

## **SOUTH POLE JUNKIE**

**VO:** This is a podcast about the sea. Because I, Threes Anna, love the sea. But I'm also worried about it, and sometimes even afraid. What is really happening in, to, on, and beneath the water? Listen and find out.

**VO:** I'm taking you on a journey to the most remote, coldest, and most dangerous ocean on Earth. A place where nature shows no mercy and where human beings stand no chance. And yet, we are drawn to it. Like a fatal love affair: irresistibly beautiful, yet deadly. That ocean is called the Southern Ocean.

**SK:** Ah, this is the moment I've been waiting for. We just have to get through immigration, collect our stamp, and then we can board. Board the *Polarstern*. And for the next four months, this ship will be my home.

**VO:** This is Suse Kuhn, born in East Germany. She is about to leave for the South Pole for the sixth time as a member of an expedition.

My chance to tell a story about a world I could never reach myself. We agree that she will send me voice messages. And then, one day, one suddenly arrives.

**SK:** Every day is different. Every day is perfect. Every day is incredible.

**VO:** What I don't know yet is that my story won't be about the brutal forces of nature, the immense masses of ice, or life on a research ship will be. It will be about people. Because something happens to people at the South Pole, especially to those who spend all their time outdoors.

**SK:** I've brought a very heavy suit that keeps me wonderfully warm, but it makes a terrible amount of noise. So I put it on in the hallway so I won't wake anyone up.

**VO:** Under that survival suit she wears thermal underwear, a thick fleece layer, a thin sweater, a heavy wool sweater, a wool overall, two pairs of socks, two hats, and a scarf.

**SK:** And then I'm ready for the great outdoors. There are going to be a lot of stairs to climb.

**VO:** Episode 10: *South Pole Junkie*.

**SK:** Fourteen flights of stairs. And suddenly, you're outside.

**VO:** She is on her way to the upper deck. The deck above the bridge, where there is an open observation box without a roof.

**SK:** I've spent many of the most beautiful hours of my life in that box. With the wind in my face, literally exposed to the primal forces of the Southern Ocean.

**VO:** From here, she observes the sea.

**SK:** When people come to take a look, they're always surprised. "Is that it?" Well, there are actually two boxes. Each of us has one.

**VO:** Because for the research project she's participating in, she has to count marine mammals and seabirds. She does this together with her colleague Bram. Taking turns, six hours at a time.

**SK:** December 26th, two o'clock in the morning. And before I can start work, I first have to scrape the ice off the windows.

**SK:** I'm sitting in my box now, and everything is set up for counting. The only problem is that the ship isn't moving yet. But the box is actually excellent for taking a quick nap. The little

heater blows in some warm air. And you can't fall over because the box is so small there's nowhere to fall.

**VO:** As they sail farther and farther toward the Pole, her daily messages cover all sorts of things. The changing wildlife. The sea ice that seems to have disappeared. Living together in a tiny cabin. Having to set an alarm just to make sure she eats. But above all, they are about not sleeping.

**SK:** Today I slept for an hour and a half, and another hour.

When you've only had three and a half hours of sleep, it really starts to hit you.

I haven't slept much.

Not much at all.

So little that you're absolutely exhausted.

I'm incredibly tired.

**VO:** Why isn't she sleeping? Is there too much work? Is the expedition poorly organized? Is she simply too dutiful? Or is something else going on?

**SK:** My fitness watch keeps trying to assess my sleep. It says, "To accurately evaluate your sleep, you need to spend at least four hours lying warmly in bed." Well, that's not going to happen.

**VO:** Then I find a book about Amundsen, the first explorer to reach the South Pole. He writes:

**Historical Voice:** It is as though the sun is chasing us. As though we are trapped in a world without night. A world in which the body's natural rhythms no longer apply.

**VO:** I find another book about a journey to the South Pole. The Belgica Expedition of 1899, where the ship's first officer writes:

**Historical Voice:** Sometimes I fall asleep while standing. Only to jolt awake moments later, startled by an invisible threat. The light is becoming my enemy.

**SK:** It's January 2nd. We now have twenty-four hours of daylight. Well, I'm curious to see how that's going to go.

**SK:** My shift started at four. I counted until eight, when Bram took over. Then it was my turn again at two in the afternoon. Very few birds. Very few marine mammals. And then, suddenly, 133 snow petrels. Out of nowhere. A moment of swearing, followed by frantic counting. Ten minutes later, another group: 57. Fantastic. And it was foggy. Then, at some point, you notice a faint glow. I looked through my binoculars and there it was: sea ice. The sea ice we'd been waiting for days. As you get closer, it becomes an endlessly magical moment. The light grows stronger, and everywhere there are chunks of ice floating in the water. At first there is still a swell, so you see them rising and falling, disappearing beneath the surface and reappearing again. All of it old sea ice, riddled with holes and cracks. And you know it's dying sea ice. It won't survive this summer. Then everything came alive. More birds than we'd seen in weeks of silence and calm. The kind of activity that should already have appeared much farther north. Then Bram came to take over at eight in the evening. And I didn't want to go to bed at all. Of course, you have to. But maybe sleep is overrated. So I stayed outside, watching. An extraordinary spectacle of ice and water and clouds and sky. And all the creatures that live among them. It's so special. You really can't get anything purer than this.

**Historical Voice:** The first weeks of the midnight sun were magical. We worked like madmen,

as if we were immortal. The light gave us energy. We laughed more. We talked more. And we felt deeply connected to this strange, fairy-tale world.

**SK:** Still, the sensible thing is to be in bed right now. Tonight they're serving currywurst with French fries. So in about two hours I'll have to set my alarm. I may be far away, but you do not let fries slip away under any circumstances. First things first.

**VO:** The ship's doctor on the Terra Nova Expedition of 1910 wrote:

**Historical Voice:** We were not afraid of death, but of our craving for food. It could drive us mad. Hunger was a constant companion. Men spent hours talking about meals from home. Some wrote down recipes and read them as if they were novels.

**SK:** Because in the end, life on board is dictated by food. In the morning there are often pancakes. A few hours later comes lunch, which is the main meal on the ship. At four o'clock there's cake. And in the evening there's another hot meal. There's always bread and salads as well. At the beginning of the voyage, of course, there's still fresh lettuce and tomatoes. But the longer the journey lasts, the more shelf-stable the food has to be. So we've run out of lettuce, and the tomatoes are gone too. There's still some fruit—apples and oranges—but that will gradually disappear as well.

**VO:** From various diaries written a hundred years ago:

**Historical Voices:** Today we killed the last dog. Its meat will feed us for a few more days. I think of the taste of fresh bread. Of butter. Of everything except the raw meat I am forced to eat.

It is the sound of the groaning ice that makes me realize that from now on we are entirely at the mercy of the elements. The sea, once our enemy, is now our only hope.

**Music: Ria – Sea**

**SK:** January 10th. Since we're not sailing at the moment, we can finally have a long night's sleep. Maybe I'm actually due for one, although I don't really want to admit it. People have started joking about the superhuman daily rhythm we seem to have here. It's such a contrast with home. At home I'm always tired. Always. And here I have endless energy, even though I hardly sleep. Explain that.

**Historical Voice:** I have never felt more alive than I do now. The endless sun, the ice, the infinite horizon. It is a gift. This feeling of being completely awake.

**SK:** *Phone rings. Startled.* "Susan speaking... Thank you very much, Otton. Have a good night." *Groan.*

**SK:** It's 3:23 in the morning. I've just been woken by a phone call. A moment ago I was lying inside grumbling to myself, but now I'm standing at the railing. I can see icebergs in the distance. Once again, I have no regrets about being here.

**VO:** Sometimes I start to worry about all the messages she sends me. She still has three months to go. At times I think she sounds addicted. But addicted to what, exactly? Then I read something similar in the accounts of Shackleton and his men, who survived for nine months after their ship was crushed by the ice.

**Historical Voice:** I am often asked why people risk their lives on polar expeditions. It is difficult to explain. The call of the South is irresistible.

Despite all the hardships and dangers, there is something in that immense silence and isolation that keeps drawing people back to Antarctica.

**VO:** Has she, like them, fallen under the spell of this white world?

**SK:** We were supposed to start sailing sometime between now and three in the morning. But I didn't know exactly when we would leave, so I simply stayed awake.

**SK:** There are still people out on the ice, so I've been waiting since eight o'clock last night. The alternative was setting an alarm every thirty minutes.

**SK:** It's quarter to two in the afternoon. We should be underway within minutes, so I've already climbed into my observation box.

**SK:** Well, perhaps I was a little naïve. It's now well past four o'clock. I've spent far too many hours waiting.

**SK:** The exhaustion makes me feel as if I'm floating. There's a cloud inside my head, or perhaps around it. Of course, being tired makes your body long to be horizontal. But because there's so little going on in your mind, it becomes a strangely free-floating kind of fatigue. I feel as though I'm in a current, a flow that carries me along. Something I can simply drift through.

At the same time, a lot of people on board are tired, so you recognize that exhaustion in one another. Maybe it makes conversations a little stranger, funnier, sometimes even more hysterical. Purely because of the fatigue. You can see people changing. Physically, and probably internally too, but especially physically. In the beginning there was freshly washed hair, neat clothes, make-up. By now, a certain resignation has set in. Hair is getting longer. Beards are growing. The circles under people's eyes deepen by the day. In just a few days, you watch people age by years.

**Man:** *"Yes, then you could have puffin and nothing! Ha, ha, ha. Okay, I've got to improve the standard of my jokes. How much did you sleep? Ha, ha, ha."*

**SK:** If you put fifty scientists and fifty crew members together on a ship sailing far away from the real world, it becomes a kind of social pressure cooker. A sense of familiarity develops here that might take months or years on land. Out here, it happens within a week.

**VO:** A young scientist on the Terra Nova Expedition wrote:

**Historical Voice:** We lived in extremely close quarters and came to know one another more intimately than people normally ever do. There was remarkably little friction. We held endless conversations, laughed often, and created countless small jokes that became woven into daily life. From the bottom of my heart, I can say that fellowship was one of the greatest gifts this expedition gave us.

**SK:** January 18th, and today there's a storm. Such magnificent, primal violence. And the birds simply fly through it, completely fearless. We need a ship—120 meters long, built of thick steel—and they, well, I can only imagine they're thoroughly enjoying this weather.

**SK:** Today we saw blue petrels again for the first time in weeks—small, beautiful birds. They stay farther north. When we first saw them on the outward journey, they felt like a harbinger of happiness, and everyone got excited. Now their return means it's time to say goodbye.

**SK:** People are beginning to grow melancholic. Nobody wants this to end.

**Historical Voice:** Time has lost all meaning. We are trapped in a system with neither beginning nor end. There is only the sun. It is beautiful, but it also drives you mad. My eyes burn. My head throbs. Some men pace endlessly across the deck, no longer able to find rest. Mistakes are made. Arguments flare up. I have not slept properly in weeks. My thoughts race, my body aches, yet sleep refuses to come.

**SK:** I'm lying awake. I still haven't slept. In the last two days, I've had maybe two or three

hours of sleep.

**SK:** Something is happening! Something very unusual, something we're no longer used to. It's dark. Really, truly dark outside. You can't see anything. That hasn't happened in a long time. And actually, I should be sleeping. But my rhythm is so broken that I can't sleep for more than two or three hours at a stretch anymore, even though I'm utterly exhausted. My eyes burn. It feels as though my brain has shrunk to the size of a dried prune, pressing somewhere behind my eye sockets against my nose. My eyes keep closing. You find yourself rolling them around just to stay awake. Which is obviously not a good sign. You have to keep counting. Yesterday, for the first time, I interrupted my count for ten minutes because I simply couldn't continue. I walked up to the bridge for a while—it's warm there. Outside it's cold, and being cold only makes the exhaustion worse. On the bridge I was allowed to make myself a cup of tea. That was wonderful. A chance to warm up before heading straight back up so I wouldn't miss more than a single observation block. Missing even one block bothers me. And almost as difficult as the exhaustion is the standing. My legs simply weren't made for standing still. I'm terrible at it. Usually they start hurting after fifteen minutes, and it only gets worse from there. As if I'm standing on hot coals. My feet hurt. My knees. My hips. My back. Not much fun. But if you sit down, you can't see anything, so that isn't an option. After five or six hours, the pain becomes so intense that all I want is to sit with my feet up. Or lie down and sleep. Better yet.

**SK:** I'm dead tired. Completely exhausted. What a journey.

**SK:** We still have a huge amount of data to enter. The last few days have been one long marathon, so we haven't had time for anything else. Everyone was a bit... well, there was definitely tension in the air. Everyone is incredibly tired. I think we're all running on fumes. There were some emotions bubbling up. So in the evening, to get rid of all the frustration, we organized a massive cleaning session. Scrubbing, mopping, sweeping, vacuuming—everything. And I noticed something. Cleaning the ship feels meaningful. It's also a beautiful way of thanking the ship itself for taking such good care of us. With a little bit of love, every surface gets wiped down.

**SK:** February 2nd, 2026. It's half past five in the morning. The sun hasn't risen yet. The sky is clear. And there's something else. It takes a moment before it really sinks in. I can smell land. I can smell earth.

**Sea Music – Ria: Friend or...**

**SK:** For humans, the Southern Ocean is certainly hostile. You wouldn't survive a single day there. But for the birds that live there, it is a good friend. The mother of everything that grows. And as for me, I'm grateful that I was allowed to visit this good friend for a while.

**VO:** After two months at sea in the freezing cold, they docked at the southernmost tip of South America. Here, the crew and most of the scientists disembarked, while a new group came aboard. Expedition member Suse stayed on. She was allowed to join for another two months—something she was delighted about despite her exhaustion.

I didn't understand that. She was completely worn out. Why would she want to go again? I needed the diaries and accounts of the old polar explorers to understand. Suse was addicted. Or suffering from what is now sometimes called *Arctic Euphoria*. Her mind and body longed for that primordial world of endless daylight. There is an opposite condition too: *Arctic Blues*—a form of depression that can occur when winter brings months of

uninterrupted darkness.

Almost everyone who spends a long time in the polar regions experiences some version of these effects, though they affect some people more deeply than others. During the second leg of the voyage, Suse became ill and spent weeks in the ship's infirmary. Had she lived a hundred years ago, she might not have survived.

*South Pole Junkie* is the 10<sup>th</sup> episode in the series *Sea*. I make four podcasts a year, but because I do everything myself, and because I have a few projects that will take a great deal of time, I'm not sure whether I'll manage that this year. The best way to stay informed is to follow me on Instagram, or simply subscribe to this podcast in your favorite podcast app and turn on notifications.

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