



From the Observer archive

From the archive: the girl who came back alive

It's March 1972 and the Observer Magazine follows the incredible story of a 17-year-old girl who survived in the Amazon on her own following a devastating air crash



The cover story of the *Observer Magazine* of 12 March 1972 ('The girl who came back alive') is the incredible first-person account of 17-year-old German-Peruvian Juliane Koepcke, who survived in the Amazon rainforest for 10 days after an air crash in which she was sole survivor.

She and her mother were en route to visit her father while flying over Peru on Christmas Eve 1971, when the plane broke up mid-air after the wing was hit by lightning. 'The next thing I realised was that I was no longer inside the plane. I was outside. I was sitting in the open air on my seat.'

As Koepcke fell, she remembers the jungle looked like cauliflower - and she then lost consciousness. Astonishingly, she only suffered minor injuries - a broken collar bone and a foot wound.

All she had to eat was a packet of sweets. But she had once lived in the rainforest with her parents, a zoologist father and ornithologist mother, and knew more than most about what to do. The three lessons that probably saved her life were remembering that it's not the big animals you should be scared of but the 'insects, spiders, ants, flies and mosquitoes'; you need to find a river, where human settlements and workers are likely to be; and don't eat any fruit that could be poisonous.

At one point, Koepcke began to be covered in fly bites 'from which maggots were now appearing like asparagus tips from a jar' - they were eating her alive. She broke her ring into sharp pieces to dig them out.

She must have been thinking of herself when she wrote: 'In the jungle everything is dying noiselessly, millions of times over. They call it Amazon biology.' But miraculously, starved and exhausted, she found a small boat and a hut on the river, and Peruvian lumberjacks rescued her.

In later life, she became a librarian, as if to offset all that drama.

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