

Grey December

An Antarctic Novel by Patrick Olszewski

Chapter 1: Stay, just for this moment

November 21

In an old wooden building shaped like a barrel for rum, constructed and raised from Richmond’s second Antarctic expedition, Jessica lets her eyes wander. She analyzes the crowd of people huddled over wool and leather couches. Parkas strewn about on tables and chairs. Wine glasses half and completely empty, sleeping in the palms of frail, calloused hands. One of the men huddled over the TV, sporting a rough, white and yellow beard, stares at a new flatscreen that was recently replaced (more accurately, upgraded). He snuffles and wipes the snot on his sleeve. He better not have the crud. Jessica doesn’t want to have it again. It’s inevitable, but still. Best to be avoided if possible.

The air is hot, thick, and sticky. She

looks around at everyone having a good time and leaves the audio recorder rolling. Her camera is set up on a tripod in the corner. Normally, she would be helming the camera herself, getting the exact close-up shots she likes. Tonight, however, she wants to celebrate with her favorite crowd. To give herself a break. She can do her job and have a little fun while doing it. One day to relax can’t hurt.

The bearded man huddled over the TV finally leans back into his seat on the couch. He holds a controller in his hands, and him and his buddies stare at the TV as men bounce up and down and fight one another over and over again with swords and sticks and fists. The cartoon characters fall off a platform and come back up to fight another day. It bores Jessica.

“Hey, Jess,” The bearded man says. He adjusts the Rolex on his wrist. “Can you do me a favor and get me another glass of

Cabernet Sauvignon?” He produces a French accent only when asking for the wine, as if to say ‘hey, I’m cultured. I can say it properly.’ The thought makes Jessica snort.

“You want me to get one for your wife too, Ryan?”

“Hey, Sheryll!!” He shouts, cupping his hands to his mouth.

“Not now, you baboon!” A voice yells back instantly from across the room. Sheryll is too busy playing cards with some of the other scientists. And she’s winning.

“She’s all set.” Ryan says. He stares back at the T.V. with a blank, focused expression.

“I’ll go ask her myself.”

Jessica walks in-between a collection of poorly constructed wooden chairs, tables, and other antique furniture that nobody has bothered to replace in years. As she reaches Sheryll, who pays no attention to her approach, more people

pile into the café from the front door, letting in the cold. Snow litters their heads and shoulders. They brush themselves off with their gloves. Collectively, they all sigh and take deep breaths, inhaling the crowd’s sweaty warmth.

“Hey, Sheryll?” Jessica taps her shoulder softly. “You want a glass of red?”

“Oh, bless you, Jess. Absolutely.” Sheryll’s voice is rough around the edges and cuts through the air with hard consonance. She croaks when she speaks. “Another glass of Cabernet, please. I’ll owe you one.” Jessica is convinced she used to be a smoker.

“No need. I was just getting up and heading out anyway.”

“Sheryll!” A voice from the table starts. Noah, a young, handsome man (though not handsome enough, according to Jessica), with a rough stubble and a thin nose, points at Sheryll with a fat finger. Skin peels off under his nails. “Let’s finish this game now, yeah?”

“Someone’s eager to get their ass whooped.” Sheryll nudges Jessica’s shoulder and gives her a wink.

The bartender hands her two glasses of Cabernet with a smile while throwing the bottle into a plastic container for recyclables at the end of the bar. A few women hang their coats up next to her, shouting a celebratory congratulations to Noah who brushes off their sincere remarks. The only reason this party is happening is because of Noah’s black hole discovery at Amundsen-Scott, the South Pole station. His group discovered a large mass of neutrino’s somewhere far away in the galaxy, from a supermassive black hole. The neutrino’s, emitted by the black hole, were detected with his group’s vacuum adjacent helium balloon. Funny enough, the project was expected to fail.



As smug as Noah can be, he’s keeping his ego well in check tonight.

He licks his lips and bluffs for his two pair. Never mind, he’s still feeling himself too much.

Jessica walks the glasses over to Ryan and Sheryll, picks up her bag from one of the couches, and heads to her camera trapped in the corner. A hoop of applause and shouts erupts from in front of the TV. The game just ended, and it looks like Ryan won. He shakes the hands of his comrades and hugs the one to his left with a strong, firm shoulder.

Infront of the door to the café, the wind tries to seep in and enter. Jessica rests her hand on the doorhandle before letting everyone know she is leaving. A warm

cry of laughter and good-nights come from the drunken scientists. Sweat clings to their warm sweaters. They stomp their boots hard on the wooden floor for her departure.

She opens the door and leaves. The two am sunlight looms overhead, from the never-ending sun stuck on the empty, cloudless horizon. Jess has only had a few glasses to drink. She isn’t drunk. She can’t say the same for her friends, though, but it’s only one night. They deserve the celebration.

When she arrived at the station the scientists welcomed her with open arms. She interviewed fifteen of them in her first week, taking their names, their histories, their mannerisms, and their individual human warmth. She found friends within two days, during her survival

training for the harsh Antarctic weather. She found her place within the scientific community – a home, temporary as it may be, with coffee and wine and personalities ready for documentation. She found her work right in front of her, practically begging, as if it was all too easy. She didn’t have many expectations for what her experience may be, but it all seemed too easy. It was a feeling of cooperation she had never experienced before.

Antarctica houses the most isolated ‘civilized’ communities on Earth, right at the southernmost tip of the world. The people there procure accents after years of working alone, together, and keep stories of their pasts locked up inside their hearts. Old expeditions from the previous European empires survived, thrived, and perished all the same on the white and black rocks. The world’s history is locked underneath tons of ice, from dinosaurs to single-celled organisms, dark to light, life to death. Hidden oceans. Buried rivers. People above and what lies below, underneath.

The continent breathes, stops, and breathes.

The snow on the ground has solidified to a rough, ragged, and firm dirt. Each step Jessica takes to her dorm, the more her boots slowly deteriorate with ice and mud. The weather is in the low-twenties, Fahrenheit. All the station’s buildings and services are to her left, along with her dorm building, where she should catch some shut eye.

But she doesn’t want to head to her dorm. Not yet. The air is dry and stiling her lungs, causing her to take out her water bottle from her bag and frequently take a sip. But even still, the cool, piercing air is refreshing from the stuffy café.

People are exhausting. And people in places – close quarter spaces – can be exhaustingly dull and gradually overwhelming.

She walks towards Mount Dormi, just for a few minutes outside of the base. The mountain is a few miles away, but the sight is there. I won’t get far, she thinks. But the view, the walk, is worth it.

She walks on volcanic rock and repurposed dirt roads. Buildings are stained white and black behind her, their windows smudged in smooth, washed strokes. People please one another with small talk and waves as she passes by. Scientists focused on their paths to the labs, and contract workers, stuck in their vehicles and tractors, laughing with one another while hiding cigarettes and beers in their cup holders.

Skuas fly a few hundred feet forward, invading one another’s flight patterns. They fly away once they spot Jessica, though they stick around the area for longer than normal. They scavenge and hunt for prey but nothing of the sort is ever left around the base.



Up ahead, a warm yellow light crackles in the old Richmond hut, constructed in 1908. The light flickers shadows, as if from a flame or a warm, stove fire. She sees the old wood furniture reflected black on the walls inside. The light is not electric. It burns brighter and brighter with

every step she takes.

And something sticks upright in the snow. The thing is half buried. A pile of clothes covers most of it with a blanket, too. A VHF radio lays on top of a volcanic piece of rock, right next to the figure. Its



battery is dead, and its screen is dark.

Jessica slowly reaches the figure and stops. She covers her mouth and falls to the ground. Her knees grow cold. She screams, backs up. Fingers shaking in her gloves as they stick to the icy ground. She

stares at the figure. Her eyes bulge. Her breath stops. She is alone, staring at the figure, and she doesn’t know what to do.

She looks back at Locks station, now a mile away, and screams for help. Shouts and shouts and screams her dry, dehydrated lungs out. Her lips crack and bleed and she wipes away the blood on her sleeve. A lone tractor a few hundred feet away, carrying a pile of salt and dirt for the station’s makeshift roads, stops in its tracts. At full speed, the tractor turns around and drives to Jessica, flashing its headlights. Signaling that they’re here. She isn’t alone.

A man, frozen in the snow, sleeps for the last time. His eyes are half open, completely frozen over. His mouth is agape. Ice has engulfed his hair, eyebrows, and nose. All he wears is his long sleeve, snow pants, and boots. His jacket is gone. A blanket haphazardly covers barely any part of him. Nothing else is around but the man, the crashing snowbanks, and the half empty bottle of liquor. Snow swallows him whole. It pours out of his mouth like smoke.

Jessica stops herself from throwing up her dinner as the tractor slows down its crawl. When she picks herself up, she looks back at Richmond’s hut. The windows are black, and the light has been snuffed out. Soot crawls on the window’s surface.

She rushes to the front door and barges in to find nobody home. The old crates of hundred-year-old canned food still sleep along the walls and on the cabin’s broken shelves.

An old wood stove is nailed to the wooden floor in the corner. Not a single ember is lit.

She leaves and waits for the tractor’s approach. Breathing. Heavily. ♦

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