



DIVE

by Daniel Knowlton

THE Oolik Arctic Outpost sits on a great sheet of ice atop a deep expanse of sea, and just outside the outpost, amidst the white, frozen wastes, there stands a single, solitary man. *If I can just stay alive for one more day*, thinks the man, bargaining with his bones. Hunger has wizened his stomach and drawn his skin taut like some desiccated fruit. *If I can just reach the fishing grounds*, he thinks, *if I can just take one more step*. Finally his legs comply, creaking forward like old, rickety machine work. The small hump of the research outpost, a barely discernible gray against the white ice, slowly recedes behind him. He bares not a stitch of skin. Each exhaled breath freezes and dusts white across his black mask. Layers of fur, down, and

nylon encase his body, his enlarged shadow hulking dark and sickly over the ice.

He knows the landscape well, where the ice grows fat and where it fades, where it is smooth with new growth and where rough with age. He and his research team—now since departed—drilled cores into the ice and measured patterns of minerals and gas. They dropped hydrophones into the frigid depths and listened to the sea's creaks and moans like a choir of bent horns. In an iron dive capsule, they each dropped alone through a tunnel in the ice, collecting ocean water peppered with life and measuring stalactites hanging down from the ice shelf, some drawn to a point like teeth, others bent like crooked, grasping fingers. The ice under Oolik is just thick enough to last a season—to the North lies the permafrost and to the South ice floes and the open sea. *If I can just reach the thinner panes of ice,* thinks the man. With hook and saw, he might cut through to the ocean and catch something to eat.

The pale orb of the sun rises just high enough to clear the horizon. It will hover there, rolling along the edge of the world for three hard-fought hours before it will fall and pitch the sky back to black. The wind lifts great white sails of snow and hangs them like opaque sheets out to dry. The man walks until the open sea lies just a mile from the edge of the ice. Here is

close enough. He pulls a pick and saw from his pack and carves into the ice until the sea shines blue beneath him. He unfolds a tripod chair and sinks a hook and line into the blue, holding his arms steady against the shivering wind. His body sags under the weight of the cold.

He waits and listens. Without the shuffling noise of his limbs rubbing nylon against nylon, the wind sounds like a faint remainder of faraway screams. *Perhaps it is the sound of artillery ripping through the air*, thinks the man, *or the metal-on-metal shriek of some new invention of death*. He takes comfort in the belief that he is at a safe distance. He knows of no other settlement reachable by foot and has counted thirty-three days since he last saw another soul.



Thirty-three days ago, Oolik was home to four researchers instead of just one and the sun was not so quick to rise and set. The man sat at his desk and listened to the sounds of the sea through thick, padded headphones. At Oolik, the sea was mostly devoid of man-made noise from fishing trawlers and shipping tankers. From his arctic perch, the sounds were so

clear that he could identify each species of marine life as the animals announced themselves in the blue void below. He sifted through that soup of sound, from the noise a mere six feet below his feet to the echoes that broadcast from hundreds of miles away, searching for a specific, elusive song. In his previous position aboard a traveling research vessel, he had been tracking shifts in blue whale migrations, thrilling in the massive barks that bubbled up to the surface, waiting for the occasional tail flip that would break the endless line of sea and sky. Then one day their songs fell silent. Several species of whales, including the blues, disappeared from his charts and maps, his sonar and speakers. The explanation, he proposed, could be found in man-made noise pollution and ice-cap dissolution. This was the research the man promised to complete at Oollik, drawing from his life's work in marine acoustics and the years spent tracking whales across the oceans, earning him the title of renowned cetologist. His proposal won him a small team and a minor outpost, and they had been one of the last groups to travel into the arctic before the epidemic began. *It was just another swine flu*, they thought, as they packed their gear and said their goodbyes to family and friends. But the man believed that the sea had a kind of natural intelligence, that the whales that had gone missing were somehow aware of whatever sickness was spreading through human communities, and he

hoped to discover what the animals were searching for or from what they were trying to escape.

On that morning, thirty-three days ago, the man heard a sound from somewhere much deeper than his usual depths of study, too rhythmic to come from the random movements of ice against ice. A dark, bottomless bellow bored into his ears, a sound born of the sea, living at the deepest edge of the audible range, too massive to exist in the thin air we breathe. The sound pulsed through his blood. *The whales have returned*, he thought. His instruments indicated the noise as a moving point, and that point was traveling toward Oolik.

The man's three fellow researchers hovered nervously behind his back. Months spent in close quarters together had taught them how to avoid the man's violent mood swings. If they interrupted his listening with new laboratory results, he would likely call for a succession of long, follow-up observations requiring hours in the iron dive capsule amidst the brutal cold and pressure, exiled to the depths until they surfaced with answers. It was better to leave him in peace, better not to interrupt his listening unless it was a matter of absolute emergency, but, on this day, after much silent shuffling and whispered debate, the three decided that they had arrived at just such a moment worthy of an interruption.

They had received a communiqué from the International Arctic Research Center ordering all current field teams to abandon their work and return to their home institutions and their families. In darkly obtuse phrasings, they were informed that conditions back home had grown increasingly worse. They looked about the room, not sure whose home country had been hit hardest. Their collective passion for their work, the importance of their study, their scientific calm and practicalities—all of it shrank to a pitiful speck.

The paleoclimatologist was to return to his house in Quebec City, his wife, and his only son. The biologist was to return to Sapporo, her two-bedroom apartment, and her aging mother. The graduate research assistant was to put the completion of his marine studies degree on hold and join his parents in Boston. The three held a quiet conference between themselves and decided how best to inform the man. They printed the communiqué, and the biologist, who had the quietest step and the smallest and least offensive hands, placed the printed sheet onto the man's desk and gingerly slid it into his field of view.

The man read without shifting his gaze or turning toward the three. He sat for a time, hefting the solemn weight of the news. He thought at first about how easy it would be to leave behind his cramped university

housing in Fairbanks and the infinite and infantile needs of his students at the institute. Then he thought of his ex-wife and their children, now grown. He thought of his hollow promise to meet his new grandchild in person over the holidays, and it only gave him a greater sense of urgency to complete his work. If there were even a chance that he was right, that there was some connection between his work and the calamity back home, it would be criminal to abandon his post now. He slid his headphones off and turned to face the three.

“We all must stay,” he said.

The biologist shifted uncomfortably and looked down at her feet. The graduate student looked to his colleagues pleadingly.

“We must stay because of this,” said the man, and he pulled out his headphone jack and let the sound fill the room, an ancient and foreign music, lost but preserved in the depths, like the secret histories they carved from the ice.

“Is that a whale, sir?” said the cell biologist.

“Yes,” said the man. “This is a *Balaenoptera Musculus*, largest of the *Mysticeti*. And in this season, when it should be heading toward warmer waters, it is swimming instead toward us, toward the ice.”

The man looked over his three silent researchers who were already cocooned in worry, too lost in their own private fears to hear the beast's call erupting through the speakers and wonder about its meaning.

“It cannot be a simple coincidence,” he continued, “this urgent news and this message from the sea.”

The three looked at the man's wild, unwashed hair, the burst capillaries in his eyes, and his dry, cracked lips. They considered the dwindling stores of food and supplies, the half-empty tank of oil, and the fact that their days at Oolik were only growing shorter and colder. They had no reply except their silence.

“I see,” said the man. “Please inform the Center that I will need a resupply as soon as possible.” With that, he turned his back on the three and placed his headphones snugly over each ear.

They packed their few possessions quickly, leaving unanalyzed ice cores and tiny, as yet unnamed beings swimming in samples of arctic sea water under the eyes of their microscopes. They left their work half-completed in some futile hope of convincing the man and themselves of their intentions to return. The biologist shut the heavy insulated door of the Oolik outpost, and the three abandoned the man to the white desert.

They left in a large, heavy-treaded truck, leaving one snowmobile for the man as a final lifeline to the civilized world.

In those first few days alone, every hour on the hour, the man would comb through radio frequencies listening for a word from the Center or some snippet about the developing crisis back home. There were no more news reports. Not a single distress call. Only empty static. Once or twice he tried casting out his own voice: “This is Oolik Outpost... is anyone there?” The static was suffocating, and at each mark of the hour, the man abandoned his radio for the hydrophones, listening again for the whale.

At each sitting, he would move through successive layers of sound as he tuned down towards the low and deep frequencies. The top layer grew thick with the incessant drone of far-off machinery. The remnants of explosions peppered the soundscape. Below that, swarms of shrimp filled his headphones with clicking and buzzing. Still, underneath it all was the whale’s song. In an effort to save his dwindling supply of energy, he left the station’s computers off whenever possible and instead turned to the outpost’s atlas of sea floor maps. He charted the whale’s progress through ocean trenches and around submerged mountains, marking its path in a continuous line of red ink. The great leviathan swam endlessly through the

bottom of the sea, only ceasing his call to surface and take new air into his massive lungs.

Then other whales joined the first, adding percussive barks and cries to that single, recognizable call, as if urging him on toward the ice. Some sang with him for miles at a time as they swam in his wake, building a wild symphony of noise. The closer the whales came, the less the man slept, but the song sustained him through hunger and fatigue. It consumed him utterly, as whale song always had, during all of his long years of study. This song in particular fascinated the man with its unceasing noise and its pull on the other whales, like a beacon with an urgent message and a clear direction. The man felt that this time he was closer than ever before to ascribing specific meaning and purpose to the noise, yet it resisted translation. Listening to the whale song stretched the man's senses, as if granting him fleeting access to the greater spectrum of sound waves beyond normal human hearing. The act of trying to decode the song asked an almost impossible task of the man, that in order to gain a final understanding, he would need to become, somehow, *more*.

He stretched his food rations thin, eating only a bit of canned tuna or a handful of crackers for each meal. He conserved oil by piling on his layers and letting the station's temperature drop to just above freezing, and

he siphoned all the remaining gas from the lone snowmobile to keep the generator powering his hydrophones. The daylight hours dwindled, darkness settled over the ice, and the man lived in a half-conscious stupor, thirsty and hungry, his world turned black except for the blinking patterns of blue and green light across the face of his instruments.

He made several dives to check for any visual clue of the coming whales or any sign of what might be drawing them toward the ice. The outpost's dive capsule, a simple egg-shaped pod of sturdy iron, lay inside the back room of the complex, hung over a hole opened in the ice. The simple vessel acted like an elevator, dropping the man through a tunnel of ice to observe its underside. The pod's lights illuminated the surrounding waters and the ceiling of ice. A steel cable kept him tethered to the surface. The man looked out through the portholes at eye level and the viewing glass at his feet. He stared into the blue darkness, cursing the poor range of his human eyes and ears, wishing he could brush aside the iron shield that separated him from the sea. He saw no sign of the leviathan, no rippling currents in the ocean or sounds of its approach, only clicking shrimp and small specks of iridescent life. There were no great schools of krill and no silent mates for the approaching whale, nothing at all except the dark sea, the ceiling of ice, and the man, floating in the cold, watching, listening.

With each dive, he sent the capsule deeper, pushing farther into the crippling pressure until he finally reached the last length of the steel tether. The iron creaked under the strain of the sea. He folded his legs under him and leaned down as far as his body would allow, putting his face against the bottommost porthole and straining to see what secret might be there in the depths, but there was nothing but darker and darker shades of blue.



It was finally the empty food stores and his growling stomach that forced the man to unlock the station's door and venture out into the cold toward the edge of the ice. As he sits freezing in place to his chair and the snow, the sun completes its brief, three-hour day and slips toward the horizon, purpling the sky. The temperature will only drop further and the man decides to leave by the end of sunset. He watches the sky gathering blackness and waits.

Through his thick, insulated gloves, the man feels a frantic tug on his line. He pulls and reels up through the water and ice, taking in breath as he takes in line. The water quivers. A fish pierces the flat, blue plane of the

sea, silver and striped red under its gasping mouth. The man holds the shivering fish against the ground, and, grabbing a crude rock of ice cut from his fishing hole, he cracks its head. *This, he thinks, is the quickest and most humane death,* but underneath his reasoning, he enjoys a deep and primal satisfaction in the wet smack of the fish—once living—against the hard ice—now dead, and it nourishes him even more than the meat will nourish his body, this sudden rush of the will to survive, bubbling up from a hidden spring.

He exhales. His body warms slightly at the thought of real food. The wet sheen on the fish's skin is already freezing in the cold air and sticking to his gloves. He packs his gear and his catch and turns back toward Oolik. There will soon be no light left if the gray sky hides the stars, so he rights himself in the direction of the station and begins the long walk home.

If it weren't for the heavy noise of his breathing and the insulated fur covering his ears, the man might have heard the great leviathan breaking through the ocean's surface off the coast of ice and exhaling a double tower of warm air and sea spray. The whale landscapes the sparse horizon with his mountainous back, rising like a chain of barnacled cliffs, then sinks back under the surface. Again and again he rises until he empties himself completely of spent breath and draws new life into his cavernous

body, warming the freezing air in his blood, then diving back down into the cold, thick depths.



The starved man sits at his laboratory table. Two emergency candles shine a pale light over his hands as he slips a knife along the underbelly of the fish, shaking with hunger, snagging here and there on its scales. He scoops its innards into an empty metal food tin and finds small pearls of roe on his fingers, gleaming wet and golden in the flame light. He licks each finger methodically, and the fish eggs pop in his mouth with bursts of saltwater. He loops a bent coat hanger under the fish, turns on a laboratory gas burner, and holds his meal over the flame. With his free hand, he catches stinging hot drips of oil that fall from the fish, burning like melted wax on his fingers, and licks them clean. He douses the flame just as the skin begins to blacken and pull away from the white meat. Unable to wait for his food to cool, the man pulls bits of flesh from the bones, chews, and swallows, burning his fingers and tongue. He sucks the bones clean. Exhausted from the walk and the cold, the man collapses in the bed-

bunked sleeping quarters and covers himself in blankets snatched from the three other mattresses, now white and bare. He rests with the warmth of food sinking into his bones.

The man wonders about his ex-wife and his children—are they home and are they safe? Perhaps that message from the Center was just a false alarm, and if he were to return, he would find houses full of warmth and human voices. Yet he can't shake the fears that course through his mind, that he would find house after house empty and barred shut, that everyone he knows is struggling to survive just like him, eating food cooked on bent wires over open fires and going days with nothing to silence the groans of their stomachs. He imagines the collapse of entire cities, pavement overtaken by grass and buildings sunk into the earth. There he would find an endless field of open graves, bodies sprinkled with white embalming salts and covered in thin plastic. He imagines lifting up the veils, one by one, walking between bodies until he finds his family, resting in a neat line, skin pale and eyes closed. The man drifts off to sleep and succumbs to his dark dreams.



Hours later, he hears a loud, clanging noise coming from the door of the station, and he wakes with a start, his catastrophic imaginings slipping from his mind. He checks his watch. He has slept a full twenty-four hours. The man tosses off his covers and walks toward the sound, cringing with each sharp ring of the metal.

“Hello?” calls a muffled voice from the outside.

“Hello?” tries the man, but his voice, unused for thirty-three days, falls from his throat in a low, unintelligible moan.

“Dr. Stevens?” comes the voice.

The man shudders at the now foreign sound of his name.

“I’m here from the Center.”

That voice, thinks the man, muffled by the thick, iron door and shredded by the cutting winds carries a shade of dread, not unlike the hollow, taunting static of that suspicious radio. He could be masked death itself, thinks the man, a carrier or messenger of some far off doom in the form of a weapon hidden underneath his coats or a plague worming through his veins. This rescuer in disguise could be here to infect Oolik and intercept the coming message from the deep. The man reaches the

door and leans down heavily on its lock, exiling the voice to the frigid cold. He retreats slowly into the back room of the outpost until the voice fades to vague mumblings.

Another sound, familiar to the man, wells up through the floor and reverberates through the walls. He looks again at his watch, remembering the day spent asleep, remembering the path he charted on his map and the brief remaining distance to the ice. *They are here*, thinks the man, *they have come*.

He closes himself inside the dive capsule and pulls the release lever, dropping himself into the water, sinking down through the tunnel of ice. The banging at the door fades and the song of the whales engulfs the man. It sounds clearer now, rumbling through the air and directly into his ears instead of traveling through miles of ocean, conducted up through metal wires, and amplified out through speakers. Here the sound travels through its natural element and rings the iron dive capsule like a bell. Through the small porthole, he begins to see dark shadows approaching.

The sound grows to a deafening pitch and the ocean quivers. He can see their outlines, a whole pod of them now, adding to the steady moan of the great leviathan and releasing their excited barks like cannons into the sea. One whale comes close to the man, brushes a flipper over the dive

capsule, straining the heavy, braided tether of steel until it snaps like cheap thread, sending the capsule spinning. The man thrills in the sudden freedom, the cutting of his leash to the surface world. The circle of light cut into the ice under Oolik hangs distant above him like a full moon, then slips under his feet as the dive capsule turns. It slowly settles and halts its spin as another whale swims next to the porthole, searching with its milky gray eye under a ridge of blubber, huge as a mountain cliff perched on its brow.

The other whales fall silent, and the great leviathan takes up his familiar call, plunging further into the depths. *They want me to follow*, thinks the man. He pushes down the dive lever, and the capsule's small turbines sink the man down faster toward the whales. The pressure wraps around the capsule and the iron buckles. The moon of dim light above shrinks to a distant star. The man cranks the dive lever further. The porthole glass hisses and cracks. The whales point their long bodies downward, diving now with increasing speed. The man matches their descent and drifts next to the singing whale, feeling its call resonate through his ribs and beat against his heart. The sea wraps around him in a crushing liquid fist, and the man places his hands to the portholes at his sides and his face to the

glass at eye level, tasting the icy salt of the sea leaking into the capsule, urging the iron barrier to fall.

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