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FicSci

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Outside the glass box of the seminar room the weather turns. The Brilliant Scientist smiles.

"This is my kind of weather. I love the cold."

The day before the forecast had warned of coming storms and as I left the house my husband pretended to be jealous at the thought of me, high and dry in a mountain hotel for the next three days. Hanging out in front of log fires with fellow fiction writers. Having "encounters" with a Brilliant Scientist, learning about science-y things.

"Spare a thought for me and the dog." He kissed me goodbye. "Bored and lonely at home. Missing daddy."

It seemed like a luxurious diversion when I was applying, but as the day drew closer I dreaded the notion of an experimental workshop. What really was the point of a bunch of creative writers learning about sea ice for three days? As always the pressure of work was overwhelming and as usual I was late with almost everything.

In the seminar room, my phone buzzes from a spate of unread emails. Ugh. I switch on Airplane Mode and tune back into the presentation. I'm in this now. Best to keep an open mind. Outside, the wind picks up and the first drops of rain pelt against the insulated windows. My eyes strain in the fluorescent light and I reach for the blanket I'd been handed by the friendly hotel staff. Cosy.

The Black Box. The Brilliant Scientist explains how the atmosphere and the ocean have long been understood and studied as distinct entities. But between ocean and atmosphere there is something much more mysterious known as The Black Box which is, as far as I can tell, the interaction between ocean and atmosphere, in the form of oceanic ice. It has something to do with nucleation vs crystal growth. Shit. The conference organiser, studiously hammering away at her laptop next to me, asks for clarification about nucleation. Relief. Yes, concentrate. You have a moment to catch up here. But the clarification comes and again I miss it. Fuck! What is nucleation? I'm too distracted by the writer sitting next to me. She has some kind of fancy pen, and her handwriting is exquisite. Her notes spread across the page in both vertical and horizontal formations which means she must be extra smart and creative. OK. Focus. The Brilliant Scientist now explains The Moving Boundary Problem. I write down 'Moving Boundary Problem'. This sounds good. Like sea ice, I, too, have moving boundary problems. I can relate. Virality Drainage. Brine pathways through the ice. That's pretty cool. Being the warmer substance, brine melts pathways through the ice and seeps into the ocean. What is brine exactly? Is it salt? Pretty sure I brined a chicken once and it came out delicious.

The Brilliant Scientist flinches. She loses her focus. Did I hear someone say she had a migraine earlier? There's a quiver in her hand as she pauses for a sip of water. What must she be thinking? Explaining her work to a group of writers staring gormlessly back at her. What an odd situation. What are we all doing here? It's a novel concept bringing artists face to face with science to see what happens. Invariably something happens. A reaction. We artists are conditioned to respond creatively to things. We love a disruption. A little multidisciplinary what-what. Even if the outcome is deeply pretentious, we soldier on with our work, forever hopeful that what we do will mean something to someone somewhere. I glance around and see the same existential consternation etched onto the faces of my peers. Well, most of them.

The writer with the fancy pen seems confident, her notes flowing from pen to page in neat, interconnected bubbles. One glance at

my own left-handed scrawl confirms that I'm never going to look at these notes again. They are performative. Performing for who though? The Brilliant Scientist no doubt. I'd hate for her to think that I'm not passionate about learning about sea ice. I imagine her and her intrepid huddle of students braving the frozen ravages of the Antarctic, taking and analysing ice samples. She casually mentions discovering a new way of cutting ice while making toast in her kitchen one morning. The filaments inside a toaster heat up to 1000 degrees Celsius and can be used to slice ice one millimetre thick without changing its composition. That's impressive. I write down "toaster".

During dinner the rain pelts down so loud on the roof of the hotel that I can barely hear the polite conversation at my table. I think of my husband and my dog at home, snoring in front of the television —God I wish I was there now. I grab a Merlot from the honesty bar and scribble my name in the book. I consider pausing to make small talk with the novelist and the genre writer around the communal fire but I'm feeling cranky, so I head back to my little room. I turn on the electric blanket. Sleep comes instantly.

A white landscape. An icy sea. I'm on a research ship with the Brilliant Scientist and her intrepid crew. Slabs of ice are hauled into pristine naval labs and cut into millimetre thick slices, projecting and refracting light beams through their delicate crystal formations. The colours are dazzling.

"Daddy."

My dog is at my feet, teetering on the rubber floor, struggling to maintain balance on the undulating ship. Distressed and shivering from the sub-zero temperatures. I can tell from the anguished look on his face that he needs to be taken outside for a poo but we're thousands of kilometres from the nearest patch of grass. Why on earth did I bring him to the Antarctic?

"Daddy. Help. Haruf."

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Day two of the workshop and the Brilliant Scientist now describes the difficulty of replicating oceanic conditions in a laboratory. Each variable, be it atmospheric, temperature fluxes, water movement, needs to be individually layered into the mathematical model to study the behaviour of sea ice. I take stock of the room. The songwriter and oral poet are both keenly nodding, basking in the thrill of learning new things. Beside me the short story writer's pen has a life of its own, notes flowing deep into the margins of the page. But others have lost some of yesterday's lustre. The playwright stares grimly at his computer screen and next to him the copywriter has nodded off, his head teetering like a bladder on a stick. The Brilliant Scientist notices. She soldiers on with the presentation, but the copywriter's head topples forward and snaps back up with a look of surprise. The Brilliant Scientist takes a sip of water.

"Ice that forms at lower temperatures freezes faster and traps more impurities. Ice that forms at higher temperatures forms slower and has more time to wean out brine and impurities from its structure. This makes higher temperature ice both weaker, and with a higher porosity."

Porosity? What on earth is porosity? I flip back through my notes to see if I missed something. I have a thought to google porosity when I get back to my room, but it's followed by a second thought that I won't. The Brilliant Scientist looks at me and I know she knows this too. We're on opposite sides of an unbreachable divide, she and I. She's in a world of matter and molecules. Wrestling with equations that matter. Matter that matters. She's grappling with the tools of her discipline to discover fragments of truth that point to the construction of an infinite universe and our minuscule place in it. She knows her work is meaningful. The outcome of her research helps determine how weather patterns are predicted which helps farmers which helps all of us. On top of that she's redressing the schism between north and south. The great knowledge gap, entrenched by colonialism, perpetuated by capitalism. It's all so fucking noble. Me, I'm in the world of fiction, hemmed in by the distinct limitations of my own imagination. A decidedly fuzzier

universe riddled with anxiety and self-doubt, brought about by the nagging fear that nothing I do really matters. Not really.

The Brilliant Scientist joins our table at dinner that night. She's exhausted from two days of talking but makes a valiant effort to discover more about us. We take turns describing our precarious careers. The Brilliant Scientist smiles and nods. The conversation turns to books we've read and films we've seen. What kind of fiction is she into? She glazes over for a moment and tells us that she hasn't read a novel or watched a film in over three years. Why? Just too busy. Not even television? Not even television, she sighs.

The short story writer checks an alert on her phone. Oh wow. A storm warning. The Stellenbosch valley is flooded, and more than 150 houses are being evacuated. Huh.

I wake up to a deafening drone. The sound is so immersive and shapeless that for a moment I wonder if it is sound at all. Then it registers. It's rain. Gallons of water falling from the sky onto the tin roof of my little room. What the fuck? Outside these four walls is unfathomable chaos. A nightmare of wind and wet and darkness. In here, safety. A small protective box perched on a mountain slope, keeping the horror at bay. The thought is thrilling. Almost arousing. I crank up the electric blanket and drift back under.

"Haruf."

I'm back on the icebreaker, in a small cabin in the bowels of the ship. My dog stares at me from a bunk bed with a fish in his mouth. He spits it out. Chunks of ice fall from the wall. I pick up a piece, but it disintegrates in my hand. Porosity, I think. Huh.

"Time to go home. Haruf."

One look at the dog and a pang of guilt shoots up inside me. I dry my hands on the blanket and give him a scratch behind the ears. His eyes roll back, and he licks the briny crook of my arm.

"Yes. Time to go home," I say. "I'm sorry. I didn't know it would be this cold."

"It's the Antarctic."

"You're right. Guess I should have known."

I draw his little body against mine to keep him warm. A violent thud as the icebreaker collides with something vast and immovable.

The ship's power cuts out and the room capsizes. We tumble into darkness.

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I'm ice cold. But also, inexplicably, boiling hot. What's going on? I squint through the blackness. The loud droning sound tells me I'm probably back in my room. Yes. It's the rain. Under the covers my flesh is roasted by the electric blanket. Above the covers my arms and face are cold. And wet. I realise that the door to my room has blown open and rain is pouring into the room. Half asleep I stumble from the bed and grab a jersey. I try to close the door, but something draws me outside.

The trees surrounding the hotel flail about in the savage wind. Just ahead, a figure in an anorak and snow boots stands in a clearing among the trees, arms outstretched. How can a person even stand upright under these conditions? I stumble into the rain and before I can focus my eyes, I already know who it is. The Brilliant Scientist is radiant despite the rain pelting her face. Her feet are rooted to the earth and her body shakes, conducting an electric current so powerful that the very trees around her bend from its force.

"Dr Rampai, are you OK?"

The Brilliant Scientist smiles. She seems more than OK. Shivering, squinting through the wetness, I already know the answer to my next question.

"Are you … communing with the storm?"

"It certainly seems like it, sweetheart! Granted, it's all a little silly but you're the one in charge, not me."

"Ugh. I know. I'm sorry. I've always had a problem with endings. Tying things up. Like all that stuff about the dog. Not sure where I was going with that. Not my strong point."

"That's OK. I love the cold."

"Oh right. I remember you said that."

"And also, not everything needs to make sense. We are relentless in our search for unity but sometimes all life is, is fragments. That's something we need to accept about it. And our work."

“That’s pretty good! Did you come up with that or did I?”

The Brilliant Scientist winks at me.

“Go back inside, sweetheart. You’ve done what you can.”

Relieved, I turn back to my little bed in my little room. I crank up the electric blanket. Sleep comes quickly.