

Rainy Season Journey *(Borgens forlag 2001)*

Excerpt from the book:

The islands from long ago

By Morten Brask

It was a beautiful March morning. Manaroo came out onto the water-front terrace of our losmen, Matahari, and asked if we would like to sail over to the island of Pisang. Siri, Geraldine, Samantha, Anke, Andreas and I were eating pancakes. None of us had any plans for the day. The sky was blue and virtually cloudless, so there would be good prospects to investigate the reef in the sunshine, when all the colours of the corals were at their clearest.

We fetched our masks and fins and were soon sailing across to Pulau Pisang, 'Banana Island', so called because of its curved shape. The crossing was calm and took about an hour, and we all enjoyed the boat's gentle rocking as we scanned the sea for dolphins. It was so peaceful, so tranquil out at sea.

The others crawled out onto the bows, but I sat under the covering and dangled my hand over the railing into the water. Such peace. Such simplicity.

Pisang had a very fine coral reef and we weren't the only ones who had taken advantage of the sunny day to sail across. When we reached the bay there were already three other boats there, with locals and a few travellers from another boarding house. We dropped anchor and spent an hour or so diving, after which we all walked across to the other side of the island, which was no more than 3-400 metres wide. We grilled some fish and then settled down to read on the little beach.

I found a spot in the shade and rested my head on a palm log that had been worn smooth by the sea. A light breeze from the north took the edge off the worst of the heat and softly rustled the tops of the palm trees. Manaroo pulled some coconuts from a palm and split them with his machete, so we could drink the lukewarm milky juice as we lazed in the shade. I was reading Hemingway's 'Green Hills of Africa' and felt more than content with life.

Indefatigable Andreas threw himself into the water in the hope of seeing more of the rare 'mommings' or – maybe – the mermaids that Manaroo insisted lived out there somewhere. A feeling of lethargy crept over me, making my limbs heavy and weary, and the book dropped from my hand.

I was woken by the wind snatching at my swimming trunks, whipping grains of sand across the beach, prickling my skin. Everyone else was packing up as quickly as they could.

'Manaroo wants to leave,' I heard Anke say. There was a look of concern on her face as she gazed out at the sea. I was wide awake now and I could see that clouds had gathered into a blanket of darkness.

'Where did those clouds come from?' I asked stupidly.

'Out of the blue,' said Anke. 'They weren't there half an hour ago. Manaroo says that often happens at this time of year.'

She hurried off to join the others, who were on their way back to the boat on the other side of the island. Siri waited for me while I put on my sandals and collected my things together.

The wind was picking up by the minute and the gusts were buffeting the palm trees, as pliable as tresses of hair. When we reached the back of the beach we couldn't find the path leading to the boat. We called out to the others, but our voices were ripped to shreds by the roar of the wind.

'There's no way we can sail in this,' I said to Siri.

'I don't know what Manaroo's got in mind,' she replied.

'But it would be madness to put out in that little dinghy when there's a storm on the way.'

'He must know what he's doing, he's been through this thousands of times.'

In our hectic search, we ran along several dead-end tracks until we finally found the right path that led us over to the other side of Pisang. The others were already in the boat, waving at us to hurry up. Even in the shallows the boat was rocking violently.

I sat just beyond the covering, a little way from Manaroo who started the engine and manoeuvred Natascha out into the bay, where we stopped and waited for a favourable moment to head out to sea. The three boats were waiting a little way off. The waves were getting really high and, even though I'm never sea-sick, I started feeling queasy. Manaroo gestured to the other skippers, and laughed.

'Do you think it's a good idea to put out to sea now?' I asked him.

'No problem,' said Manaroo. And then he gave an abnormally loud laugh. I was getting seriously irritated.

'We can put out later,' I said.

He shook his head. 'It'll be much worse later, the sea's still calm now.'

'Calm, do you call this calm?'

The boat was being pitched back and forth by the waves, which reared above the railing.

'No problem.' He laughed again.

'Has he gone crazy?' Samantha asked from under the covering.

'No, it's just his way of showing he isn't afraid,' said Geraldine. 'Indonesians mustn't show they're afraid.' She had lived among the Indonesians for three years and knew more about their mindset than the rest of us.

'Well, so much the worse,' said Andreas. 'We can't let ourselves in for this just because he won't show he's afraid.'

'I would think he knows what he's doing,' said Geraldine, and then added with a cautious smile: 'I hope.'

We waited in the bay for quite a while, as the waves grew bigger and bigger. Manaroo again gestured to the men in the other boats. Two of them shook their heads. They didn't want to put out to sea. But the skipper on the boat closest to us started his engine, and then Manaroo started ours. He opened the throttle and headed out of the bay. 'He's doing it!' shouted Andreas from under the covering.

The first wave was a shock. With a force the like of which I wouldn't have thought possible, our little boat was hurled across the surface of the sea until the wave struck under the hull, lifting us at least four metres up into the air. The wave hadn't even passed before the next one threw us up so high that the descent made my stomach judder, and then the hull hit the water with a bang. 'This is madness,' Andreas shouted to Manaroo. 'Let's turn back.' 'It's only here in the breakers, when we get further out it'll be better,' Manaroo shouted in reply.

I looked towards the island and could hardly believe my eyes when I saw that we were already several hundred metres from land. My mind began to race. I wondered if we could swim to land if the boat came to grief, and then dismissed the thought and convinced myself that Manaroo knew what he was doing; he'd been through this loads of times. I remembered we didn't have a radio on board, so we wouldn't be able to call for help. We were all clinging to the railing so as not to be flung overboard. If only we had lifejackets, I thought.

The boat struggled through the waves, but the usually so dominant sound of the engine was as feeble as the fluttering of a fly's wing compared to the massive sound of thousands upon thousands of tonnes of water crashing all around us, and of the wind screaming in our ears.

It didn't get better when we got further out. On the contrary, the waves got bigger, more unpredictable, and they began to smash in over the railing. We were drenched and Manaroo, who wasn't sitting in the shelter of the covering, was struck so hard that several times he was nearly washed overboard. He tried to give a contemptuous laugh, but the water was surging all over him and filling his mouth. Every time he was hit by a wave he blinked the water out of his eyes like an anxious little child.

Then I felt water around my legs. I looked down. The water level had risen above the boards and up to our ankles. There must have been several hundred litres of water inboard already. I found a bucket full of tools and emptied it. Then I lifted the planks in the bottom of the boat and started baling out.

Geraldine, who was sitting opposite me, found a plastic box and started baling too. My bucket held about three litres, and I worked hard and with a steady rhythm, but the water level carried on rising because all the water we pitched out came straight back with the next wave.

I wondered how many waves we could take before the boat got too heavy. No – no thinking, I said to myself, just work. I upped my speed, baled out like crazy, but it was a Sisyphean task.

I looked up and caught sight of the other boat, a couple of hundred metres away. It looked so small and the sea around it looked so huge, and I could see the bows rear into the air and then a moment later plunge downwards, and sometimes the boat disappeared completely behind the gigantic waves. I looked towards our bows, but all I could see was the black sky and then an abyss of water.

Samantha and Siri were on the wooden bench, clinging to the railing so as not to be flung overboard and at the same time trying to keep the orange cloth in place across the open windows. They were being thrown back and forth like children on an out-of-control carousel.

Anke was sitting next to them. She was weeping noisily; traces of mascara streaked her cheeks, but there was no sign of tears as her face was being lashed by the spray from the heaving sea. Andreas was holding her, trying to comfort her, but his usually calm features were clenched in a mask of anxiety.

I think we were all gripped by anxiety at that moment. Anxiety that this was not going to end well. But I was glad I had my bucket, so I could work and not think too much. Work and work, pitch water overboard, work to keep the boat afloat. Don't think. I swung my bucket in a steady rhythm, but a wall of water kept soaring up into the air just beyond the railing, and the water I hurled out just hit the wall and splashed back into the boat.

Elfin Geraldine was sitting opposite me, baling out water with her little plastic box. She was weeping too, but she was trying to stay plucky.

In emptying the bucket overboard my underarm kept scraping the rough wooden edge of the railing and now it was bleeding. I tried throwing the water the other way, but then it just whipped back in my face.

'The others are turning back,' shouted Andreas from under the covering.

I looked out to sea and saw that the other boat had turned round and was sailing away from us.

'They're turning back,' he screamed at Manaroo. 'They're turning back! Look at them, damnit. They're turning back!'

I realised that until this moment it had been a comfort to know we weren't the only ones out here. Now that the others were sailing back to safety I began to lose heart. Manaroo looked at the other boat and screwed up his eyes.

'I can't turn the boat, it'll turn turtle,' he shouted. He tried to laugh, but could only manage a twist of his lips.

I carried on baling out with my bucket. My back was aching and my arms were hurting. I was getting short of breath. I clenched my stomach muscles tightly and carried on.

'I've dropped my box!' shouted Geraldine. She looked at me miserably. She had no idea what to do.

'There's a tin over there,' I shouted back. Geraldine grabbed the tin, which wasn't much larger than a big cup and was totally useless in our battle against the waves. But she carried on filling the tin and pouring away the water, weeping all the while.

There was nothing to be done except keep on baling out and hoping that we would reach the lee of Banda Besar, the largest of the islands. It would be easier to sail from there.

At that moment I was hit by a wave, knocking me over towards Geraldine, and a sharp pain shot through my right arm as I hit the bench. I fell into the water in the bottom of the boat and had to use every ounce of energy to get up again. The pain in my arm was excruciating as I resumed baling out. I was just about to ask one of the others to take over when it happened.

The engine packed up.

The throbbing faded and the engine died. Now the only sound was that of the sea and the wind.

Everything inside me just seemed to stop. I think we all knew what it meant. Without the engine we couldn't take the waves head-on and, the minute we were hit by a wave along the length of the boat, we would capsize.

I looked around. We were exactly midway between Pisang and Banda Besar, and I reckoned the distance to both islands was somewhere between three and six kilometres.

With an inexplicable calm, I wondered if it would be possible to swim that far in this weather. Siri, Samantha, Anke, Andreas and I had fins. But Manaroo and Geraldine didn't. What could we do about that? Could we just swim off wearing our fins and leave Geraldine and Manaroo to fend for themselves? I didn't bother to speculate any more. It would be useless even trying. It would be impossible to swim against the waves. Maybe we could keep afloat for a while, but then we'd be dragged under. No one can swim five kilometres in five-metre-high waves. Some of the waves were even higher. I looked across to Manaroo. He'd stopped grinning. I could see the forbidden fear in his face.

Anke and Andreas were holding one another tightly. Anke had burrowed her face into Andreas' shoulder, her body had gone into spasms and she was screaming. I looked at Andreas' face. He was crying. He was gazing steadily at Manaroo, but tears were running gently down his suntanned cheeks.

Samantha was staring down at the floor of the boat, clenching her teeth so tightly that the muscles in her jaw were protruding. Geraldine stopped baling and dropped the little tin. She was shaking all over. She lifted her face, turning it towards heaven, folded her hands, closed her eyes and prayed.

I looked at Siri. Her hair had been plastered back by the waves, and her face seemed so clean. She held out a hand to me. I leant forwards and took her hand in mine, and we looked at one another for a long time.

Siri smiled at me. I smiled back. And we silently said goodbye. It was at that moment the images appeared. I knew the saying that your whole life passes before your eyes in extreme situations, but I had never really understood what it meant. Now, suddenly, images from my very early childhood came to mind. I saw my mother and father when they were younger. My mother was pushing a stroller and I was holding my father's hand. We were going for a Sunday walk in the park. I saw another picture, of my younger brother and me, naked in a paddling pool, on our summer holiday. We were splashing water at each other. My father was sitting under the shade of a tree watching us as he smoked his pipe, and my mother was reading the newspaper. Other pictures passed through my mind, of the time my brother and I played bank robbers, and my brother insisted on wearing an old leather hat, strings of beads round his neck and a big pipe in his mouth. And I saw pictures of me ill in bed, and my mother bringing me fruit cordial and stewed apples. Pictures of the Christmas tree that Christmas we got the walkie-talkies we'd been hoping for all year.

They were such beautiful images, and they made me feel warm inside, and I missed my family so intensely that I hurt to my very marrow. While these pictures were racing through my mind, the boat and the sea and the wind simply didn't exist.

When Siri let go of my hand the pictures disappeared like shadows, and I was back in the boat. Geraldine still had her hands folded and her lips were moving silently. How can this be happening, I thought, how can this be happening to me?

Adrenaline was pounding in my heart, and everything happened so slowly that I was aware of every detail and my mind was completely clear. I thought, without actually being scared, that now the time had come. The boat would vanish under us, and we would be parted from one another in the ocean.

And then the most incredible thing happened. Geraldine's prayers were answered. By some kind of miracle Manaroo managed to start the engine. First it throbbed slowly, tentatively like an old steam engine needing a push to get going. The sound became more regular and then there was no doubt – it worked! The engine worked! A wave hit us hard from the side and the boat heeled so far over that the top of the railing dipped into the water, but Manaroo had managed to turn us just enough that we didn't capsize.

This was the wave that would have upended us. The boat righted itself, and before the next wave swelled up Manaroo had us back on course and we could take the waves head-on.

A ripple of relief ran through us all, and the waves didn't seem to be nearly as bad after that. I carried on baling out in spite of the pain in my arm, and we ploughed our way slowly through the sea. After twenty minutes, maybe more, we were in the lee of Banda Besar. The boat was still rocking fiercely, but everything was so quiet we might as well have gone deaf.

We lit the cigarettes that Andreas kept in a watertight container hanging round his neck. And suddenly we were all talking at once, babbling and cracking stupid jokes, and we laughed at everything. I looked at the group and felt such fondness for them all, and seeing them laugh was pure joy. Andreas started fiddling with his diving gear.

'Scheisse,' he shouted boisterously, 'I've left my snorkel behind on Pisang, we're going to have to sail back.'

And how we laughed.

'Yes, damnit, let's turn back,' we shouted, 'back to Pisang, turn the boat, Manaroo! We've got to go back this minute, those snorkels cost a packet.'

And we laughed all the way back to the water-side terrace at Matahari, where we stepped onto dry land, in safety, completely out of harm's way, and the kind proprietor in his white outfit greeted us with relief, and we drank beer and had dinner.

It got late, and we got drunk and noisy. Some other travellers from another boarding house came over and joined our party. They had been out in a boat too, and they'd all put on their masks and snorkels and fins and waited to be washed overboard. We fetched more Bintang beers and we got more and more drunk. The mood was warm and animated. We were so relieved, so happy, so elated that it was all over. Manaroo was in high spirits too. He bragged about his skill as a sailor, that he could take on every wave in the ocean. We looked at him, but we didn't say anything. I was annoyed by his bragging. I think we were all angry with him because he had put to sea when it would have been far more responsible to stay on Pulau Pisang. But now here he was, proud and happy, and I knew he was unlikely to be aware of just what a terrible scare he had given us. The ferocity of the sea today might very well have frightened him too, but he'd done it before and he'd do it many times again. It occurred to me that Manaroo was one of those people who get stronger every time they survive a dangerous situation. He thought he had conquered the ocean, and he thought he would be able to conquer it again tomorrow. He raised his beer mug to drink a toast, and we all drank a toast with him. There was no reason to spoil the cheerful mood.

We took it in turns to go down to the kitchen and fetch more bottles, and after an hour we were all pretty drunk and were speaking so loudly that they must have been able to hear us right up at Hotel Maulana. Everything we said was funny, at least that's how it seemed to me. Everyone was at the same pitch, everyone was relieved and liberated. We had been given a gift, and now we were sharing this gift. Nothing was out of bounds, everything raised a laugh. Manaroo's German slang made us laugh, a moth drowning in Samantha's beer made us laugh. When Andreas, well cut, tried fishing for sea urchins with an empty Bintang bottle, I nearly choked with laughter, and when he overbalanced and fell into the water I flopped across the table in fits, knocking over glasses, beer trickling onto the floor. We were still laughing when our kind proprietor in his white outfit came out onto the terrace. He stood looking at us for a moment, as if he wasn't sure if he was welcome. 'Come and have a drink,' we called out. He shook his head.

'Just one glass,' we pleaded. But our host declined and looked down at the table.

'Something has happened,' he said.

The tone of his voice sobered me up in an instant.

'One of the boats hasn't returned from Pisang.'

We all went very quiet.

Next morning we learnt that the boat had gone down off Ai.