the engines of the air fighters taking off and landing. Military planes don’t care. Whether the weather is good or bad, they always fly.

On the floor in the far corner of the hall there are two men. One is a chemist, a blond slim lad, he graduated seven days ago, he was allocated to the Institute of Arctics and from there he was urgently sent to join an expedition.

The other man is an electrical navigator. He is older, with a beer belly, obviously married and well-groomed. He has been living with his family in the North for ten years but this time he is flying from Leningrad where he got instructions on the coming ice patrol in the Chukchee Sea. Generally, he was in the northern capital by transit, he was returning from his holiday to the Black Sea where most of the money earned in the Arctic Circle is normally poured down the drain.

They were sitting on an artificial clearing made of the unfolded "Leningradskaya Pravda", tucking into their dry home sandwiches with Krakow sausage and examining the map of the area of their ice patrol. The chemist accidentally looked at the newspaper black and white picture near the paper bag with food. The picture showed the geographical position of the zone of the total sun eclipse which was taking place the next day. The dark zone nearly completely clashed with the zone of their coming navigation, marked in dotted line on the navigator's map. The beginning polar explorer was surprised, alarmed and even frightened. At least, he stopped chewing, but he didn't say a word.

Tomorrow would be the sun eclipse. This is something that no one can ever cancel. That is probably why a flurry started at the airport. In spite of the weather they started getting a plane ready for the scientists from the Pulkovo observatory. For the latest week the scientists had accustomed here, in the forced Providence deprived shelter. And now, you see, they needed to fly! They finally remembered! The military planes flew, didn't they? So they could as well. Literally, deadly reasoning!

The navigator was a polar explorer with experience. He used to fly the route Amderma - Tiksi - Dikson - Anadyr. He knew that in an extreme situation it was always better to look like big boss. Today his shiny bald head, neat beard, white shirt and trendy striped tie allowed him to boldly climb aboard the plane getting ready to take off. Pushing the young specialist with suitcases in front of him and getting through the crowd of surprised astronomers, he would now and again say importantly, "Ladies and gentlemen, tomorrow we are watching the eclipse from the vessel in the Chukchee Sea. It's colossal responsibility, you know!"

The small plane accommodated fifteen people and a dozen boxes with fresh eggs. It took off easily, with hardly any run-up, soared over the ground and a moment later rose above the impermissibly low continuous dark clouds. The bright sun hit the portholes. It broke through the endless sequence to repeating events day after day. It seemed like everything happened before that was hidden behind a veil and looked grey or black and white.

An hour later everyone clung to the portholes at the same time. Below the plane they could see a polar village at the foot of snowy mountains. They surrounded the azure Providence Bay on most sides. After the airport in Anadyr it looked like Sochi! The same colours, the same mountains and the smell of the sea. But the sea itself was cold and not so salty, although it showed all the colours of the bright north sky. They could see a small white ship at the pier of the port, which complemented the wonderful scenery. At last all the crew of the ice patrol had gathered together. From now on for five months their home would be a fragile looking ship with a simple name "Lighthouse". That morning everyone was getting ready for departure and forgot about the eclipse. The nature reminded them of it. Suddenly it got as dark as twilight and the sun sickle, overshadowed by

the Moon, was slowly disappearing. At parting it flamed like a diamond ring and set afire a flaring necklace. The stars could be seen now. A minute or two passed and the bright sun returned its azure colour to the northern sea. The nature mystery disappeared as suddenly as it came out. The white ship left the pier without any hurry, emphasizing its significance.

The sailors and expedition members – Naval school students, hydrologists, oceanologists and chemistry students – were located in big cabins in the prow, the heads near the stern, the young specialist and the navigator being now old friends settled in a two-berth cabin, in the middle. Their work started. Some of them had just returned to full life. Being at home, they had felt like a fish out of water, or like being an early demobilized officer or a released jailbird. Others, “accountants”, started drawing calendars, counting days to their return and money they would get after the expedition – their salary, allowances and an extra index for the Providence Bay being a homeport.

A week passed. There was no ice barrier to be seen and they didn't have to fight the icy deck. The sea was just swelling. Nevertheless, for most expedition members the beauty of the North had died. In the hydro-chemical laboratory, apart from the young specialist from Leningrad – he was called the chief chemist – there worked two students. Those two stayed in a big cabin with the hydrologists. The chemists didn't have to wake up very often at night, only when the vessel stopped. That's why they slept on the top berths.

It was impossible to sleep because of the ship motions. The flowery curtains hanging on the hooks were moving with a rattle up and down the metal pole fixed to the ceiling. They were going up and down according to the rhythm of a rolling motion. Suddenly pitching motions added to that and the curtains now were also

swinging. Left and right, left and right... Now and again it would stop, then the usual harmony of sickness would break but then recommence with greater force. When he was free from his shift time, the navigator would usually sit at the table, smoke strong cigarettes and burn out patterns from the Chukchee epos on walrus tusks with a thin burning hot needle.

On the aft, in the saloon, where the heads had their meals, it didn't rock that much but the sickness would shape up invisibly and gradually. It was difficult to follow it. It was much better to eat food quickly together with the sailors. Particularly when it was closer to cabins. They had a bowl of soup and a piece of wet brown bread in the left hand and a spoon in the right hand. Everything got eaten in one minute. Second helpings were a waste of food. So was the second course. It was important to take a horizontal position as soon as possible. Then at least something would be digested.

Usually they would lie down for ten minutes. They couldn't hold it in any longer, and had to run to the latrine. Not to the deck as it was often described in books, but to a latrine. On the deck the recently consumed dinner would be followed by the person himself. But in the latrine everything was sweet. It was impossible to fall anywhere and no one would see you. But even here, in order to not get splashed, people had to know when exactly to bend down over the hole. They didn't learn it at once, it came with an experience - with intuition, familiar sounds of the engine and bubbling in the pipes, when people could sense with their whole body the speed of the ship falling from the top of the wave.

After that they could go "home", to their berth.

The portholes were battened down. The doors in all cabins were open to let the air in. Alas! The air from the engine room travelled faster. The remarkable thing was that it was not going to end in an hour or tomor-

row, for example. It would happen the day after tomorrow, in a month or two...

Two months passed. The life content was to look for the ice barrier by all means and inform all vessels about that; also to scientifically survey, measure the current speed in various depths and oil pollution, to assess the temperature and saltiness of water, oxygen, silicon and other chemical elements content. Then based on those figures geographers would make promising scientific conclusions.

After the ship had been to the northern part of the Bering Sea and made nearly fifty stops for measuring, it returned to the village of Providence for a short time. They restocked water, fuel, got piles of letters and two days later, still with a swinging walk, they found themselves in the centre of a cyclone, now on the border of the East Siberian Sea and the Chukchee Sea, near Herald Island. They had to make a quick decision about what to do now. They didn't get any orders. The zone marked with a dotted line on the map was just a reference. The members of the expedition, temporarily attached to the hydrographic vessel "Lighthouse" for five or six months, at last had finished their meeting. Seven people: hydrologists, chemists, oceanologists and their democratically spirited head - had been thinking what to do. To stay where they were or to go to the Bering Sea? On the one hand, it was really pleasant to lie at anchor in the middle of the De Long Strait between Wrangel Island and the mainland. The depth of the water was only thirty to forty metres. It meant they only had to sample water from six sea-lines every five hours. That was it! For two months! There were no motions... That was the main thing. Surely they could later put the results of their measurements into complicated formulae describing nuances of various currents in this pretty place and contribute to the Arctic study.

Besides, the weather was wonderful! In the daytime there were bright colours everywhere: the azure sea and blue whales, opaque walruses and shiny seals. At night there was the northern light. It would be nice to land somewhere at a small river mouth, catch salmon and shoot ducks. Later on they could smoke and fry all that. They would eat enough caviar for life.

What was on the other hand?

If they turned right, then went north, checked how far the ice barrier was, then they could go to the Beaufort Sea at full speed. And there... Over Alaska and Canada there was an expanse for stardust and science. Firstly, after the 15th of September the sailing directions didn't recommend to call in there. No one did. It was dangerous. The ice would come up to Point Barrow and cover the sea exit. Secondly, it was the sea depth! Three thousand metres. That was a hundred times more. No bottles would be enough for samples of water. They would have to work literally all the time breaking all their shifts. Of course, if there was no ice, the motions would be bad, it was not a place for romanticism, however...

They had been discussing it for a long time but from the very beginning everyone was for the act of bravery. Four of them were sitting on the floor. Three were at the table. The ones sitting on the floor thought that it was rocking less. They would run out, come back and run out again in turns.

They decided to go to the north, to look how far the ice barrier was. Then they could think. It turned out to be quite far. That was that. The north stardust and a polar explorer's duty turned out stronger than physiology. Especially when during the latest sun eclipse that very water area was shadowed by the moon, as the chief chemist found out. It looked like a coincidence. But it was attracting, there was something mystical about it.

However, it was not surprising that it was the chemist who paid attention to the coincidence. Chemistry is mere magic, too. If someone decided to peep into the vessel hydrochemical laboratory... What if that trick took into someone's head – to breathe in ammonia or hydrochloric acid vapours, the first thing their eye caught would be plastic bottles. Hundreds of small containers filled with water from different layers. They would be everywhere – on the shelves, tables, deck and in the pockets of strange-coloured and burnt with acid lab coats hanging on hooks. Somewhere in the middle of that would be a crooked shaggy wizard/chemist. He only lacked a big black hood. He would be sucking in one sort of liquid from a bottle through a pipette into his mouth and a moment later just about spitting out a completely different one into a bucket on the floor. If the ship motions had been going on all his shift, his eyes wouldn't be able to see the photocolimeter readings and the light green stripes intercrossing on the small screen would be shaking, flashing and turning into a grey continuous blur.

Carrying out the decision of the team of like-minded people, the "Lighthouse" roamed the length and breadth of the "foreign" Beaufort Sea and even reached as far as the Mackenzie River mouth. All of a sudden, without announcing anything, the captain turned back to the home Chukchee Sea. Why? Was he frightened of the American plane which had been circling the vessel and waving its wings yesterday? What was there to be scared of? They were in the international waters.

The Americans must have been alarmed much more when they found a small Russian vessel near the northern coast of Alaska in late autumn. "Why? Idiots! The sailing directions are an international document. It says clearly there. What shall we do with them if they have to winter on the ice?"

Everything turned out simpler and more complicated at the same time. The boatswain got ill. His throat was inflamed so much it was impossible to breathe. There was no doctor. They couldn't consult on the radio as there was no connection. They had to turn around and go to the Bering Strait at full speed. Barely made it! The ice barrier had come up to the Point Barrow. If the boatswain hadn't got ill, the mystic adventure would have ended in forced wintering. That didn't catch up with the schedule of the expedition or its members.

And they had had enough of it, honestly! They had had the same thing for five months! Dry potatoes, tinned beetroot soup, always damp bread and salty salmon. They started dreaming of motionless ground, live phone conversation with families and fried pork. Early in the morning the smell of the bread fried in butter gathered everyone in the cook-room, both the people who went on the watch and those who could sleep. One of the sailors was cooking croutons out of damp bread before the start of his dog watch. A lot of them! Enough for everyone.

That morning no one was in bed and they were in no mood for croutons. They were waiting to approach a big vessel to hand over the boatswain. They were waiting to see and hear anything new and unusual, high in demand by the nature of people roaming in the Arctic Ocean literally without any radio connection for months. They could judge the changes in the world only by the American map of ice conditions their electric navigator managed to pick up for free when the "Lighthouse" was passing the Alaska coast.

The voice of the big vessel's captain was exactly what they were waiting for. It burst into the pilot room from above, from the side and even from below and sounded indifferent, hoarse and boozed.

"Come closer from the left, don't be scared, I'm telling you!"

"It's easy to say – don't be scared!" the cockswain uttered aloud.

Sure enough, as soon as the vessels collided with their boards, one of the two row boats burst into pieces. What did the "board" mean? The small vessel had a board, but the big one had a metal wall stiffed with luminous portholes. Some fifth or tenth deck of the "giant" caught up with the crumpled highest deck of the "Lighthouse". The boatswain was standing near the railing. Two sailors were supporting him. He made a step and the same moment he was caught up and pulled on the iron vessel. The next second, blocks of Bulgarian cigarettes and small sacks with Japanese onions were thrown to the "Lighthouse". Everyone knew the ice patrol vessels never had anything. They must have already eaten all their stocks apart from the dried potatoes and salty salmon. They were Arctic hermits. They lived in their own world, went where they wanted to go and put in once in three months. The main thing was that they informed where ice was. Everyone needed that. They were felt sorry for and they were respected.

Now it was time to go home! But a storm blew up with renewed vigour and wouldn't let the "Lighthouse" turn around. The vessel, aiming straight for the north, was helplessly operating its power supply units full blast. The energy was just enough to stay in the same place in spite of the gale.

The captain tried to take a risk twice and turn the vessel around, but all in vain. The alarm was raised and to the loud discontinuous hoots everyone would put on wadded jackets, trapper hats, warm boots, take all documents with them, beautifully embroidered seal slippers – gifts for their families from Leningrad – and go on the rocking deck flooded with icy water.

Inexplicable phenomenon! Everyone knew very well five minutes outside the vessel meant death! The water was

seven degrees below zero, they wouldn't be able to survive longer. Warm clothes didn't have anything to do with that. Even in summer, on a calm sunny day, the team spent twenty minutes to get a simple wooden box thrown into the sea for training purposes. However, both the team and expedition continued playing the "saving game" tamely.

Early in the morning everyone woke up because there were no motions. The vessel had laid at anchor near the shore protected with a huge rock from the storm. The night before the executive officer had turned the vessel tail down to leeward without notifying anyone. Five hours later it successfully passed Cape Dezhnev, Big Diomedes Island and on seeing the Faraway Rock, it first hid in a small strait, then entered the Providence Bay and lay out. Success is never blamed!

When there are no ship motions everyone feels hungry. Around five people got on deck, under canvas found barrels with gherkins and sauerkraut, fixed to the floor, and tucked into them, without even bread. The others headed to the cook-room for the donated Japanese onions. Just as the pressure in the submarine compartments levels up, so people's guts run down by endless ship motions, demanded immediate substitution of the boring daily ration for something savoury and fresh. The same thing, as the surrounding nature after the storm had stilled.

The same grey colours of the sea and sky, constant smell of solar oil, tins of food and ever-present gastric juice had disappeared somewhere overnight. That dreadful mixture had been following them all the time. In July the sun covered by the moon didn't shine there for only two minutes. It took them months of suffering to get round the water surface marked by the sun eclipse. Now, when they had left the bewitched circle of the three northern seas, everyone seemed to have woken up. It looked like the eclipse had just taken place. Their eyes were shining, people started talking again. Their eye-

sight had come back to life – that was a sure sign. At the background of the turquoise sea there suddenly appeared bright blue colours of the rocks still melting into the sky. Now and again the Sun would flash for a second between the heavy clouds sliding fast over the sea. Then the blue would be pierced with lots of breaking light rays, the shore and the water would be filled with warm orange tints, become friendly and attractive. However, the wind wasn't going to calm down. In the narrow cleft between the coastal cliffs it was ripping a thick layer of water off the calming sea and making a haze of millions of splashes. But it wasn't strong enough to create waves.

It was time for a special ritual. Stumbling in the strong wind and holding onto each other in order not to fall overboard, the “zombified aliens” were coming out. They were pale, smelling of chemical agents and sick, wearing trapper hats, wadded jackets, slippers, wool socks and burnt with acid blue sagging joggers. Walking in line, the chemists were dragging heavy boxes with metal corners for laboratory containers and unused chemicals. A moment later they lifted their arms and let the boxes fall into the water as the last symbol of the past.

In the end of the expedition everyone remembered about the chemists for some reason. Maybe, that was because all that time no one had really seen any of them. Who were they? Clearly not sailors, hydrologists or oceanologists. They couldn't be the people who used to dream of the sea, storms and travels in their childhood. They found themselves there, on the edge of the Earth, accidentally, by allocation after graduation or by taking an opportunity to earn a lot of money. It is lucky if in the very beginning of the independent life journey the expedition didn't become a sun eclipse but will be remembered as a bright and important event. Later on in life everyone would have to try their own strength. If they knew their limit, it was always easier in life.