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DISAPPEARING ISLAND

Among my Arctic relics there is a piece of coal — of the kind flyer Baranov once told me about. I dug it out of a black seam laid bare by a landslide. Polarniks call it coal, but it is very light. On its black surface you can distinguish the structure of timber. It is coal without any doubt, but its origin is wrapped in mystery. The island on which it was discovered is one of sand deposited by the sea and it emerged not so long ago, comparatively speaking. Nothing has, or ever could have, grown on it. And yet there is that strange coal.

I first heard about it aboard the Belomorkanal. Netayev and I had boarded her when she was sailing to and fro in Bleak Island Bay. It seemed as though the captain could not make up his mind to put to sea.

Netayev told me they were checking the ship's magnetic instruments.

"It may take them long, I'm afraid," he said with a sigh. "I wonder if we'll catch up with the Sedov."

But the Belomorkanal sailed without delay on Monday, August 26.

At lunch we met the captain. Clean-shaven, with fine features and firm lines at the mouth, he was dressed with seaman-like smartness, and his manner was polite and obliging.

"I think the Sedov will still be landing cargo at Disappearing Island when we come alongside," he said. "You can board her right there. The sea isn't very rough."

"She's an interesting ship, is the Sedov," put in the first mate. He was a shortish, untalkative man with a weather-beaten face and attentive eyes.

"Isn't she?" said I. "A ship of legendary renown! She drifted her way along the whole polar basin, north of the route followed by the famed Nansen's ship, the Fram."

The first mate smiled.

"That was a noteworthy, an outstanding occurrence, to be sure. But the Sedov performs quite a few feats that go unnoticed. You'll see that when you've sailed awhile on board her. She does for the Arctic the duty of internal transport. She's always plying from island to island. Nobody seems to take notice of her, but she's quietly scored more than one record."

"Did you ever sail on her?"

"Yes. I did my navigation training aboard her. Many discoveries have been made by those who sailed on her. 'But she looks so plain. You'll see that for yourself, though, when we come up to Disappearing Island."

"Why do you call it 'Disappearing'? That isn't its real name, is it?"

"We gave it that name after a certain trip. I was sailing on the Sedov at that time. I can tell you about the island. And about the coal that was found on it."

The first mate told us about the Sedov's crew, about the professor who took an interest in the unusual coal, and about romantic Sannikov Land.

At the time there were aboard the Sedov passengers bound for various polar stations, and a Moscow professor. He was a lively, active old man who made everybody's acquaintance, asked questions, argued with people, and was eager to know everything. He won general affection. Everyone knew he was on his way to an island which he wanted to explore.

Wearing a costume quite unsuited for the North, he would walk about on deck and speak now to one, now to another of the Komsomol members, who were going to some island or other.

"Tell me, young man, are you glad to be in the Arctic?" he questioned a freckled lad who was gazing avidly at the sea.

"I don't mind. I like it," answered the lad reluctantly.

"And may I ask in what capacity you're going to Work hereabouts?"

"I'm a meteorologist. Did a training course."

"The meteorologist's work is that of a scientist!" declared the professor.

The lad looked up in surprise and flushed.

"And what about the seascape? How do you like it?" the old man went on to ask.

"Seascape's all right. There isn't much ice, though, and you don't see any bears, either," replied the lad gravely as he looked at the few ice-floes lit by the sun and shaped grotesquely by the water.

"Not much ice? But these are the first floes you're seeing. They must thrill you! I can see from your face I'm right. And soon we'll arrive at the island you're bound for. I wonder what it's like."

"Oh, nothing special about it. I'd much rather have gone to some other one."

"How can you say that? Your island comes first in our list. We must help the polarniks there."

"I know. Only I wanted to go to the New Siberian Islands."

"Why?"

The lad — his name was Grisha — roused up.

"Have you ever heard about Sannikov Land?" he asked.

"You mean those distant mountains north of the New Siberian Islands? The ones industrialist Sannikov sighted from Cauldron Island in 1810? That's pure imagination. There is no such land. Soviet flyers and seamen have proved that more than once."

Grisha was transformed. A restless glint came into his eyes, and his freckles instantly disappeared in a deep flush.

"No, they haven't! After Sannikov, people saw birds fly north from the New Siberian Islands. Why should birds fly out into the open sea? And besides, the Onkiloks — that's a tribe — went off somewhere to the last man. Towards Sannikov Land, they say. I'm quite sure there is a land there."

The professor smiled.

"But science needs something more than conviction."

Grisha would not surrender.

"Now take Obruchev. He's an academician and he wrote a whole book about Sannikov Land! It says in his book that Sannikov Land has a peculiar climate on account of volcanoes, it's warm there — "

"Warm?" echoed the professor.

" — and you may come across all kinds of prehistoric animals," Grisha went on with rapture. "Perhaps even pithecanthropi."

"But, my friend, it was science fiction Vladimir Afana-syevich wrote, pure and simple."

"Next winter I'll ask to be transferred to the New Siberian Islands."

"Want to discover Sannikov Land?"

"Yes, and I will! I'm going to unravel its mystery, if I can do no more."

"I like daring. And I envy you — sincerely. I wouldn't take the chance."

"But you came here, and by air, too."

"I'm a geologist, my friend, don't you see? Each day of my life I've walked an average of five thousand paces with these rheumatic feet of mine." The professor hid a smile in his moustache.

"Is it true you've discovered coal on the island, Sergei Nikanorovich?" asked Grisha.

"Come, now, my dear boy, that's idle talk. It was polar-niks who did it. I, on the contrary, argued that that was impossible. Why, it's an island of sand, sea-made. Nothing ever grew on it. How could there be any mineral coal there? But it seems that there is some coal there, or rather, traces of it. I've come here for the express purpose of finding out my error."

"You'll know soon."

"Yes," the old man agreed.

The island came into view next morning. A huge grey pillar was advancing from it towards the ship. People in the Arctic call the phenomenon a snow "charge" — a snow-storm moving at lightning speed.

The "charge" swept aboard the Sedov and shut out the island. It grew dim all around, as if the ship had been put in a giant bag. But the snow-storm raced on. The captain came out on deck and showed the professor a distress radiogram he had just received from ashore:

"Heavy breakers. Landing impossible. Shore crumbling. House threatened with collapse. Doing what we can."

"Breakers?" asked the astonished professor. "And that could stop us?"

"It isn't much of a problem for seamen to make some far-away island. But landing —"

The Party organizer invited all those on board to the saloon. Some of them had singlets or quilted jackets on, others were in full dress. There was not room enough. Those who came late had to hug the walls, or sit on the floor. The gathering comprised both crew members and passengers — people bound for polar stations. The professor sat on a bench near the wall, scanning the faces with his bright, impatient eyes.

After the meeting he said, rubbing his hands, "I like debate that is brief: 'Breakers? Can't land? Good. We will land.' "

Men pulled on oilskin overalls. The launch *Petushok* was being lowered. It hung in mid air, held by ropes slung under its bottom, and a minute later was dancing on the waves. It was followed by a flat-bottomed *kungas*, capacious but heavy and unwieldy.

Men started down ia rope ladder. It was difficult, with the waves tossing the *kungas* up and down. An attempt was made to bar the professor from the Ladder.

"I can't stay!" he protested hotly. "It is my aim to visit the island. You may lower me with ropes, after all!"

It was done with the help of a jib.

The *Petushok* made for the island, towing the *kungas*. The high, bluff shore was drawing near. The polar-station house rose on it like a besieged medieval fortress. Clouds of foam seethed below.

The launch raced on, lashed by the waves. The second mate, who was steering, knew that it would be child's play for the sea to smash the flimsy craft to chips against the shore.

He was manoeuvring with the waves. At first he played the simpleton and let the waves toy with him, but just before reaching the shore he put the *Petushok* about. The launch suddenly turned to the waves its bow instead of its stern, and charged them with boyish daring.

While the heavy kungas was putting about after the launch, the waves struck at it ceaselessly with their shaggy paws. The briny billows burst into clouds of spray, blinding the men and knocking them down.

The Launch drew the tow-line taut; now the kungas was between the Launch and the shore, with its stern turned shorewards. The second mate was retreating step by step and the kungas was imperceptibly approaching the shore. At a suitable moment a sailor cast a line ashore from the kungas. Polarniks caught it up and tugged at it to keep the craft from turning its side to the breakers. But the breakers tossed up the kungas and dashed it down on the rocks.

It was all the professor and Grisha could do to keep aboard the kungas by clinging to a bollard on the bow. Both looked bewildered. The men on the shore and the Launch's crew were pulling at the line in a vain effort to hold the kungas. It turned its side to the breakers just the same and heeled. The water surged aboard.

The passengers jumped overboard and waded to the shore. The breakers overtook them and pounded at their backs.

Grisha stood in the water, tugging at the professor's sleeve. At last the professor jumped, too. His breath was taken away. The sea was colder than ice. Dazed and breathless, he staggered to the crunching shingle.

The breakers pitched the kungas after him and overturned it.

The half-choked professor spat out in disgust. Huge shaggy dogs hopped about him, trying to lick his face. The polarniks joyfully welcomed the arrivals. They stood on a narrow strip of land at the base of the bluff.

From there the sea could be seen setting upon the island. It sapped the shore — frozen sand now thawing up — gnawed at it and melted it like sugar. And the shore overhung the sea in a heavy mass that might topple down any moment.

Walking up and down the shingle, washed clean by the surf, the professor examined the lumps of sand broken off, and rubbed his hands. Then he threw back his head and looked up. He saw the house on the bluff.

"The shore crumbled here yesterday," said a bearded polarnik in a thin, youthful tenor. "Now the bluff starts right at the steps of our house. But you must all dry your clothes."

"Dry our clothes? What about the house?" asked Grisha.

"Do you hear the roar? The shore crumbles here every moment."

"Then we must save the house!" said Grisha excitedly. "Our clothes'll dry as we do it."

The new-comers began to climb up in a hurry, as if summoned by an alarm-bell.

Up there they saw a fine house, built some ten years earlier. In it each polarnik had a private room. And now it was poised above the sea, threatening to hurtle down.

Once it had stood more than a hundred yards from the shore. Now the shore was hard by it. This had been discovered by the polarniks, who had returned to the island the year before. They had lived undisturbed throughout the winter, but as soon as the thaw had set in the sea had started the assault afresh. They had had to abandon the house after taking out of it all they could.

A deep winding cleft stretched over the ground. It crept under the house and came out on the other side.

"Stop! Stop!" shouted the professor, his hand pressed to his heart. "What are you up to, you crazy fellows? Don't you dare to cross that cleft!"

The men halted for a moment.

"The whole island consists of sand held fast by ice!" cried the professor. "It was piled up by the sea and held together by the cold. The frozen layer is now thawing, the sea is washing away the island, the shore is crumbling. Don't dare to step across the cleft!"

"But the house'll be lost if we don't!" said Grisha.

"We must save it. Get a tractor. We're going to tie a rope to the house!"

Grisha glanced at the professor.

"Please, Sergei Nikanorovich, see that it doesn't hit you. There's no tractor here."

A beam fell from above. It raised a pillar of dust. The professor stared in perplexity now at the house, now at the beam.

Grisha was already on the roof, ripping off boards. The polarniks had marked every board and every beam beforehand, so that they could easily reassemble the house elsewhere.

Work was in full swing.

Boards crashed down one after another. Rafters creaked. Axes gleamed. Heavy crow-bars were put to use.

"Step lively, boys! Come on! Come on!"

It was as fast a job as could be. The kind done during a fire.

The men shifted huge beams and threw them down. The dust settled on their moist faces.

"Heave ho! Heave ho! Lively, now!"

A screaming, furious wind lashed at their faces and strained to tear the men down from the log frame. The sea roared below, but no one heeded it. The men tore up the logs one by one and threw them away from the shore.

"Look out!"

The professor helped the men to drag the logs across the cleft.

Soon the ceiling was taken apart. The house, laid open, showed its rooms which had been so cosy but a short while before.

At last the job was finished. The polarniks took their visitors, who were exhausted and soiled beyond measure, to the poultry-house converted into a dwelling.

The professor had put on someone's jacket. Gay and talkative, he sat at the table bantering Grisha, whom he assured that his face was tattooed like an Onkilok warrior's. The wife of the chief of the polar station, a quiet but active young woman who was also the local cook, led Grisha to the mirror, then silently handed him a pailful of hot water and sent him to the bath cabin. True, the others also needed a bath, but Grisha was staying on the island and so she had to take care of him.

It could not be helped. Grisha had to comply.

The hostess ladled more of the steaming borshch into the plates, saying again and again, "Please have some more. I hope you like it."

"I'll say they know how to make borshch on this island!"

After dinner the professor sat down near the poultry-house in a short sheepskin coat and felt boots. Two huge huskies — Lokhtak, the team-leader, and Belukha, the undisputed head of the dog pack — fawned upon him.

"Lokhtak is a bear-baiter," said the bearded polarnik. "He takes on a bear all alone or together with Belukha. They attack the beast from two sides and take turns to divert its attention till you come along with a rifle. Once Lokhtak had a close shave. The bullet went right through the bear and hit the dog's shoulder-blade. Lokhtak was a long time getting over it. But he's as keen on bear-baiting as ever."

The professor was surprised at the friendliness which the two terrible dogs showed towards strangers. The polarnik said that in the North dogs look on all men as friends. It is the beasts, such as the bear or the seal, that are their enemies.

Lokhtak ran off and lay down near the bluff, not far from the hatch cabin.

"He's watching for seal. When a seal sticks out its head he'll start barking to bring on a hunter."

"That reminds me of another kind of hunt — for coal. Show me the way to your deposits, will you? Those logs made me forget why I'd covered several thousand miles to get here."

"Let's go down, Sergei Nikanorovich, and look at the fresh bluff. Most likely we'll find something new there."

"Good. I'd like to see remnants of vegetation that has never existed here."

"We've been using coal all winter," said the polarnik modestly.

Suddenly Lokhtak barked.

"What's that? A seal?" asked the startled professor.

Barking in alarm, Lokhtak darted about the bath cabin which stood not far from the demolished dwelling. Suddenly he dashed away. There was a subdued rumble.

"A landslide!" cried the bearded polarnik in a shrill voice.

That part of the shore where the house had stood awhile before was gone — it had probably slumped down just at the cleft.

The little bath cabin rocked. The shock sent the professor staggering - against the wall.

There came a rolling crash, like an artillery salvo.

The door swung open. Out ran Grisha, naked and lathered. He was steaming. His bare feet left marks on the snow. In the twinkling of an eye, he covered the distance between the bath cabin and the poultry-house and disappeared in it. Lokhtak chased him, barking in surprise. He had never seen naked people.

The professor burst into boisterous laughter, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

"He's sure to discover a new land! Take my word for it," he said, choking with mirth.

A few minutes later he went down with the bearded polarnik. Where the shore had overhung the sea a huge pile of frozen sand rose now. The sea was washing away the sand. In a few hours it would begin to sap the shore again. So far the waves could not reach the fresh bluff.

The polarnik pointed to some black veins in the sheer wall.

"Coal?" muttered the professor incredulously. "Impossible! I don't believe it."

He walked up to the wall and began to break off black pieces. The veins, sandwiched between layers of sand, ran parallel to each other.

The professor weighed one of the pieces in his hand and tossed it up several times. It felt lighter than a piece of dry wood. The professor beamed.

"It's samovars, my dear, that this sort of coal would be good for."

The polarnik looked at the professor, puzzled.

"Over in Siberia where I was born, samovars are fed with charcoal," he said.

"Precisely," the professor agreed, in a tone full of meaning. "Come on, let's take a stroll along the shore."

They walked on silently for a while.

"Ha!" cried the professor. "Here's the answer to the mystery of your coal!" He poked with his foot a log polished smooth by the sea, with rounded ends. It lay close to the edge of the water.

"Flotsam?" asked the astonished polarnik.

"Of course!" The professor smiled. "What's accumulated on this island here is remnants of vegetation that never grew on it. I'd been cudgelling my brains to guess where coal had come from to this alluvial island. Now I know. It has floated over!"

"What do you mean?"

"For centuries the great Siberian rivers brought to the sea the trunks of trees that had fallen into the water. The trunks were carried to these latitudes. The waves washed them ashore and the sand covered them up. The timber covered with sand became carbonized. True, carbonization didn't proceed in the same conditions as on the mainland. That's why the coal here looks rather like charcoal. Centuries passed. Under the pressure of the waves the island rose higher and higher, raising the seams of coal with it."

"We must shovel up the coal, or else the sea will carry it away."

"Right you are! Don't let it wash away what it once brought here. It's excellent fuel. There's only very little of it here, and there couldn't be more, because the island's so tiny. But you'll have enough to see you through the winter."

The professor squatted down and began to prod the bared seam, humming a tune in his greying moustache. He was in high spirits.

"Sergei Nikanorovich!" Wearing a fur coat that was too big for him, Grishia squatted beside the professor and added in an excited whisper, "A discovery!"

"Yes, you may call it that. 'Flotsam' coal has never been described yet. It's been discovered on this shore here."

"And I made it in the bath cabin — "

The professor turned to him in surprise. "In the bath cabin? A discovery?"

"I may be wrong, Sergei Nikanorovich, but I don't think I am. When the cabin shook, I at once imagined the shore being slashed off as with a knife. This island shrinks twenty to thirty yards a year, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then what's going to happen in a few score years? This island will disappear?"

"It will. But don't be upset. The sea will wash up a new one elsewhere. An island like this rose in the Laptev Sea recently."

"But then, since islands can disappear, there might've been a Sannikov Land, too. In that case Sannikov did see it, and geese did fly to it, and the Onkiloks migrated to it. It did exist, then it was no more. It was a disappearing island like this one!"

The youth was gazing at the professor with shining eyes.

"That's interesting — 'flotsam' coal on a disappearing island," said the professor after a long pause. "I admire you, Grisha!"

Soon the professor left for Moscow, having promised to mention in his new book Grisha's hypothesis about Sannikov Land.

The first mate, who had told us this story, was standing on the captain's bridge.

"There it is, Disappearing Island," he said, handing me his binoculars. "You can make out the Sedov against the shore."

I gazed at the mysterious land which had once risen above the sea and was now dissolving in it.

It was an oblong island several miles in length and some three miles in width. I visited it. Scanty grass grows on it in patches. The sandy ground gives way under your feet.

I saw the shore tumble into the sea. The cut showed black veins of "flotsam" coal. I managed to bring a piece of it to Moscow.

As I strolled about the shore I thought of Sannikov Land and tried to guess how many decades more the island would be there.

"You can fortify the shore and prevent it from thawing up," Grisha, now meteorologist at the polar station, said to me, glowing with enthusiasm. "Sannikov Land may have disappeared, but now not a single foot of Soviet soil will disappear if we don't want it to. You see, the coal here is interesting stuff for the scientists," he added.

Grisha saw me to the shore where the Petushok was waiting for us.