

IMMOBILIZED

The phone only rings twice a day: once in the morning to announce “*not yet*” and later in the afternoon to say, “*not today.*” The pilot on the other end of the line is apologetic but firm. We’re anxious to get in the air, out over the ice, find some bears and get the footage that will make the film. But we’re paralyzed by zero visibility.

Day one. Day two. Day three falls away. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do. Sitting alone in this stale room. The view out the one small window a parking lot of heavy machinery. No people, just trucks. The weatherman says it’s minus something stupid out there... *colder than a well digger’s ass.* The flat, grey horizon stretches into nothing.

Money disappears by the day. The months of preparation, the research, the negotiation, all that work to bring us here for five days at the centre of the story with full access to the people, the place, the polar bears. But the weather pins us to the ground.

No action, no bears, no footage. This is the missed opportunity of a lifetime.

The research team has made this trip this many times before. They pad extra days on to accommodate for the unpredictable Arctic weather. But after three days on the ground, their window is closing too. The season is short. They need to gather as much data as possible to complete this year’s population survey. That means collar, weigh, test and track as many bears as they can bring down.

Everything rides on this data – funding, momentum, The Cause. But with no line between grey sky and hard ground, their pilot has the last word and he’s not taking the risk.

So we sit by the phone and wait. Each alone in our own drab room, fake wood walls, basic desk, frayed bedding. There’s no cell service. No side story to explore even if we could leave the room. There’s nothing to see here folks. Not a restaurant or bar, not even a drop of bootlegged booze. Burly men with ruddy cheeks and a handful of tough women who take no shit. Everyone here for one reason or the other – pipeline, money or bears. This is the frozen nowhere.



“What you guys doing up here?” He pulls up a chair. Big guy with an easy way, looking for someone new to chat up. We’re happy for the company. We’re sick of each other already.

“We’re shooting a doc on the polar bear. Be we haven’t made it out to the ice yet.”

He’s heard all this before. The polar bear is a hot story. Everyone wants in on it. We’re just another film crew looking to bag the big one. He stabs at the mountain of food on his plate and grunts something about the weather. The conversation stalls.

By day four I’m beginning to panic. Two days until we leave and we’ve got nothing – not one minute of tape. I call the pilot again but it’s the same story. He’s not putting his life on the line for a damn bear. And so we wait.

The bear follows the cracks in the ice. This is his kingdom and he sits proud at the top of the food chain. He has all the time in the world. He is free, to wander, to hunt, to exist.

He points his snout into the wind. The air skips a breath. Something is not right. Sound chops at the sky. The bear feels in his gut, it’s time to move on.

The ringing phone slaps me out of bed. The familiar voice on the other end of the line says the words I’ve been waiting to hear, “*It’s a go.*”

There’s a break in the weather but for how long, who knows. We scramble into action. The researchers are at the hangar before us, loading their helicopter with gear, including a long, serious-looking rifle, loaded with darts potent enough to take down a 700-pound bear.

I’m wearing a southerner’s winter coat underneath a red Arctic parka, three sizes too big. I squeeze into the backseat of the helicopter, feeling superfluous and ridiculous. We lift into the air, the helicopter door wide open so Harold can get the shot. The wind bites at my nose and cheeks and chin. We follow the other helicopter deep into a frozen world that up till this moment had only existed in my imagination. I feel way out of my element but so alive.

The other pilot’s voice crackles over the radio. “*There’s a bear up ahead.*” And suddenly, just like that, the hunt begins.

Harold leans into the icy wind, harnessed to the chopper, his camera fixed on the running bear and the helicopter in pursuit. The research team's designated shooter leans out the window and steadies the gun on the sill.

Go! Go! Go!! I scream at the bear but the words stay stuck in my head. I want time to stop but it only slows down and draws out the inevitable. This is all in the name of science I tell myself but still, it feels so wrong.

The chopper bears down on its prey. Harold keeps the action in his frame. I hold my breath for lack of having anything more useful to do. The man holds the gun steady, finds the bear in the crosshairs and pulls the trigger.

He misses.

We're flying so close beside them that I see him curse out loud. Their chopper swoops down lower. We keep up, at a distance but right in line. The man reloads. He aims, shoots, the bear stumbles.

I am frozen. Breathe in. Exhale.

The bear runs on, he falters, then falls. The two helicopters pull up and away, leaving him a moment in peace.

The almighty polar bear lies in a heap, breathing hard, conscious but completely immobile.

We double back and land. The rotor stabs at the air, Harold jumps out not waiting for the engine to cut. He grabs his camera, the tripod, shouts, "*grab the boom!*" and runs to the bear. The researchers are already in position, on their knees pushing the massive beast onto his stomach. I stumble out onto the ice, grab the boom mic and make a mess of the cable. I suddenly feel so inexperienced, like an observer watching the action unfold from a distance. The pilot with the research group grabs a clipboard and starts calling out for data. *Length? Width?* They move fast. There is no time to waste. The drugs don't last long enough.

They roll the bear and pull a grey canvas sheet underneath him, hook it up and pull hard at the winch to lift him up. "*#37812. Male. 700 pounds.*" His tongue lolls out of his mouth. The King of the Arctic. I need to look away.

He breathes in and out, his black nostrils flaring, his breath drifting on the cold air. His eyes are open but he can't feel the needles, the bits of tissue removed from his hind, the fur snipped away, the pokes, the prods. He sees movement, shadows, shapes, hears their sound vibrate off the ice and air. He wills his muscles to flex but nothing happens. The researchers check that his radio collar is functioning.

They roll him back onto his belly, stretch out his legs and point his snout into the wind.

And then they're gone.

It's all over so fast. Harold and I are left alone on the ice to get the last shot. Our pilot starts up the helicopter. The bear lifts his head as high as he can, to where his thick neck meets the ice. He fixes his black eyes on me, the one with no business being here. He's breathing harder, straining to move his body. I feel a chill run down my spine as I realize, *he's trying to get at me!* I want to run but I can't move. He can smell my fear.

"You got the shot? He's moving."

"Got it." Harold snaps his camera off the tripod, unhooks the boom, takes one in each hand and runs. I walk backwards, away from the bear, too scared to turn away.

We lift up and watch as the bear splayed on the ice becomes smaller, a part of the landscape. A big purple circle stains the fur on his back, a mark to indicate that he's been counted and his record updated. He looks used up and tossed aside.

The great polar bear lifts his head and breathes in the world around him. The air has changed but something lingers. He lies and waits for movement to return.