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AGAINST THE WIND

The island was exposed to the four winds. Rising slightly above the ice-fields, it was lost in the sea, a flat, bare island swept clean by storms.

The sun would drop beyond the horizon for many months. In the rare cloudless days the stars glittered above the island land a tremulous radiance blazed in the sky. Then the sun would return. It climbed higher and higher as the days went by, lighting up the basalt rocks and the snowy furrows on the shore. The sea would awake and send the ice-floes drifting against each other.

But the wind never stopped blowing All it did was to change direction and move away somewhere, only to come back and sweep again across the island, howling among the rocks like a wolf, speeding over the smooth glacier on the shore and whirling round its top, a wind laden with polar cold.

On a frosty, starlit night a man was making his way against the wind.

The wind tugged at the skirts of his short fur coat, hurled snow in his face, and tried to blow out his torch. It had piled up snow all along his way.

The man stopped.

He peered into a small booth. Inside it a meteorological instrument showed in the beam of his torch. With numb fingers he jotted down the readings. He did not pay the slightest attention to the wind. To him it was ordinary weather, the kind he had become accustomed to during his fifteen years in the Arctic.

The wind had beaten his face dry; in fact, it had dried his entire figure, wiry and lithe, the figure of one used to life amid hardships.

Skhodov — that was the man's name — walked back to the house, feeling his way along a taut rope. He went to the instrument and back every four hours, day and night, in any weather.

There was no one to relieve him, wireless operator and chief of the polar station, or his comrades, meteorologist Yurovsky and mechanic Anisimov. They had refused to take extra men, because there were sick polarniks to be replaced on another island.

Skhodov reached the station house. The wind beat him in the back; no sooner did he open the door than it rushed in.

The hoar-frost coating the doors and walls sparkled in the passage, brought out by the torch.

Skhodov walked into the wireless room lighted by an oil lamp. Its hoary walls seemed to be pasted with ragged wall-paper.

There was a frown on Skhodov's face. Yurovsky lay in a sleeping-bag.

"How're you getting on, Zhenya?" asked Skhodov.

Yurovsky coughed in reply, a dry, painful cough.

Skhodov stepped up to the youth and laid his hand on the other's forehead. He could not tell whether Yurovsky had fever. The room temperature was far below zero.

Silent and thoughtful, Skhodov sat down in front of the wireless and got in touch with Bleak Island. He tapped out the radiograms received from neighbours whom he served as an intermediary, reported the weather, and then had a doctor called to the microphone.

Anisimov, thickset and broad-shouldered, came in. He jumped and danced to shake the snow from his parka.

"There's a sick man here," Skhodov reminded him,

Anisimov pushed back his hood.

He had brought warm broth in a pot. He contrived to cook it in the radiator of a petrol runner while it charged the batteries. That was the only source of heat the three men had.

"How about some hot food, Zhenyia?" Anisimov asked in a friendly voice.

"I'm cold, I'm so cold," whispered the sick youth.

The doctor was at the microphone. Skhodov told him how Yurovsky felt. The doctor asked questions about symptoms and fever and the pulse. Then he told Skhodov to hold the microphone to Yurovsky's chest.

Skhodov held the wire and Anisimov the microphone. The rattle in Yurovsky's chest was heard hundreds of miles off.

The doctor diagnosed pneumonia and warned the poliarniks that it was serious.

"It's very important to keep him warm," he said in conclusion. "Beware of draughts."

"Draughts," Skhodov echoed slowly, and sat down near the sick-bed.

The house had not been heated for a long time. There was not so much as a handful of fuel. All the fuel had drifted away into the sea months before.

Skhodov recalled how enthusiastic Yurovsky had been when he arrived on the island, and the way things had impressed him. It had amazed and delighted the youth that the ship sailed up to a glacier as to a wharf, that the seamen had made their way to the island in late autumn, through solid ice, which involved such an enormous risk, and had to hasten back without a moment's delay.

After the ship sailed, a strong wind rose. Skhodov was in a hurry and granted neither himself nor his comrades any respite. Soon most of the boxes containing equipment and provisions were stowed away in the storehouse.

All that was left on the glacier was drums of petrol and a black pile — the three men's supply of coal for the next two years. There was no telling whether the ship would succeed in breaking through to the island the following year.

They rolled ashore two drums, and then came what Skhodov had dreaded. The gale broke off part of the glacier, with the precious coal and petrol upon it.

The men stood on the edge of the glacier. The wind was pushing them down into the raging sea which dashed up icy spray and foam.

Skhodov remembered the bewildered, almost frightened look on Zhenya's youthful, dusky face. His slightly dilated eyes followed the fresh iceberg, which drifted off to two others looming in the distance like ships in a roadstead.

The sea, dark in the twilight, seethed around the iceberg, lashed at it and drove it farther and farther away from the shore, stripping the men of their last hope for the recovery of the fuel.

A delicate and melancholy afterglow appeared on the horizon. It reminded the men that there was sunshine somewhere in the world.

"How are we going to live now?" Zhenya asked naively.

"Better stop thinking of a stove," said Anisimov.

"We must turn the Sedov back," Zhenya suggested in an excited tone. "Send a radiogram."

Skhodov cut him short, "We can't risk the ship." He turned to Anisimov. "D'you think two drums of petrol will be enough for us to charge the batteries for the wireless during the winter?"

"I'm trying to reckon that out myself, Vasily Vasilye-vich. I think they may, provided we go on a starvation allowance."

Shielding his face against the wind, Zhenya walked to the house. It was a spacious one, with a piano and a bookcase in the large parlour. All the volumes of poetry had been set apart by Zhenya. Heating radiators were mounted under the window-sills. Once warm water had flown into them from a tank built into the kitchen range.

When Skhodov and Anisimov entered the kitchen, Zhenya was standing near the range. He could not put up with the idea that he would see no fire for a whole year to come.

"Vasily Vasilyevich," he said. "I just heard music from Moscow. I can't believe it's so far away. Shouldn't we ask for a plane to be sent here? It could drop us some fuel."

"Look here, Yurovsky," said Skhodov coldly. "Soviet polarniks have found themselves in a position like ours more than once. On Wrangell Island our men chose to stay for the winter even though they had no fuel Think of

Papanin's or Sedov's men. We've got sleeping-bags. We Soviet polarniks aren't going to summon a whole squadron of aircraft just to bring us coal."

His head bowed low, Zhenya listened to his chief. He had immense confidence in the might of the Soviet Land and could not understand why they had to forgo summoning a plane.

Anisimov explained it to him under his breath:

"Try to understand. I was an air mechanic during the war. I know what it is to fly in the Arctic night. It means a lot of risk and bravery. The plane would have to be guided, and we've got no direction-finder Our tiny wireless is no good for that sort of thing."

Zhenya spoke no more of planes. He did his utmost to bear the hardships as staunchly as his comrades did Skhodov watched him in silence. He saw the youth go out to the instruments in any cold, day or night, at the required hour, and on his return freeze without a complaint in the cold room.

Skhodov inferred that Yurovsky had the makings of a good polarnik. And now Zhenya lay in front of Skhodov in a room frozen through and through, coughing painfully. Warmth could save his life, but there was none of it. Skhodov tried to think of a way to help his comrade.

Anisimov looked at Skhodov, then at Zhenya, lingered a little, and walked out.

He had hardly opened the entrance door when the wind bore down on it.

"What a tremendous strength!" he thought.

Prickly snow beat into his face He turned his back to the wind. For some reason he recalled the slip stream of an aeroplane propeller.

How many million or even thousand million propellers would it take to give rise to that sustained blast hurtling along at such a terrific speed? Or how many propellers could be set turning if put in the way of the wind?

"Oho," said Anisimov to himself and went into the machine room

His eye screwed up, he looked at a petrol drum, sizing up something.

"Zhenya's going to die if we don't do something about it," he said and walked back into the house.

"Some wind out there," he began vaguely as he entered the wireless room.

"Eight points strong," Skhodov replied briefly.

"Yes, and it's never less than a fresh breeze." Anisimov sat down on a stool. "What an energy! How about turning just a tiny portion of that energy into heat, Vasily Vasilyevich?" He laughed as he kicked the radiator with the toe of his felt boot.

"Stop that idle talk. Wind motors are made at plants," said Skhodov and straightened the parka covering Yurovsky.

Anisimov fidgeted on his stool.

"During the war I had to parachute from a damaged plane. I broke my leg and was picked up by partisans. Afterwards I was with them as a field engineer."

"What of it?"

"Well, they taught me a few things about using available material. Now I'm thinking that we could make a wind motor from a petrol drum."

Skhodov got up angrily, walked over to the table, and took out the meteorological register.

"You see, Vasily Vasilyevich," Anisimov went on, "we'd take an iron drum and cut it in two lengthwise. Then we'd make a sort of merry-go-round from the two half-drums and mount it on an upright shaft. Like this." He stepped to the window and drew an S on the frozen pane. "The wind blows from the side. One half-drum is turned to the wind with its hollow and the other with its bulge. See what I mean?"

"I see."

"In the hollow the wind meets resistance, presses on, and turns the whole thing. Meanwhile the hollow of the other half-drum comes round against the wind. And round and round it goes! It'll work no matter which way the wind blows."

"That's pure imagination," said Skhodov. "We mustn't waste the drums, we keep our petrol in them. And anyway, we can't transform the energy of rotation into heat. It takes electric machinery and heaters to do that.

I won't have so heavy a load put on our runner. We need it to charge the batteries."

He set to copying figures from his note-book into the register. His fingers, stiff with cold, hardly obeyed him.

The disconcerted Anisimov crawled into his sleeping-bag. For the time being he was beaten.

Skhodov stayed up. The gale howled outside. It seemed to jeer at the old polarnik, as if boasting that it had blown away the coal and now was going to take away one of his comrades.

How was it, Skhodov asked himself painfully, that he had failed to take proper care of Yurovsky? Was he to blame? Was it not his duty to train the youth to rigorous living conditions, to take the burden of the adverse situation upon himself and his comrades instead of shifting it on to flyers? It was very dangerous to fly to the island in that late season, and now that visibility was zero it could hardly be done at all.

Zhenya was dying of cold and he, Skhodov, could do nothing for him. There was Anisimov suggesting something, racking his brains, trying to think up a solution. He was a fine chap, was Anisimov, and resourceful, too, in the genuine Russian way.

Russian resourcefulness! Kulibin built an arched bridge without any props. A giant bell, made into a wheel, was moved hundreds of miles.

A simple Russian muzhik amazed foreign engineers by erecting a huge column in front of the Winter Palace. He built a spiral platform and rolled the top of the "Alexandrian Column" up the platform.

Anisimov, too, was suggesting a simple solution. It was worth thinking over. There were rotor windmills, weren't there?

Yurovsky's dry, racking cough reached his ear.

Zhenya's life hinged on warmth. But how could the power of rotation be converted into heat? The dynamo could not be used for the purpose. He must not take chances with a machine which ensured the operation of the wireless.

Anisimov came up unexpectedly and sat down on Skhodov's cot.

"Why aren't you in bed?" said Skhodov. "You're going to nod on your watch."

"You see, Vasily Vasilyevich, I keep thinking of how we could do without electric machinery."

Skhodov lighted the oil lamp.

The white, shaggy walls of the room came into view.

"What can we do?" asked Skhodov, and it was hard to tell whether the question was meant for Anisimov or himself.

Anisimov began to speak in enthusiastic, persuasive tones.

"Vasily Vasilyevich! When you apply brakes the brake-shoes get hot, don't they?"

"Well?" asked Skhodov distrustfully.

"You just wait!"

Anisimov picked up a torch and ran out to the shed. It took him long to dig up the door buried under the snow, but at last he opened it and set about rummaging among old machine parts.

He came back elated.

"There's an iron pulley there," he announced to Skhodov, "and we'll make the brake-shoes from stone and fasten them with these screws here." He showed the parts he had found.

Zhenya tossed on his cot, shivering.

"Wait a bit, Zhenya, it's going to be warm!" Anisimov told him. "This is what we'll do, Vasily Vasilyevich. We put an upright steel pipe through the roof. It'll be a sort of axle. We fix its top in a bearing, and to support the bearing we make a wooden tripod. We rivet two half-drums to the pipe and presto! the merry-go-round is ready. And below we mount the iron pulley on the axle and apply brakes to it."

"But how're we going to use the heat of friction? The pulley will be overheated."

"We'll put it in water, right in the central-heating tank. The heat of friction will pass into the water. The water in the tank will get hot, then we'll have central heating!"

"It sounds so very unusual," said Skhodov. "I don't think much of it, but I'll help you just the same."

The two men set to work with feverish haste. They gave up sleep altogether. Zhenya's life depended on the rapidity with which they carried out their design. But they could not work on "wind heating" alone. Now as before, they had to watch the weather, send in reports, receive wireless messages, cook meals, and look after Yurovsky.

The snow-storm gave way to unprecedented frost. Skhodov reported: "Fifty-eight degrees below zero."

Anisimov was busy near the shed. He hopped from foot to foot and slapped his hips to get warm, humming a tune and glancing at the sky now and then. The North Star glittered overhead.

"Suppose the globe were a rotor windmill, then the end of its shaft would pivot on the North Star," he thought.

He smiled at the idea, land resumed his work on a drum.He cut it in two. The petrol he had emptied into a tub made of ice by Skhodov.

Working with his habitual skill, he hit the chisel with the hammer squarely on the head, and there was something dashing about his last blow. The two half-drums lay on the snow.

Anisimov sighed, straightened his back, looked at the sky and the North Star, and was amazed.

It had become as light as before sunrise. Searchlights sent up their beams from beyond the horizon. For a moment it seemed to Anisimov that a fabulous ice-breaker was nearing the island. But the beams came from beyond the horizon all around him. Pale shafts of silvery light, they moved across the sky slowly and tremulously, as if feeling the unfathomable universe. Lastly they crossed close by the North Star to form a dome of light, mobile and majestic. Anisimov had never yet seen northern lights like those. But where had he watched a similar scene before?

Suddenly he laughed joyfully. Now he remembered. He threw down his tools and ran into the house.

"Vasily Vasilyevich! Zhenya!" he shouted right from the passage. "There's a 'Victory salvo' up in the sky! The Arctic surrenders! Unconditionally!"

Next day he climbed up on the roof to set up his rotor. The wind swooped down on the little human form in an effort to throw it off. Anisimov was pottering near the steel pipe which he had poked up with Skhodov's help from the kitchen.

"Go on, blow harder!" he muttered. "Rage! You silly force! Wait till we harness you. You'll turn our whirligig yet."

A bold idea flashed across his mind. What if the Arctic winds were made to revolve huge wind motors all along the coast? Then electric current could be sent south, to factories, and could replace dozens of power stations consuming coal.

"Wouldn't that be fine!" he thought, delighted with the idea, and forgetting to be on his guard, he let go of the chimney which he had clung to. The wind struck at him. He clutched at the wooden wedge thrust into the home-made rotor by way of a brake. The wedge slipped out and the half-drums began to revolve. Anisimov lost support and toppled down.

As he lay in the snow-drift below, he listened happily to the roar of his wind motor.

Skhodov came running out of the house.

"The pulley's turning," he said.

Excited and overjoyed, Anisimov walked into the house. He immediately set about fitting brake-shoes to the rotating pulley. Those were not like the brakes applied to railway carriage wheels. He simply pressed two big stones to the pulley by means of screws.

But nothing came of it. Anisimov had expected the stones to wear down and gradually assume the shape of the surface of the pulley. But that would probably take long. Just then the stones were no good. They either stopped the pulley altogether or let it rotate unchecked.

Skhodov watched Anisimov's efforts with bitterness. Anxiety gripped him with renewed force. Yurovsky was in a most critical state, and Skhodov often lingered by the youth's cot.

On his way to the meteorological instruments Skhodov decided that he no longer had any right to rely on Anisimov's doubtful invention and risk his comrade's life. He must try to summon la plane after all. Coming back, hs walked into the kitchen.

Anisimov was fussing about near the central-heating boiler. His haggard face was grimy with dust, his cheekbones stuck out and his eyes were like two dark hollows. His hands were covered with wounds and chilblains, and blood oozed from the cracks in his skin.

Skhodov watched him awhile in silence, then went to the wireless room. Zhenya lay motionless, with closed eyes; a rattle came from his chest. He had lost consciousness. A heap of snow that had fallen from the ceiling lay near the key on the table. Skhodov held his hand to Yurovsky's forehead, then sat down and grasped the key.

Anisimov had not slept for several days. Skhodov had helped him in his work without saying a word, but now he pinned his hopes on something else. However, this "something" might also fail to materialize. He said nothing to Anisimov, for he did not want to disappoint him.

Finally that which Skhodov had been looking forward to came.

Anisimov straightened up and stared at his chief.

"A plane?" he asked, struck with amazement.

"Yes," answered Skhodov. "We've got to save Zhenya."

"But how did the flyer find his way here?"

"Perhaps instruments on the mainland helped him," said Skhodov.

Now the hum of the aeroplane could be clearly heard. The flyer was describing a circle over the island.

Both polarniks ran out of the house and listened to the roar of the engine.

"Fire a rocket!" shouted Skhodov.

Two rockets flashed in the dark one after the other.

The storm was gathering strength. Clouds of snow enveloped the house.

The sound of the propeller was dying away.

"He's dropped it," said Skhodov with relief. "Now we must look for the sacks of coal before the wind snows therm over."

"Come on, let's hurry!" said Anisimov.

Skhodov stopped him. "No. We can't both go. You must stay here. I'll search for the sacks. I'm going to mark each of them with a picket. One sack I'll bring here."

Anisimov obeyed reluctantly. Skhodov went out into the howling storm.

Anisimov entered the kitchen. Soon a fire would be blazing there. He glared at the turning pulley. He felt like stopping the useless wheel.

Angrily he began to tighten the screws, pressing to the pulley the new stone "shoes." Sparks flew from under the "shoes." Anisimov held out his hand. The sparks were hot. That was warmth. Warmth brought by a cold wind! That warmth had to be utilized by all means.

Skhodov plodded in the snow through the raging storm. He hit on several sacks which had landed some three hundred yards from the house, and set up marks near them. But he made a mistake by deciding to look for the others at once. The storm was getting worse. The snow whirled and danced in the air and knocked him off his feet. It bore down on him from all sides, blinded him, and caught his breath; dry and unmelting, it forced its way under his hood.

Skhodov had expected to get back by the rumble of the rotor, but he discovered with alarm that he could not hear it. Was it possible that the howl of the storm was drowning the sound of the rotor?

He could not take his bearings by the direction of the wind, because it was blowing from everywhere. He was no coward, but the danger of being snowed over close by the house, together with a sackful of coal, frightened him. Utterly exhausted, he sat down in the snow, unable to believe himself. Did he really have to perish as absurdly as that?

At any rate it was useless to walk on. "I might move still farther away from the house," he argued to himself, somewhat more calmly, trying to pull himself together.

He knew what the Nentsi do in stormy weather. Sitting in the snow, he dug himself deep into the fur of his coat and rolled himself up into a ball. He must overcome the cold and, what was worse, sleep. Sleep — sticky and sweet — was stealing up slowly, dimming his mind. He ground his teeth and bit his lip to keep it off.

He strained his muscles in order not to freeze. In his youth he had engaged in "will gymnastics" — exerted his will-power to strain and relax his muscles. Now, in his mind, he made himself walk, run, and climb rocks. He felt hot, his strength ebbed, he was spent with fatigue, but again and again he took up his hard and invisible work.

He wondered what Anisimov would have thought about in a similar plight. Probably about his wind motor or a huge Arctic wind ring sending power to factories in the south.

Skhodov began to work out how long the coal might last. Two weeks or so, perhaps.

The storm howled and roared. There was a crashing noise, as of shots, all around. It was ice shifting in the sea. The hurricane drove ice-fields against each other. Even if Anisimov had fired a shot Skhodov could not have heard it in that chaos of sounds.

But what was that rumble, importunate and unceasing?

Skhodov strained his ear and jumped up.

How could he have failed to realize it for so long? It was the rotor turning! Then the storm had been unable to drown its sound.

Barely dragging his feet, Skhodov stumbled in the direction of the sound. He tried to haul the sack along, but he had too little strength left.

Bent almost in two, he toiled on, and suddenly, heard a shot. So Anisimov was firing! There was the porch.

Anisimov saw his chief almost crawl up to the house — it was nather a dim shadow that appeared for an instant in the whirling snow.

Anisimov led Skhodov into the house and on into the kitchen. There, with nothing on but his night-shirt, Zhenya lay sprawled on his sleeping-bag.

"Take off your coat, Vasily Vasilyevich!" Anisimov urged Skhodov. "You'll get warm right away."

Skhodov sank heavily on the bench, staring in wonder at the "weeping" walls streaked with moisture.

"Warmth?" he said with an effort, as if distrusting his own senses, then asked sternly, "So you fetched some coal? And who permitted you to leave the station in a blizzard?"

"But I didn't go anywhere!" Anisimov broke in with rapture. "It's our merry-go-round working. I fixed the brakes! It was all a matter of friction. The 'shoes' had to clutch the pulley over a larger area. Here, look."

Just then Skhodov saw that the steel pipe thrust up through the ceiling was rotating. Anisimov put his hand into the central-heating boiler and snatched it out.

"It's scalding!" he cried in delight.

"And the sacks are out there," Skhodov murmured. "I marked them with pickets."

"That'll be our emergency supply, Vasily Vasilyevich. Suppose the wind should drop."

"You're right," Skhodov agreed. He rose, walked over to Yurovsky, and bent over him. "Well, Zhenya, my boy? How does it feel to be warm?"

"It's just wonderful, Vasily Vasilyevich!" Yurovsky smiled.

Skhodov stepped up to Anisimov, gave him a strong hug, and suddenly kissed him.

"We won't call for any more planes," he said firmly.

The wind darted about the island in a frenzy, sweeping the snow into heaps. It drove the ice-fields against each other, shredded the black clouds above, and lashed at the solitary house with a roar.

And once again a man walked out of the house on his way to the instruments. The wind tugged at the skirts of his short coat and raised a snow

wall on his path. But now it also kept turning the strange rotor on the house-top, which rumbled like a tank.

With torch and note-book in his hands, the man was making his way against the wind.

It was late when I finished my story — time to go to bed.

As usual, I made the round of the ship. She lay in the roads and there was no need for me to go up on the bridge.

The island was invisible in the darkness. All I could see was a light in the window of the far-away little house. It looked like the lowest of the stars shining in the sky.

My first mate was making ready to hoist the launch. I called it off. The man was greatly surprised. Unloading was over. The new passengers were already on board.

I didn't explain anything to my first mate.

“Wait till morning,” I said to him and went to my cabin.

Sure enough, Masha was waiting for me near my door.

“Well, Masha,” I said, “are you going to sail before or against the wind?”

That was the end of the captain's story.