

The Polar Bear Club (or Rules are Rules)

The tanker ship Richard G Matthiesen arrived midday. She brought fuel to Antarctica to keep the machines all running for another year.

Pete and I left the ship after dinner, and walked to the pint-sized base at McMurdo. We had been working all afternoon, and it was time to relax. Even for a couple of guys in their 50s, a half mile is not far when you haven't had a beer for weeks.

"All their water is desalinated sea water." Pete, the ship's Chief Engineer, said, as we strode up the inclined, icy road toward the base. "It makes water pretty expensive around here."

"I suppose it's quick showers for everyone." I mused. "Even with snow drifting around, it's still the driest place on Earth."

We trudged into the large community shelter, and found the "Club".

"Beer please", I said, sliding onto a stool at the bar, "and one for the Chief here".

I put some bills on the counter. We talked to the others sitting nearby, and they welcomed the strangers into their midst. After a second beer, I was ready to go back to the boat.

Pete was studying a framed notice on the wall announcing the "Antarctic Polar Bear Club", and listing the rules limiting membership. I quickly read them.

"So, Pete," I whispered, "You thinking of joining the Polar Bear Club?"

"It says the initiation has to be witnessed by a member in good standing." Pete said. Then he stood and asked the crowd, "Is there a Polar Bear Club member in good standing here?"

“I’m a member.” A lanky underfed twenty-something grad-student-type emerged from the huddle across the room. He sat down next to us, and shook hands. “Tad’s the name.”

“We were looking at the Rules,” I said, pointing at the notice, “and just wanted to be sure we hadn’t missed anything.”

“Rule One,” Pete read from the wall, “the applicant must be fully immersed.” He turned to face Tad, who nodded.

Pete continued, “Rule Two, the initiation must take place in Winter Quarters Bay.”

Pete turned to face Tad, who nodded again, looking puzzled.

“Rule Three,” Pete finished up, “Applicant to wear only a normal swim suit, or equivalent.”

Tad explained, “Yeah, no wet suits or anything like that. Just a swim suit or underwear.”

Pete and I nodded.

“I think we want to try it.” I said. “Can you witness... officially, I mean?”

“Ah, yeah, sure.” Tad looked perplexed.

“Can you follow us back to the ship?” Pete asked.

“You mean right now?” asked Tad a little incredulous.

“Oh yeah.” I answered. “Time’s a-wastin’. We won’t be in town very long.”

The three of us left the bar and wandered on down the road, back to the ship. As we neared the vessel, Tad remarked, “It’s a lot bigger up close.”

We climbed the gangway and escorted Tad to the Officers’ Lounge, our TV room at the rear of the Officers’ Deck.

“Wait here a minute while we get changed.”

Tad sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs, taking in his surroundings.

Moments later, Pete and I returned, dressed in swim trunks, carrying towels, and escorted Tad out the “after hatch” to the small open-air deck behind the ship’s house. Tad’s jaw dropped. There, in front of him was the hot tub the officers had built, mostly from spare parts. A four-foot long section of 6-foot diameter Saudi oil pipeline sat upright on the deck, full to the brim with steaming distilled water.

“Ah!” Pete said, pulling the thermometer out of the pool. “Ninety-nine degrees, perfect!”

Pete climbed in, and I followed, ceremoniously dunking our heads under the water, and slowly surfacing again.

“Tad.” Pete addressed our official witness. “Note that according to Rule One, we were fully immersed,”

“And, according to Rule Two,” I continued, “We are definitely within the confines of Winter Quarters Bay, and dressed according to Rule Three.”

“Any questions?” asked Pete.

“Can I bring my girlfriend?” asked Tad.

“It’s OK with us.” I said, “But make sure there are never more than three people here at a time, and keep the noise down, because someone is always sleeping.”

“Welcome to the Polar Bear Club!” Tad beamed.

The next day, Pete and I picked up our membership cards, and bought our Polar Bear Club T-shirts at the base store. Rules are Rules, but always read the fine print carefully.