

The Last Polar Bear

Nicholas Duddy

On a forty-nine-degree summer day, 8,000 miles from the North Pole, the last polar bear arrives in Adelaide. She washes up on the Glenelg shoreline, carried by the incoming tide. She lies facedown in white sand. Motionless. Through pearls of spume, her frail form looms.

At first, she is overlooked. A bum-bagged jogger mistakes her for dumped shag; a myopic cyclist swears she's a beached bronze whaler; an amorous elderly couple confuse her skeletal spine for driftwood and recall that jetty where, many moons ago, they first made love in the dark of a starless night.

But the realisation soon follows. An angler crashes the SS *Fishfinger*, his rusting aluminium tinny, onto a sandbank forty feet from the bear. Mouth agape, he rubs his bloodshot eyes. He forgets about his inky bucket of squid and whiting and garfish, and jumps into knee-high water.

Walking her beagle and her mother, an eight-year-old girl is the first to touch the polar bear. Her beagle barks, yanking the lead, pulling her to the bear. She's never seen anything so filthy, not even when Charlie rolls in mud. With her glittery jelly shoe, she kicks the polar bear's paw. But the bear does not stir. *Mummy!* she squeals through the sleepy morning.

Within minutes, the first news team arrives. In the car park, the reporter stands impatiently, receiving her final flick of mascara, her final swirl of rouge, her left leg quivering. The cameraman burns through four durries – even the emergency one in his sock. They both race to the beach.

REPORTER: (*with iambic journalistic lilt.*) What's YOUR name, YOUNG laDY?

YOUNG LADY: (*with sonic texture of honey.*) Lucy.

And so, in this moment, the world's last *Ursus maritimus* is named after the little girl who first found her.

By midmorning news teams surround Lucy. They outdo one another with their expert coverage. One station enlists a zoologist, who posits that Lucy circumnavigated the world, drifting through the Arctic Ocean on sea ice, down the northwest passage between Canada and Greenland, across the expanses of the Atlantic, snacking on marine delicacies off the Angolan coast, before traversing the Southern Ocean to Kangaroo Island in pursuit of little

penguins and long-nosed fur seals, and finally crossing the Gulf St Vincent to dock on Holdfast Bay. Another station interviews an acclaimed psychic, who — after holding a lock of Lucy’s fur and drinking a glass of seawater — believes the bear suffered from severe postpartum depression with her firstborn, exacerbated further by her son’s death in a freak fishing accident. She never recovered.

The crowd builds. They pass around SPF 100+ sunscreen and share broad-brimmed hats. They create a rota for fetching food and water, only leaving the bear for loo breaks (one couple use nappies to overcome this issue). Meanwhile, the police tape off a twelve-metre radius around Lucy.

Feet invade every patch of sand. A local church group stand on the beach and read aloud Jeremiah 30:17 and pray for this celestial bear’s wellbeing. Beside them, a group of atheists stand in silence. In the carpark, at the edge of beach and bitumen, vendors sell plastic water bottles and marked-up Kmart t-shirts featuring any picture of a bear — brown, koala, Humphrey B. They sell out in twenty-five minutes. Improvising, they sell plain white tees with *LUCY* printed in uneven Sharpie lettering.

Before the sun crowns the sky, Lucy is a worldwide phenomenon. Every major broadcaster — ABC, BBC, CNN, NBC, WXYZ — has a reporter standing by; Facebook live videos are narrated by woeful Attenborough and Irwin and Bear Grylls impressions; tweets weave a tapestry of hashtags laden with threadbear puns. Lucy — the little girl, not the last polar bear — and Mummy now demand thousands per interview. And with good reason: this is the first polar bear sighted in twenty years, the last confirmed sighting being by the Chukchi people in Uelen near the Bering Sea.

But Lucy — the last polar bear, not the little girl — has not moved. She remains facedown, surrounded by twelve veterinarians in face masks cleaning her fur. They clip her jagged claws. They stroke her back, gloved hands raking the ribbed outline of brittle bones. Crab nets and beer cans and ripped cloth wash away, strewn across the shore like souvenirs. Her coat shimmers bright white. They roll her over. Repeat the process. Like a snow angel, she lies supine in white sand. Sunlight limns her silver limbs, and the crowd weeps at the sight of Lucy, at the might of beauty.

Distinguished guests arrive at Glenelg. They take up their VIP positions at the front of the crowd. The Premier of South Australia foregoes his two o’clock kip, arriving in green-and-gold boardies and thongs. He is shown up, though, by the Prime Minister who arrives in a navy pantsuit with an Australian flag pinned to her lapel. She waves off her Chief of Staff,

who whispers firmly to No. 10 and the White House and the Kremlin that the Prime Minister will have to return their calls.

The crowd is restless. Lucy still has not moved. She needs to eat, one of the experts deduces. With no blubber readily available, they try feeding her a specially formulated paste of prawns and breadcrumbs and multivitamins, with just a pinch of paprika. But she does not move. The angler has a thought. He slinks away from the crowd, sprints up the shoreline, and hauls the cockle-crust bucket from his boat. He pushes through the crowd and hands the bucket over the yellow tape. The experts lay out the seafood smorgasbord.

A paw quivers. Lids flutter. Eight-ball eyes open, green mucus oozing down her snout, and Lucy accepts the garfish dangled above her head like a sword swallower. With every bite, her strength recovers. With every bite, the crowd's spirit rises.

But Lucy's future is uncertain. Some argue she should remain in Adelaide; some believe she should be transported to London or Paris or New York where more people can visit her. The Premier takes off his thongs, the Prime Minister her blazer, and they agree on keeping Lucy in Australia.

Just as they prepare to front the press, they receive a phone call: an anonymous persona is offering ten million dollars for Lucy. The Premier glances at the Prime Minister; the Prime Minister glances at the Premier. With diligent yet decisive diplomacy, they decide it's in the public's best interest for the bear to be cared for in private rather than in the public sphere; to put it simply, the world must respect Lucy and her owner's privacy as they begin their new life together.

But then the Chief of Staff receives another message: an offer of fifty million from a Silicon Valley tech-exec. Then: one hundred from a Shanghai businessman looking for a last-minute graduation present for his daughter. Another message, another offer. Eventually, after careful and considered deliberation, the Premier and the Prime Minister decide to hold an auction overseen by Sotheby's.

As the sky bleeds with sunset, Lucy perches on all fours, her eyes scanning the crowd, her body still as an opal statue. The crowd stares at her, their hearts beating harder, eyes big and bold, lost in the polar bear's majesty, in her mystery, overwhelmed by this monument to Mammalia.

Lucy digs her front paws into sand and heaves her body upright. Her silhouette stretches behind, across the shore and the sea towards the dying sun. Her mouth opens and a sound echoes across the beach. Not a roar, but a whimper. Lucy shakes, limbs flailing,

Fiction: *The Last Polar Bear* by Nicholas Duddy

swaying, as if bowing to the cheering crowd, hypnotised by the thousand smiles before her, until she falls headfirst into the sand with a force felt across the earth.

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