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## News

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“You know, I never used to look at the sea. Seems like there was just never any time” Barry said as he gazed through the smooth, glossy surface of the cafeteria window and out onto the shore, where the waves played their slow waltz on the grey sand.

“Time’s different out here” old John Vincent said, his crooning Kansas accent a dusty relic of their home. “I remember a time when I used to walk down to my neighbor’s and gather me up a basket of hazelnuts from them old filbert bushes. I’d take off round noon and it’d be damn near sunset when I got back home. I tell ya we still got hours here at the station, but they sure are different than the hours I used to have.”

“Ain’t that the truth” Barry said, thinking about the long days he used to spend worrying about his car payments, about how his daughter was doing in school and how he never had time alone.

“Well” Barry said with a slow sigh, “I better be heading back to my station. It’s always nice to have a chat old man.” John Vincent tipped his oil spotted cap and gave Barry a wink, the shadow of a smile creeping up under his wild grey mustache.

“You take care Barry. Don’t you forget to have a scotch with me before you hit the hay” he said as Barry turned and headed towards the creaky double doors at the end of the cafeteria.

This was the Lily, a meteorological station situated at the southern tip of the arctic, it’s mane of red signal lights and illuminated windows cutting a sharp figure against the frigid darkness of the surrounding landscape. Barry had worked here for three years, doing two months here, two months at home. He had always been rather introverted and found the time here soothing, a window to shake off the often overwhelming life of parenthood. At times he felt guilty leaving his wife and daughter alone for so long, but he had married a woman of strength and capability, and thought that maybe a break from his incessant worrying every once in a while would do them both some good. The people of the lily were like his family, and the muted light that bounced off the southern sea brought him a strange sense of calm. He thought that out here time stood still, and after the mountains had melted into the earth and the forests all fell silent, this place would still be here, just waves crashing against sand, grey sky over a thin bed of frost and ice.

Barry headed through those creaky double doors at the end of the cafeteria, weaving his way down through the labyrinthine network of dim, cramped passageways, rows of dull metal

doors with sharp red lettering. He worked in the communication port, all the way past the provisions cellar, through the wide, echoing halls of the air transport hangar and down into the tail of the station. His office was a cozy little box full of pleasing bleeps and gently blinking signal lights, with a main screen that lit up with action every time he received a signal. He would receive messages from the central station back in the states and relay them to their intended addressees, mostly messages for the handful of workers that had family back home and data for the various research wings to pore over. Once every couple of days though, he would get the latest news from around the globe. ‘North Korea threatens military action against the U.S.’ they would say, ‘Sierra Leone in midst of record drought conditions’ they would say, ‘Movie star found dead, suspected cocaine overdose’ they would say. The news was always exciting for the population of the station, providing some speculative substance to digest and a source of gossip and justification for the people onboard.

Over time many of the residents had developed a strange separation from the conflicts of the world around them, and with each new dose of news regarding earth’s seemingly never-ending hardship, this sentiment grew stronger. Barry would sit with old Mr. Vincent in the dome, listening to the people talk about the latest catastrophe with a hint of condescension permeating their tones.

“It’s a good thing we’re out here” Mary Bruckner would say in her thick British accent, “seems like the whole globe’s collapsing in on itself.”

“Yes ma’am” Jeff Donner would say, slapping his stubby hand on his thigh with an authoritative thump. Barry and John Vincent would just sit and listen, John taking the occasional puff of his ancient rose wood pipe as Barry stared absently out at the sea. He thought about how

he felt like they were all nestled in a giant bubble, where the tragedies of the outside were far away, hazy images of a different world.

Barry slid the key into his office door, the lock making a familiar extended click as the door swung open. This was an exciting day. It was nearing Thanksgiving and the families of some of the residents were flying in to visit. Barry imagined his daughter, pointing through the foggy window of the plane at the glacial ice floating off the coast, asking her mom where all the polar bears were hiding. He rubbed at the sleep in his eyes, setting the mug of coffee he was cradling down next to the model of an old powder blue Cessna that sat on his desk. He sat down and looked at the terminal screen, it's flashing bands of red and blue indicating a new message. Barry hit the print button, tapping his fingers on the desk to the chukita-chukita-chukita noise of the page rhythmically dancing it's way out of the machine. He grabbed the corner of the paper as the printer finished whirring, flipping it over and setting it on his desk with a practiced finesse.

'To the residents of NASA meteorological station 216-1a3, We regret to inform you that remnants of the passenger plane due to arrive at your station this morning were found in the Lincoln sea this morning at 0430 hours. No survivors have been found and all passengers are assumed dead upon impact. Our sincerest condolences. –Greenland Coastal Patrol Office'. Barry just sat for a moment, staring blankly at the page, his eyes moving back and forth between the words passenger plane and 'dead upon impact'. The cold black ink of the letter seemed to pulsate, stretching the inside of his skull and creating a dull hum that grew into a deafening roar, drowning out all the noise of the office. His face began to tremble and he felt his stomach churn, struggling to escape his body. He felt reality settle into him then, and his thoughts seemed

shrouded in a dank, mephitic haze. The motions of his body took on a dreamlike quality, and he found himself drifting suddenly, gliding past all the familiar doorways of his colleagues, their frames now bent and twisted in a sickening posture. His body carried him stumbling through the complex without direction, holding the sinister message away from him like a young boy would hold an infected dying animal, barely aware of the murky tears rolling down his cheeks.

The people of the Lily all gathered in the cafeteria, the thick aroma of bagels and dark roast filling the air as they waited for Barry to arrive. On Tuesday mornings they would all circle around Barry in the cafeteria, listening as he read through the latest bits of news, his deep twangy voice drifting over the words with a gentle prosody.

“Wonder where that ol’ numbskull Barry is” Mary Bruckner said, the wrinkled grin on her ancient face belying her snappy tone.

“I reckon he’s napping in his office again, that young man ain’t never at a loss for sheep ta count” Jeff Donner said with a bellowing chuckle.

“Well he better hussle, I got a scarf that needs finish nittin before my granddaughter gets here.” Mary Bruckner said, a sharp nod of her head emphasizing each word. The creaky double doors at the far end of the cafeteria swung open and Barry shuffled through, his head down as he dragged his feet slowly across the cold floor.

John Vincent stood up from his worn recliner in the corner of the room. “Barry, what’s wrong?” he said, his bushy grey eyebrows arching with concern.

Barry lifted his head, his glossy eyes looking through the nervous buzz of the crowd and out the large window on the wall. “The plane...it’s not gonna be here.” He said.

“What do you mean?” Mary Bruckner said, cocking her head to the side and pursing her lips. Barry just held out the message, his eyes never leaving the churning grey waves rolling outside the window. John Vincent walked up and gently took the message from Barry’s hand, his head slowly swinging back and forth as his eyes scanned the page.

“The passenger plane, our passenger plane, wrecked in the ocean” he said, looking up at the crowd, a hint of grief permeating his normally soothing voice. “There were no known survivors.” For a moment everything was silent. The dim light of the morning seemed to cast a suffocating pallor across the walls, draining all the color from the world. A heavy pant cut through the muted room, growing more labored with each breath.

“My granddaughter” Mary Bruckner said, her lungs struggling to flex against the pain of the moment. “she was...she,” Mary collapsed, falling like so many leaves on an autumn tree, and lay on the floor, clutching her chest and shuddering with each uneven gasp of her breath. For a second everyone just stared, watching Mary Bruckner with wide eyes, unsure of how or what to think.

Upon the sight of Mary’s body trembling like a puddle on the floor of the cafeteria, Barry snapped out of his stupor, and a sudden realization of where he was washed over him. “She’s having a heart attack” he yelled as he ran up and rolled her over. He tried to recall to rudimentary CPR training he learned so many years ago in high school, recalling only the steady thud of “staying alive” pulsing through the classroom as his classmates did their best Hannibal Lecter impressions with the rubbery face masks of their training dummies. “Someone get the first aid kit” he said, his words coming out in sharp barks each time he pushed down on Mary’s chest. Time seemed stretched and thin as Barry sat above Mary’s body, murmuring as he tried push

after push to wake her from the nightmare that now surrounded them. The people just watched, transfixed, as the moments unfolded in front of them, a tragedy all too real to grasp.

“She’s gone Barry” John Vincent said in a low whisper. He put his hand under Barry’s arm, lifting him off of the motionless body. Barry looked around; a sea of pale faces who’s eyes struggled to meet one another. One by one they slowly sat down, unintentionally encircling the old woman.

John Donner’s voice broke the quiet, startling the group to attention. “We have to bury her.” He said in a slow, dry croak. “We have to bury her.”

“I can do it” John Vincent said.

“I’m coming” Barry said. And so they found a bag, an old potato sack down in the hanger and carefully put Mary Bruckner’s body in it, both lost in the depth of their thoughts.

“If this god damn ground were any more rocky we’d need a jackhammer” Barry said as he drove the rusted blade of the shovel into the dry, frozen earth. His shovel collided with a one of the rough black stones that lurked beneath the lifeless soil, sending a sharp buzz up through his arms and into the aching space behind his eyes.

“yessir, don’t know if there’s any harder earth in this world” John Vincent said with a heavy sigh, although Barry noticed how the old man’s shovel seemed to glide effortlessly through the coarse terrain. “I grew up workin the land” John continued, “soil so rich it’d grow a turnip the size of your head. Back in those days we’d spend all day digging trenches for the spring sowing, and I can still remember the sweet scent of that land. One day I was digging out rows for our carrot patch and I found the remains of an old fox, it’s skull cleaned out by all the

worms and perfectly preserved. I lost just about everything I owned from my childhood in the years that've passed, but I've still got that skull, sitting on the shelf in my quarters."

"Why'd you keep it?" Barry said, his dark eyebrows furrowing as he stopped and looked over at John's silhouette, a crooked portrait etched against the darkening horizon.

"Well" John Vincent said as he scooped the last bit of earth out from the hole, "I just thought it was beautiful, that's all." Together they lifted the old canvas rations bag with the body of Mary Bruckner and tossed it into the grave, a muffled thud bouncing off the station's wall behind them. They shoveled the piles of dirt and rock back over the hole, stomped it down in silence as Barry thought about what it felt like to be surrounded by the frigid cold of the ocean, about the sound of metal twisting and breaking against the waves. When they finished Barry took a small cross made from the gnarled grey branches of the bushes that grew in the area, and drove it into the ground. They took their shovels and walked towards the shore, sitting on the frozen bluffs that overlooked the sea.

"I'm sorry about your family Barry. A man like can never know what to do with such loss." Barry just sat watching the crimson light of the setting sun bounce off the waves, waiting to see something wash up on shore.