



At the Ark at Eight

(An der Arche um Acht)

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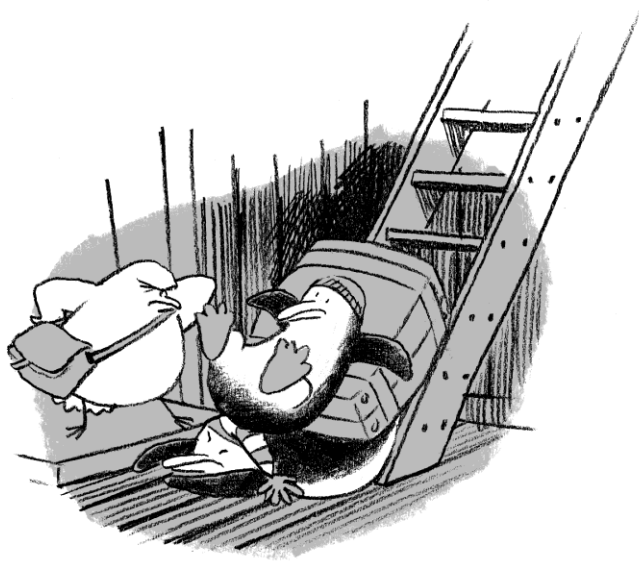
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Anyone who has ever been on Noah's Ark knows that it is an enormously large ship. It is so big that you can easily get lost on it. There are three different levels. Noah is incredibly proud of his ark although he claims that he got some advice on its construction from God himself.

For example, God supposedly suggested that Noah use wood from a fir tree and, when it was done, that he coat it with tar to make it watertight. The two penguins don't have a chance to appreciate Noah's skillfulness. Huffing and puffing with their heavy suitcase in tow, they follow the dove, who hurries them down the endless corridors. They have to climb over ventilation pipes and have to keep descending steep stairways until they no longer have any idea where they are.





Whenever one of them quietly moans from the strain the dove turns her head and angrily hisses, “Shhh, all the other animals are already asleep!”

At the end of a long corridor the dove opens a door and disappears behind it. It is black as night inside. The two penguins trip along behind the dove with their suitcase.

“Where are we?”

“We are down at the very bottom,” whispers the dove, “in the belly of the ark.”

The two penguins put down the suitcase and look around. It’s rather dark, except for a light bulb dangling from the ceiling that gives off a faint shaft of light that lights up a few barrels. They hear creaking and cracking all over.

“What smells so funny down here?”

“That’s tar,” says the dove, pointing to the barrels. “Noah had the ark coated with tar to keep the water out.”

“Tar?!” squeal the penguins in unison, horrified.

“Be quiet, or you’ll wake the other animals.” The dove glances nervously toward the ceiling. “Especially the lions sleep very lightly.”

“This stench is unbearable!”

“Your fishy odor will cover up the smell of the tar soon enough,” says the dove coolly and starts to leave. “Any more questions?”

Of course the penguins have questions. A lot of them in fact. They want to know how long the buffet is open, if they have to get dressed for meals, where they can rent deck chairs, if there is a pool on the deck, whether exercise classes are offered onboard and—

“Where do you think you are?” yells the dove, her head turning a bright red. “This is a rescue operation, not a luxury cruise!”

At that moment they hear a mighty roar coming from an upper level. The two penguins wince and the dove looks up and rolls her eyes. “See what you did! Now the lions are awake again.

It isn’t easy to get a couple lions back to sleep, especially if you’re only a dove. I’ll leave you now, but I don’t want to hear a peep out of either one of you.”

“Wait a minute,” ask the penguins indignantly, “do we have to stay down here the whole time?”

“You should be happy to have gotten a place at all,” responds the dove testily.

“The ark is full to the rafters with animals. Down here it is dark and the air is stuffy, but at least you have some space. On the upper levels it is so crowded the animals cannot even move.”

“But what should we do the whole time down here?”

“Sleep. That’s what the other animals are doing.”

“And when will we arrive?”

“We haven’t even set off yet,” screams the dove at the top of her lungs, “and you already want to know when we will arrive?”

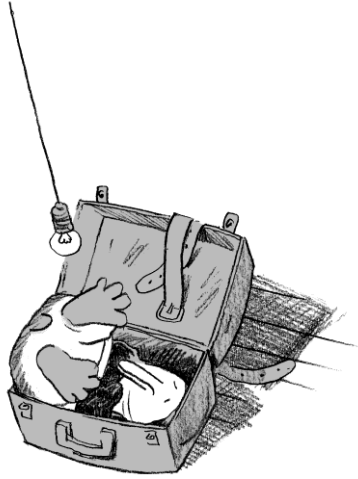
Then they hear a blaring trumpet from above. The two penguins cringe and the dove moans, “Congratulations! Now the elephants are also awake, and it is all your—“

Suddenly there’s a mighty jolt. The bilge of the ship starts swaying. The dove tumbles over the penguins and the suitcase starts sliding across the floor. Shivering, the birds cling to one another. Terrible screams can be heard from all directions. Bears growling, sheep baaing, pigs grunting, elephants trumpeting, geese cackling, apes squealing, goats bleating, horses whinnying, dogs barking, roosters crowing, frogs croaking, chickens clucking, owls screeching, snakes hissing, hippos burping, deer being silent, cows mooing, wolves howling, cats meowing—in other words: there is a deafening din. At some point everything quiets down again. All you can hear is a steady hum. The floor sways. The light bulb hanging from the ceiling starts to swing slowly from one side to the other.

“We’ve set off,” announces the dove. “Noah’s Ark has started moving. Here we go. Have a nice trip.”

The dove turns around one more time as she gets to the door and glances at the two penguins who are standing in the belly of the ark, shivering and holding each other tightly by the wing.

“Funny,” the dove says, “somehow I have the strange feeling I forgot something. Something very important.” She scratches her head and mumbles, “Oh well, it’ll come to me.” Then she quickly slams the door shut behind her.



The two penguins immediately open the suitcase. “Hopefully he didn’t suffocate in there.”

A little penguin is lying inside pressed together like an accordion. The two others poke him with their wings. He doesn’t move. They put their heads down into the suitcase and sniff at him. He smells odd.

At first glance the little penguin seems to be dead, but when he hears one of the penguins say to the other, “He’ll certainly go to heaven,” he shoots up like a spring and stands there in the suitcase, looking around. He asks eagerly, “Where am I?”
“On Noah’s Ark.”

“What smells so funny?”

“It’s tar,” they tell him, “but you’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t like it here,” says the little penguin, climbing out of the suitcase. “I’m going home.”

Cautiously the other two explain to him that there is no more home and that everything has been flooded because God brought on a great Flood covering the entire earth.

The little penguin swallows hard. “Then there really is a God?”

“He has proven that to us once and for all,” the other two explain, and they grab the little one by the collar. “You’re always causing trouble. Actually only two penguins are allowed onboard; we secretly smuggled you onto the ark, but no one is allowed to know.

Understand?”

“And what about all the other animals?” asks the little penguin, but no one answers him.

The two others just stare at their feet. Finally they respond, shrugging their shoulders, “They’ll realize sooner or later.”

“Realize what?”

“Well...”

“That they are drowning?!”

“We didn’t say that,” the other two look accusingly at the little penguin.

“God is letting all the other animals drown?”

The other two penguins try to explain that God was somehow dissatisfied and he had had his fill of everything, so he wanted to start all over again. But actually, they said, they didn’t really understand it all either....



“What was that?” asks the dove. The two penguins pretend to be listening intently. “We didn’t hear anything.”

“It came from the suitcase,” says the dove. The penguins quickly shake their heads. “That suitcase seemed suspicious to me from the very beginning.” The dove knocks on the case with the tip of her wing. “Open up!”

The penguins don’t move a muscle.

“I want to know what is in that suitcase.”

“God,” calls the little penguin from the suitcase. The dove flinches. “What?!”

Something in the suitcase clears its throat, and then the voice continues.

Now it is a bit deeper. “You heard right.”

“I don’t believe so,” laughs the dove.

“You don’t believe in God?” asks the voice threateningly.

“Well, yes, but—“

“But what?” thunders the voice from the suitcase.

“But I am having a hard time,” the dove tries to defend herself, “believing that God is in this suitcase.”

“Why? God can be anywhere and everywhere.”

The dove looks questioningly at the two penguins, who nod their heads in unison.

“Prove to me that you are God,” the dove says craftily.

“You must have faith in me without needing any proof.”

“That is asking a lot.”

“I know, but that is the catch,” comes the voice from the suitcase, “otherwise it would be too easy. It is not for nothing that people refer to believing in God.”

The dove thinks for a minute and finally says, “You know what I think?” And without waiting for an answer she continues, “I think this is a trick. I’m going to open this suitcase right now.

Then we’ll see.”

“Whatever you say,” says the voice, “but you’ll be blinded.”

“Blinded?”

“Whoever looks into the face of God is blinded. If you really want to become blind then go ahead and open the suitcase. But please be careful, the left latch sticks a bit.”

The dove glances hesitantly at the two penguins. One of them wonders if it is really true that looking into the face of God will leave you blind; the other desperately hopes at that moment

that God might be looking everywhere on earth except into the belly of the ark.

After a while the voice continues. "Are you hesitating? That is very reasonable. It would be quite a shame for such a pretty white dove to lose her sight."

"How do you know that I am a pretty white dove?"

"Come on now, I am the one who made you in the first place. After I created all the other animals I said to myself, 'To finish up I would like to make something that far surpasses all other beings—a creation that resembles me.' And I came up with a white dove."

The dove flaps her wings in excitement. "I am starting to believe that God really is inside that suitcase." She then throws herself down onto the ground in front of the suitcase and calls out:

"I am so sorry that I did not believe you."

"No big deal."

"I never thought you would be so understanding."

"Unfortunately, most people have a totally wrong conception of me."

The dove creeps a little closer to the suitcase. "To be quite honest I was even a little angry with you."

"That's okay. I can take it. In fact it is hard to be angry with someone who doesn't mean anything to you. If you were angry with me then it means you are not indifferent."

The dove is speechless. The two penguins exchange looks of amazement. Where did the little penguin get those ideas?

The voice from the suitcase asks, "Would you care to tell me why you were angry with me?"

The voice still sounds friendly, but the dove has the feeling that something depends on how she answers. Is this a trap? She contemplates for a moment and then decides to go for broke and shouts out: "This Flood is a catastrophe!"

"To be totally honest," says the voice calmly, "I am not particularly proud of this Flood. I guess I..."

"Go on," says the dove softly.

"I guess I overreacted a bit."

"Overreacted?!"

Even the two penguins look a little bewildered.

"I made a mistake," grumbles the voice.

The two penguins exchange glances, then they grab the dove under her wings and pull her toward the door. "God needs some rest."

"Let go of me. This is so exciting, I never thought that having a personal talk with God could be so enjoyable."

"You can have this pleasure any time," the voice from the suitcase says. "I am always here for you, no matter where you are."

"In the future I will never again doubt you, and I will tell everyone how great and magnificent you are. And I guarantee," says the dove, stretching her right wing upward like a sword, "that in record time I will convince others to love you as much as I do."

"Don't bother," comes the good-natured voice from the suitcase. "People need to decide for themselves whether or not they want to love me. Love only counts if it is given of one's own free will."

The dove is beside herself with joy and throws herself onto the suitcase, wrapping her wings around it. "I always loved you, but now I love you even more. You are even better than I had imagined."

The two penguins turn away in embarrassment when the dove starts covering the suitcase with kisses. "Is there anything you would like? Tell me and I will do anything you ask."

“I’d like a piece of cheesecake.”

The dove springs up from the suitcase. “What?”

“Some cheesecake.”

All three stare at the suitcase. There is a long silence. “Maybe we should call it quits for the day,” say the two penguins cautiously. “God seems very tired. This enormous Flood must have exhausted him totally.”

“In that case,” says the dove, her eyes narrowing into small slits, “then He deserves some cheesecake all the more.”

Cheers come from the suitcase. “This dove will certainly go to heaven!”

“But after such a strenuous Flood,” the dove asks with a mellowing voice, “wouldn’t you prefer something more hearty?”

“Cheesecake will do just fine.”

“With a nice brown crust?” coos the dove.

A chortle comes out of the suitcase.

“And lots of raisins?”

“The fewer the better.”

“And decorated with a few colorful parasols?” pipes the dove.

“I will never forget this,” cheers the little penguin in the suitcase. He presses his eyes closed in blissful ecstasy; his wings are curled up into little fists. That is why he doesn’t realize that the dove slowly opens the case as he continues speaking: “In fact I have an incredibly good memory and I am seriously considering making you into a kind of deputy and—“ At that moment he finally notices that his voice no longer sounds dull and muffled.

He opens his eyes. In front of him the white dove is standing with her wings folded across her chest.

“Now I don’t know God personally,” snarls the dove, “but I do know one thing: That is not God.”

The little penguin clears his throat. “You can never know these things.”

“God is not a penguin!” hurls the dove back defiantly.

The two other penguins try in vain to convince the dove that God can take on any form at will, but the dove will not hear a word. She flaps her wings in the air, some feathers go flying, and she exclaims that never for a moment did she believe this swindle and that the penguins should be ashamed of themselves. Now she feels she has no other recourse but to inform Noah himself about this tasteless conduct by the penguins. The punishment will be terrible, she is sure of that.

At the door the dove turns around one more time before leaving. “Here on the ark you penguins will have to face the music.” And she quietly closes the door behind her.

“Cheesecake, of all things,” groan the two other penguins.

“I couldn’t think of anything else,” replies the little penguin sheepishly.

“At that point at the latest the dove had to realize that you are not God,” says one penguin, and the other one adds, “I actually realized a little earlier.”

“Realized?”

“That you are not God.”

“Did you really think that God was in this suitcase?” asks the little penguin, amazed.

“For a while I did. You were very convincing.”

The little penguin blushes with pride. “And I didn’t even have to think very hard. The words just popped into my head.”

The third penguin then totally loses his cool: “Have you two gone crazy? God would never admit to having made a mistake. You acted as if you were God. That’s—that’s...” and his voice cracks. “There’s certainly a word for that, but I don’t know it. Or maybe there is not even a word for it because such a crime has never before been committed. We will all be punished severely for this. I can already see His mighty fist waving above us.”

“Maybe God is very different than any of us ever imagined,” murmur the two others.

“He’s certainly not so vindictive.” Not totally convinced, they lower their heads, waiting to face the music.

The penguins wait and brood over their punishment. Although they do not know exactly what is meant by “facing the music,” it certainly does not inspire much confidence. At some point they no longer know whether they had been waiting a minute, a day, or already a week for their punishment. Waiting seems like an eternity to them. “Maybe the punishment will never come,” ponder the penguins. “Maybe waiting for the punishment is actually the punishment.”

