

CHAPTER ONE

FROZEN REALM OF MYSTERY

... the general object of the expedition was a peaceful voyage, to explore and survey coasts, seas, and islands, and to make such investigations as might be found practicable in aid of science...

– Charles Wilkes, 1845

This is one of the “heights” of a polar voyage, when all one’s comrades are one’s bosom friends, and when every single experience is viewed through rose-coloured spectacles.

– Raymond Priestly

I STEPPED FROM MY ROOM in the upper hallway of Dorm 202 to go for a piss down the hall. It was the middle of the afternoon. A man lay on his back in the middle of the hallway. He was barefoot and wearing no shirt. I assumed he was drunk. He too must have worked nightshift. His eyes were open. As I neared the bathroom I asked groggily, “Dude, are you all right?”

Only his eyes moved. “Eventually you will make a mistake,” he said.

I nodded, walked into the bathroom, and peed on a cake of pink deodorant in the urinal. I washed my hands and then dried them with a paper towel from a dispenser that someone had recently ripped from the wall and left in a sink.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked as I passed the guy in the hall again.

“Eventually you will make a mistake,” he said calmly.

I shrugged and went to my room, where I curled up under the covers and started to fall asleep. Before I did, I groaned and climbed out of bed to lock the door, in case he had been talking to me.

Soon after I arrived at McMurdo Station by plane that first summer, the station manager gathered the employees in the Galley for an orientation. As he spoke, we fidgeted at the cafeteria tables. Our red parkas hung in the hall, but we still sweated in our long underwear, black wind-bibs, and heavy white boots with air-valves. Paintings of glaciers hung on the walls. I had only one question in mind: How long can I stand outside before I die? The station manager instead told us that if our neighbors were noisy, we should report them to the Firehouse. The Housing lady said a few words, and we formed two lines for keys to our dorm rooms.

From the pile of standard-issue orange bags in the hallway, I dislodged mine and sought my room. Someone else had already been assigned to my bed, so I took my key back to the Housing Office, where several people were in the hallway outside the door, not in line, but just hanging around. I couldn't tell whether they were new like me, or if they had been here before. I consoled a woman who was crying because she was not assigned her choice of roommate. I could hear people talking inside the Housing Office, so I asked a guy leaning against the wall, "What's the deal here?" He shrugged and said he also needed to talk to them, gesturing at the Housing Office door, which was locked. I knocked and got no response. After a few minutes, a woman with a crowded keychain arrived from around the corner. The crying woman shifted to a hopeful snuffle. The woman with the keys looked beyond the waiting crowd as if inspecting some grave blemish in the distant hallway. Her ready key slithered into the lock, she slipped inside, and the door slammed behind her. The sniffles reverted to sobs, and one more voice joined the merry clamor from within the Housing Office. People who for a moment had stood at attention resumed their positions against the wall. After a few more minutes, the door opened, a man emerged from within, and a woman tried to close the door.

I would have worked for free my first summer, just to go to Antarctica. Because I had little knowledge about the place, I imagined that I also had few preconceptions about it. I suspected, though, that wherever the unknown lurked, science would be there to stop it, so I expected to find radar dishes and weird machines, as at a moon base. I would not have been surprised to

find myself shivering in a tent full of scientists or staggering through a blizzard pulling a sled. Mostly, though, I was free of assumptions about the frozen realm of mystery. I knew only that in Antarctica, things would be different, and I was ready to do whatever it took to adjust to the rugged frontier.

Now I was blocking the door of the Housing Office with my foot.

“Excuse me,” I said with a smile. “Someone is in my bed. Where do you want me?”

The Housing woman nervously eyed the crowd closing in around the door.

“What dorm are you in now?” she asked.

“155.”

We smiled at each other. She hesitated, then let me in, closed the door behind me, and established herself behind a counter.

Thereafter, my daily commute to work from Dorm 202 took seconds. I worked just across the yard in Building 155, the town hub, where the main hallway, called Highway One, is congested in the summer by people using the cash machines at one end and by people talking outside the store at the other. Along Highway One are alcoves with coat hooks, and bathrooms with orange-scented hand lotion and free condoms. There are sometimes bags of shredded documents outside the Human Resources Office and people leaning against the wall by the Housing Office or by the computer kiosk. Bulletin boards along Highway One are layered with flyers for Disco Night at the bar, stereo equipment for sale, and accident and injury statistics. There is a sign-up sheet on the door of the barbershop. Haircuts are free here.

I worked Midrats (midnight rations) as a DA (Dining Attendant) in the Galley. We washed dishes, scrubbed pots, vacuumed the dining area, scouted for spray bottles of disinfectant to wipe the tables, and mixed Bug Juice (industrial-strength Kool-Aid). Most of us on the Midrats crew were fingees (Fucking New Guys). Though our reasons for coming varied, as did our methods of getting jobs, we were all excited to be here. Flo, who referred to herself as a hip grandma, had come down to see penguins. Her husband was an important figure in McMurdo construction. Lindy, who had also married into McMurdo, was here for the penguins as well. Lindy popped her gum, kept freshly painted nails, and liked contemporary country music. June was an ornery, lip-glossed San Diegan whose sister had worked on the ice for years. She had heard McMurdo was fun. Gail was a Midrats salad-maker who had no McMurdo connections. Her résumé had escaped the slush pile because she

had drawn cartoon penguins on her cover letter. Mary, our supervisor, had been applying for years to get a job of any kind in Antarctica. She also had no local connections; back in the “real world,” she was a financial consultant. She planned to use her wages to buy a new metal detector, as finding metal things was one of her hobbies. Steve had been down before and had come back mostly for the money. He was from Nebraska, and told me of a recent concert there featuring Jefferson Starship and Eddie Money that drew an enthusiastic crowd. Steve said that Jefferson Starship put on a good show, but that Eddie Money got drunk and bellowed contempt for all the people who had come from afar to see him.

At work, classic rock blared from different radios around the kitchen, and our exposure to the tinny canon of riffs occupied nine hours a day, six days a week. The Galley might as well have been in Nebraska. Stainless steel, hot water, the smells of baking chicken and boiling potatoes and butterscotch, all to a repetitious soundtrack of Foreigner and The Eagles. I often forgot where I was, until I went outside in the cold and wind to dump cardboard or food waste in the dumpsters off the dock.

One night early in the summer, Gail called me to the salad room where there was a suspicious hush, with four people crowding around some spectacle.

“Look at this,” she whispered.

A snail was crawling across a piece of lettuce in a one-gallon plastic sauce container. There are not supposed to be snails in Antarctica; it had hitched a lift in a box of leafy vegetables. The lucky snail had found itself amongst a sympathetic group of salad-makers rather than stern representatives of the National Science Foundation, which was decidedly anti-snail by orthodoxy of the Antarctic Treaty.

“Don’t tell anyone,” said Gail. “If NSF finds out, they’ll make us kill it.”

I suggested the snail be named Anne Frank, but the salad-makers called it Snidely. A week or so later Snidely was hand-carried back to New Zealand by someone fired for throwing rocks at his co-worker.

The summer crawled along, with only small local dramas staving off the monotony of working in the Galley. Due to our collective surplus of curiosity about any event more gripping than the burning of sauce, the Galley was a hub of station gossip, a central plaza for the town’s gurgling fountain of undetected infractions and titillating punishments, an engine idling on old accounts of scandalous romances and employee misbehavior. Until the day, after a seemingly endless stretch in the kitchen, the Midrats crew was offered

a boondoggle, a trip out of town. Now we would have our own stories to tell: real outdoor Antarctica stories, not common indoor stories that could have happened anywhere. After our shift, we changed into our ECW gear (Extreme Cold Weather) and jabbered with anticipation on the Galley dock, our bright red parkas still clean from disuse. A noisy orange snow vehicle arrived, and Hank from F-Stop (Field Safety Training Program) jumped out and explained that the Hagglund here cost a quarter mil because it floats. "There's exit hatches in the roof," he said, which roused a happy murmur: those hatches weren't there for nothing.

We boarded and the Hagglund rumbled out of town toward Cape Evans. I awoke when it stopped, and we climbed out in front of Barne Glacier. The face of the glacier was a massive, fissured blue wall, and its bigness stunned like that of an anchor store at a regional shopping center. The area festered with seals. Lindy began shrieking and posed beside one of the creatures. She was wearing lipstick and perfume. The indifferent brown slug was bleeding and shitting where it lay. A midget on our crew squirmed on the ice in front of a seal while we snapped photos.

Hank pointed to nearby landmarks.

"That's Big Razorback Island," he said. "And that's Inaccessible Island."

We were driving across a flat plain of ice, and I could have walked to the landforms he indicated.

"You just called that an 'island,'" I said.

"That's right," he said.

"Why is it an 'island?'"

"Because it's surrounded by water."

We were driving across the frozen sea.

We filed into the Hagglund and continued driving until the vehicle suddenly stopped and Hank hurried us out. There were two Adelies, our first penguins. A wave of giddy hysteria swept through the group, and cameras began clicking. We had received several grave warnings that we were not to molest the wildlife, and that penetrating a penguin's comfort zone entailed stiff penalties. We did not want to do anything wrong, but we wanted to be as close as possible, preferably close enough to trick one of the birds into an Antarctic buddy shot. We followed Hank's lead. To us, he came to personify the Antarctic Treaty. We knew there were limits on how close we could rightfully get to a penguin, but the Treaty did not prohibit penguins from approaching us.

Hank hunkered down on the ice. We hunkered down on the ice. The

penguins stood there. They watched us. It was cold and sunny. Someone was hissing in ecstasy. Hank lifted his gloved hand in the air for just a moment. The whispers of excitement froze; breaths briefly stopped clouding the air. The penguins hesitated and then waddled toward us. There was an outburst of gurgling from the spectators. The penguins stopped and looked around. They were cute. But the distance marred them. From this far they might as well have been covered in scabs. Hank began scooting forward across the ice. As if pulled by magnets, we scooted forward too. Scooting shifted to slinking, and then to a fast crawl. A horde of perfumed dishwashers converged on two saucer-eyed penguins oblivious to our designs. I was sure one of the birds would die today, drained of life by hugs and then slung over someone's arm like a dishtowel. But then Hank halted the advance. The penguins marched forward to an eruption of unregulated giggling then, only momentarily interested in us, wandered off in another direction, probably to find and eat fish.

The excited camaraderie of the penguin adventure was soon gone. Back in the kitchen, Flo befriended the Galley Supervisor, who knew about Flo's connected husband. Flo, who had never worked in food service before, disliked Mary and reported to the Galley Supervisor that Mary always stuck her with all the hardest jobs and the most work. To make sure that workloads were evenly and fairly distributed, we were swapping duties halfway through each shift, which meant that the ice cream machine seldom got cleaned. By this time, Gail was getting headaches from the perfume Lindy wore to work each night, and with a piece of hastily cut cardboard blocked the window that separated their work areas. Getting in on the action, June informed the Galley Supervisor that Mary sometimes let us stretch our breaks, so Mary was disciplined and thereafter documented when each of us returned from break, causing even more bitterness toward her.

One day, suddenly reminding us where we were, Gail was invited by some marine mammal biologists to visit their field camp, Weddell World. A trip to a field camp could only be authorized for work purposes, but since Gail was a cook, the scientists pulled the strings for her to fix them dinner. I, loyal dishwasher, went along as her assistant.

At their camp out on the sea ice, Lee took us into the Jamesway hut that served as their lab, which boasted 11 laptop computers. In the back behind a hanging sheet was a butterball of a seal with gooey brown eyes and limber nostrils, bobbing in the water through a hole in the thick ice. This hole was so far from open water that the seal had to return here to breathe. Fastened

to its head with a liberal application of industrial-strength adhesive was a video camera that recorded the seal's activities. The recordings usually featured a lot of swimming about and the attacking of prey. The scientists brought the seal (Arnold) to their camp from the ice edge after knocking it out with a cocktail of Valium, ketamine, and a breathing stimulator (because seals involuntarily hold their breath if they become unconscious). Then they spent half a day outfitting the seal with the video camera and a backpack of equipment and plopped it through the hole into the sea like a plump brown berry into cream.

Terry ushered us outside and down the Ob Tube, a hollow steel shaft poked through the ice like a toothpick through plastic wrap, with a ladder inside and a window near the bottom to observe the seal in the water. In the chill of the Ob Tube I peered up at the bottom of the blushing blue sea ice through the ice-coated window and dark water. The gadget-encumbered seal floated in the hole in the ice. Just then, some marine mammal biologists returned to camp, landing noisily on the ice in a helicopter, whereupon the seal glided over to monitor me. The blubbery graceless seal above¹ was a sleek atom bundled for warmth below.

After a dinner of omelettes, and once I had washed the dishes, we relaxed with coffee in the ironless hut, a wooden black box the size of a prison cell, which was built without ferrous metals that would have interfered with the compass readings taken there. "We even had to make sure the couch didn't have any ferrous metals in it," Lee said.

"I thought you said iron was the problem," I said.

"I was trying to be understood."

The hut was mostly windows, for calculating the sun's position without standing in the elements. We drank coffee, warmed by a sun that wouldn't set until the end of summer. Lee pointed south to White Island. He told us about an isolated seal colony there, which is odd, he said, because White Island is farther south than Ross Island and is surrounded by the permanent ice shelf, rather than the seasonal ice and open water that attract seals around McMurdo. I asked how the seals got to White Island if there was no open water there, but our hosts had not studied the seal colony, so they would not even speculate on the origins of the isolated gene pool. Terry asked Lee whether so-and-so had studied the isolated seal colony. Lee didn't know, and Terry asked if so-and-so had married such-and-such. "Marine mammal biologists," Lee said, "there's another isolated gene pool."

Someone mentioned the Botswana water owl, which flies straight into the water to catch prey. Randolph had learned owl calls counting owls in the Grand Canyon.

He began doing owl calls in the ironless hut on the sea ice.

Returning to McMurdo, the glow of our fantastic seal odyssey brightened a few weeks of drudgery, but eventually dimmed. In the kitchen, June and Flo and Lindy teamed up against Mary, whose credibility in the eyes of the Galley Supervisor was not helped by her lack of an influential spouse in town, and at her end-of-the-season work evaluation they blamed her for the accumulated problems on our DA crew. June's connection in town was, at best, lateral to that of the kitchen supervisor, so her eval suffered too, but Flo and Lindy earned praise, as did Steve and I, for steering clear of it all.

When I returned home after my first summer on the ice, I wore my Antarctica regalia proudly. I wore the casual McMurdo Station ballcap and a few t-shirts from the McMurdo station store, where such items sold well.

"I just got back from Antarctica," I would say to people.

They were curious, and would ask me what I did there, and how did I get a job there, and how cold was it. I told them that I scraped ridges of turkeyloaf from baking pans while listening to Bob Seger. I told them that I knew someone who knew someone who knew someone. I said I didn't know how cold it was by temperature, but the shutter in my camera had frozen and a ballpoint pen wouldn't work outside. More questions would follow, and I would be the star of the show.

Though the details vary, this exchange, familiar to Antarctic workers, is sometimes called "playing the Antarctica card." It can be used to impress sexual prospects, potential employers, and those who get a little too uppity about their travel experience. The main drawback of playing the Antarctica card, as people with more than a few seasons of experience know, is that playing it too often can lead to weariness, as might happen to a game-show champion repeating his name, occupation, and hometown night after night.

Some seasoned workers are careful about playing the Antarctica card, broaching the subject only when they are sure that their audience has time for details, because the place is genuinely fascinating, but not always in the ways one might expect. Some, disdainful of Antarctica's use as cheap parlor entertainment, refuse to speak of the place except to other Antarciticans, to those who can differentiate between the regimes of ITT and ASA, trace the reputation of a particular department to an interdepartmental squabble six

seasons ago, or at the very least understand the impact of Offload. These workers wear highly revered regalia from past seasons with the gravitas of druids bearing ancient amulets. They have risen in the ranks on the highest, driest, coldest, and windiest continent in the world. Behind their eyes lies a calm understanding of systematic hostility. They are never surprised by the weather. They expect storms, ride them out, and find them not worth mentioning, unless to someone who knows what a real storm is like.

At nearby Cape Evans, on May 6, 1915, a fearsome storm ripped the wooden ship *Aurora* from anchor and carried it away in the night, marooning² ten men in Antarctica for two years. They had only offloaded a few supplies. The sea swallowed their cases of fuel, left too near the shore during the storm. The only other supplies were those scattered around the Cape Evans hut by Sir Robert Scott on his doomed expedition to the Pole a few years earlier. The treeless continent provides no firewood.

Sir Ernest Shackleton, intending to cross Antarctica from the opposite coast on foot, had sent the *Aurora* expedition to lay depots of food and fuel in a route across the far side of the continent. Distracted from his task when his ship, *Endurance*, was crushed in the ice, Shackleton and his small crew spent the next few years hopping ice floes and gobbling wildlife until he crossed the ocean in a puny boat, scaled cliffs on a remote southern island, and then strolled into a whaling station to ask for assistance. Shackleton had long since canceled his trans-Antarctic expedition, but the men at Cape Evans didn't know that. They dug through crates of musty supplies, scavenging materials for a futile sled journey to establish a supply line for an expedition that would never arrive.

Six of the men sledged continuously for seven months. They wore pants made from an old tent, shoes made from fur sleeping bags; their lives depended on worn tents and defective primus stoves left behind by Scott. They traveled in blizzards. Frostbite covered their faces. One of the party, Mackintosh, reported that his ear had turned a pale green and that his feet were "raw like steak." Fellow adventurer Ernest Joyce wrote that his nose was "one black blister."

On the return journey, the supply depots laid, they began to starve. Joyce wrote that, despite the help of their four dogs, they were still only "crawling three miles in ten hours—our food, biscuit crumbs and cocoa." They gulped down filthy wads of seal meat scraped from the bags that had held the dogs' food. Then, with no food and no fuel, they had to take supplies from the

depots they had risked their lives to establish. Their salvaged tent split in the wind. While two of the men made repairs, fumbling a needle with frostbitten fingers, Hayward began ranting: "We can have meat. We can kill one of the dogs and eat its flesh. That would keep us alive." Horrified, they shushed him, imagining their black lot without the dogs there to pull their pitiful effects through the bleak nightmare.

Besides freezing and starving, they suffered from scurvy. They tied lengths of bamboo behind their knees to keep their legs from curling irreversibly while they slept, a symptom of the illness. Mackintosh, the leader of the expedition, was delirious with the disease. His gums were swollen, his knees were black and bent, and he conversed with imaginary visitors to his tent. A priest brought along on the expedition was strapped in his sleeping bag to a sled pulled by the limping men and the dogs, popping opium tablets from the medicine kit, reciting Bible verses, and bleeding steadily from the ass. He died as they approached the safety of Discovery Hut, south of Cape Evans, another shelter left by Scott.

At Discovery Hut their worst problems would be alleviated. There would be shelter, a stove, and plenty of seals. Crewman Richards wrote that as the expedition neared the hut, he "had the strongest desire to rush to one of those animals and cut its throat and drink the blood that... would hose from its neck... the blood for which my body was crying out." They arrived to find the emergency hut half full of snow and had to enter through a window. Richards wrote, "There was absolutely nothing in the way of general provisions—no flour, no sugar, no bread. The sole food we had from the middle of March until the middle of July—four whole months—was seal meat. That is all we had—morning, noon, and night." For those long stormy months, recovering from their crippling afflictions, the men gorged on seal and huddled from draughts behind a heavy canvas curtain, blackened by smoke from the seal blubber they burned in a corner of the frozen hut, which still stands just across the bay from McMurdo Station.

McMurdo lies in the shadow of Mount Erebus, a smoldering volcano encrusted with thick slabs of ice. To make room for McMurdo, a ripple of frozen hills on the edge of Ross Island have been hacked away to form an alcove sloped like the back of a shovel, and then affixed with green and brown cartridges with doors and windows. Silver fuel tanks sparkle on the hillside like giant watch batteries. As if unloosed from a specimen jar, a colony of

machines scours the dirt roads among the simple buildings, digesting snow and cargo dumped by the wind and the planes, rattling like cracked armor and beeping loudly in reverse.

McMurdo is the largest of three³ year-round American stations in Antarctica. With a summer population of around 1,200, one need not greet a passing stranger outside or in the halls. Some people drive to lunch. People like McMurdo for the natural beauty that surrounds it, and dislike it because it is loud, crowded, and industrial. In the distance, framed by ratty utility poles and twisted electrical lines, the gleaming mountains of the Royal Society Range spill glaciers that glow like molten gold onto the far rim of the frozen white sea, on which planes land, out near all the buildings with skis. Near Castle Rock, skiing toward Mount Erebus, in the middle of nowhere, you can stop at the bright red emergency shelter that looks like a giant red larva and call your bank⁴ to dispute your credit card fees.

The town bustles in the summer with ships, helicopters, planes, cranes, and semis. It is the coastal hub for infiltrating the rest of the continent. By plane or helicopter, equipment and supplies radiate outward from McMurdo to field camps and to Pole, the second largest year-round base, which is officially called "Amundsen-Scott Station." The name is mildly embarrassing, and seldom used except in government documents and such. Roald Amundsen was the first person to reach the South Pole. His men and his dogs made it to Pole a month before Robert Scott. Amundsen also made it out of Antarctica alive, whereas Scott is still encased in the ice like an insect in amber. Amundsen's account of his journey is matter-of-fact, while Scott's is a heroic tale of nationalist sacrifice. Uncertain whether to honor the winner or the team player, the U.S. has given its allegiance to the hyphen. Workers usually call it "Pole." It is a smeared fleck on a hulking lobe of ice called the Polar Plateau, 800 miles inland from McMurdo, where there are no seals, whales, penguins, or ships. Pole is surrounded by a desert of ice, around which the eye glides without traction inevitably back to the crawling machines, the drums of solvent, and the clusters of cargo that, more than penguins or icebergs, characterize daily life in the United States Antarctic Program, known locally as "The Program."

The first science foundation—which fostered the work of Euclid, the first star map, the calculation of the earth's diameter, and an inkling of the steam-engine—was established in the third century B.C. by Ptolemy I. The National Science Foundation—the federal agency that manages the United

States Antarctic Program—was established during the Cold War by Congress. Ptolemy’s ancient think tank, history’s first endowment of science, was headquartered in Alexandria, Egypt. NSF is headquartered near Alexandria, Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Congress passed the National Science Foundation Act of 1950 to “promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare; and to secure the national defense.” In Antarctic brochures, NSF describes itself merely as “the U.S. Government agency that promotes the progress of science.” Someone exposed only to such brochures or to newspapers might get the inaccurate impression that most Americans in Antarctica are scientists or researchers.

Most of the population work for NSF’s prime support contractor, which employs everyone from dishwashers and mechanics, to hairdressers and explosives-handlers. All prime support contractors in U.S. Antarctica have been subsidiaries of defense contractors since Holmes & Narver assumed operational control of South Pole Station in 1968. ITT Antarctic Services held the contract in the 1980s. And Antarctic Support Associates (ASA), a joint venture of defense giants EG&G and Holmes & Narver, held the contract until 2000, when ASA was displaced by Raytheon Polar Services Company (RPSC), a subsidiary of Raytheon Company. While the National Science Foundation is known as a proud sponsor of public television programming, Raytheon is known for making the Exoatmospheric Kill Vehicle and other top-shelf weapons systems.

In U.S. parlance, all 5.4 million square miles and 7 million cubic miles of ice that make up Antarctica are “The South Pole.” This is understandable, because from that royal dot have arisen many of the greatest tales of misery and suffering by those whose bodies are scattered across the wasteland. The South Pole, an abstract natural nonlandmark, has no visible identifying characteristics, which only adds to its elusiveness and mystique.

In Antarctic parlance, all of the United States divides into “Washington,” referring to NSF’s sphere of influence, and “Denver,” referring to a vague suburban belt of Sheratons and brewpubs on the outskirts of Denver, where the support contractor has long been headquartered. Toward Denver is the most immediate over-the-shoulder check for the Antarctic lackey. “I’m going to have to ‘okay’ that with Denver first,” they say, or “I’m not the one who made the decision—if you have a problem with it, talk to Denver.” Denver is where most of the managers and full-time employees work, and where strategies

for improving morale are formulated. Some of the clocks in McMurdo and at South Pole are set to Denver time.

I had just arrived back in McMurdo for my third summer, but this time I would stay for the winter also: a year contract. I was in Sid's room with him and Milo, upstairs in 155. I had expected them to be wild-eyed and deranged, with big beards and lips glistening with spittle, but Sid and Milo, both on the tail end of a winter contract, didn't look so bad. Sid's face looked a bit pasty, and Milo was a little haggard, but overall they seemed fit and tranquil. A few minutes after I greeted them I realized that the winter-overs were emitting a low harmonic drone that I was overwhelming with my turbulent piercing chatter. While they were calm and steady, thoughtful and deliberate, I had arrived with the agitated enthusiasm of one who has had a break from the ice.

The curtains were open to admit the perpetual summer sun.

"I got in trouble for making toast this winter," said Milo.

All winter Milo often chose to eat toasted bagels rather than attend the meals, because in the winter simple tiresome food can become preferable to elaborate tiresome food. Because there are no restaurants, a small supply of basic foods in the Galley is available for 24-hour community access. Milo said the trouble had begun at Winfly, when the Galley reopened after remodeling, during which the winter-overs had eaten in the library. Once the Galley had been renovated, meals were served there, and the library once again became the library. One of the features in the new Galley was a heavy black curtain that could be drawn to separate the dining area from the service area. The curtain was useful at the end of meal periods for keeping mobs of people from retrieving second helpings while the Galley staff cleared away the hot trays of teriyaki chicken and Hungarian goulash.

Milo was one day toasting a bagel from the bread tray when the DA screamed at him from across the room and rushed over.

"You can't come behind the curtain during non-meal times!"

"I'm making toast," he said.

"You can only use the Galley during mealtimes."

"I always eat toast."

"You can only use the Galley during mealtimes."

He ignored her and left with his bagel.

Later Milo discovered that since the heavy black curtain had come into

play, the DA had been yelling at others also, so he wrote her an email saying that she had no good reason to yell at anyone.

When she read the email she burst into tears and ran to HR. The email was abusive and threatening, she said, so Milo was brought into HR for questioning. The HR Person read the email, and asked Milo if he would be willing to apologize to the DA. He agreed to apologize, but then asked plainly:

“Is she allowed to yell at me and the others?”

“No,” said the HR Person.

“Can I get toast in the Galley anytime I want?”

“Yes,” said the HR Person.

Sid, whom I would be replacing as a Waste EO (Equipment Operator), ate his dinner from a blue Galley tray while explaining to me how the Housing Coordinator had received a death threat and then disappeared without warning six weeks ago. No one seemed to know just what the email threatened, but management had secretly flown the Coordinator out on one of the Winfly planes, which bring new employees and cargo near the end of winter, without listing her name on the flight manifest. This unheard-of departure from protocol added to the excitement and intrigue and promised to keep the incident on the grapevine for more than a week or two. Also, rumor had it the FBI was consulted.

The task of identifying the perpetrator of the threat was complicated by widespread dislike of the Housing Coordinator. During the winter months, winter-overs each have their own private room. Just before Winfly (the season from late August until summer begins in October) the Housing Coordinator had posted signs saying that the winter-overs would each get a roommate, without exception. Her math was poor. It was simply never the case that each of over 200 winter-overs was assigned a roommate, and old-timers who knew better wrote her emails demanding to know how the lucky few were going to be chosen to keep their private rooms. She replied that people were not paying for their rooms, that their “happiness” should fall “within the policies and procedures,” and that if they didn’t like it they should ask their managers if they could leave on the first plane out.

This type of counsel may have blunted contention had it come from someone more experienced, but she was a finge. This was her first year on the ice, so even though she had been appointed head of Housing, her authority was a mirage. She wrote, “I am in the position to implement and enforce the McMurdo Housing polices and I appreciate the full support that my superiors

in Denver have given me.” Afterward, she received the threat, and the company scoured the network records to determine when and whence the email was sent. Since the perpetrator had not logged on, Human Resources interrogated a woman who was sitting at another computer when the email was sent, asking who was beside her. She said she didn’t know.

With secrecy that caught everyone’s eye, the Housing lady was sent to Denver to finish out her contract, after which she was to be flown back to New Zealand to enjoy the fringe benefit of the typical post-ice holiday. As Sid scraped at something with potatoes in it, he pointed out that under the current plan, both the victim and the perpetrator⁵ would arrive in New Zealand upon completion of their winter contracts.

“Besides the death threat,” Sid concluded, “it was a pretty mellow winter.”

CHAPTER I NOTES

¹ “At nine in the morning of the next day we had our first opportunity of seal-hunting; a big Weddell seal was observed on a floe right ahead. It took our approach with the utmost calmness, not thinking it worth while to budge an inch until a couple of rifle-bullets had convinced it of the seriousness of the situation.” – Roald Amundsen

² “Perhaps the most interesting of all the reactions between the Antarctic environment and the temperament of the explorer occurs during the catastrophic period of expeditions. For the sake of clearness, this heading also needs subdivision as there are several possible types of catastrophe worthy of separate consideration. Thus we have:

1. The detention or loss of the ship in pack ice.
2. Catastrophes affecting individual sledge parties.
 - a. The starvation of an inland party.
 - b. The marooning of a portion of an expedition with inadequate resources on an unknown coast.
3. Polar madness generally.” – Raymond Priestly

³ Palmer Station, the newest and the smallest of the three stations, is seldom discussed at the other stations. Palmer lies across the continent, on the life-infested Antarctic Peninsula, which has been called “the banana belt of the Antarctic.” While McMurdo has dirty skua gulls that

pester, Palmer has exciting seals that attack; while Pole has a rowing machine in the weight room, Palmer has sleek black rubber speedboats; while McMurdo and Pole share the bureaucracy of a thousand warring subcommittees, Palmer seems merely a nice family. When Palmer arises in conversations at McMurdo or Pole, our eyes roll back in our heads and our quivering tongues sparkle, like hogs envisioning a great feed. But mostly, we don't talk about Palmer, because it seems a different world.

⁴ When trying to explain to a bank customer service representative why you don't have a phone number, or why your address has a U.S. postal code but that you can't step into the nearest bank branch to re-key your PIN because the bank cancelled your old cash card, the friendly customer service representative will hang up on you about 50 percent of the time as soon as you utter "Antarctica." After trial and error, the best workaround solution when trying to conduct business from Antarctica is to say that you are at a "foreign military installation."

⁵ Throughout the summer I made known to many my interest in the details of this story, and over a year later I received an email from a dummy account by an anonymous person who claimed to have sent the death threat. "Annoniemaus" wrote: "Basically [the Housing lady] was a jerk. Everyone I knew was upset about housing, and wherever I went people were talking about it, discussing it, and upset. I was actually quite fine about it, since the way things were going was how I expected them to go. [Her] being a jerk really didn't feel like that big of an inconvenience, but the more I was around it all, the more it bothered me that someone like [her] could run around affecting people's lives so uncaringly, and then act so poorly when she was questioned in any way. I thought about it. I thought about how there was no way to show her how it feels when someone screws with your life and you are helpless to effect any change. What I came up with may have seemed rather drastic, but even in retrospect I'm glad that I did it. I made up a dummy account, just like this one, by logging on to a computer without using my login name, and then sent [her] an email that said if I saw her off the ice I would punch her in the face, or something. I never had any intention of doing so. Not even a little. In fact, like I said, I wasn't involved in any of the housing drama. I merely wanted to let her know what it felt like when you have no control over a situation that is upsetting and affects your life. Simple."