

*CHAPTER TEN*

THE ANTARCTIC  
SERVICE AWARDS

*We live in a golden age of science, which we hope will continue to unlock the secrets of the unknown for the benefit of all humankind.*

– Dr. Neal Lane, NSF Director

*Great holes secretly are digged where earth's pores ought to suffice, and things have learnt to walk that ought to crawl.*

– H. P. Lovecraft

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON  
June 19, 2001

I am pleased to send warm greetings for Midwinter's Day 2001 to the scientists, researchers, and other professionals from around the world who are stationed in Antarctica. This June 21 observance is a special time to recognize your contributions to learning and knowledge.

More than 40 years ago, 12 nations pledged their commitment to a unique experiment based on international cooperation, scientific

understanding, and peaceful co-existence. The Antarctic Treaty brought together an international community of scientists to collaborate on new discoveries and shared global problems.

Today, the international science community working in Antarctica is carrying on this proud legacy, helping us to learn more about global processes affecting Earth's environment. Consequently, we will have the solid scientific information we need to develop sound environmental policies. Exciting discoveries, like the recent astrophysical breakthroughs in understanding the nature of the Universe at its infancy, also inspire young people to sharpen their math and science skills and to prepare for the opportunities of tomorrow.

The United States is proud to support your important work in Antarctica. Your spirit of cooperation, demonstrated recently by an international effort to rescue a sick colleague at the South Pole, inspires people everywhere. I applaud you for your courage and professional dedication as you work in a tough and unforgiving environment.

As you observe Midwinter's Day 2001, I send best wishes for a productive and rewarding experience in Antarctica. May God bless you and bring you safely home to your families.

George W. Bush

McMURDO STATION  
ANTARCTICA  
July 4, 2001

Dear Mr. Bush,

Thank you very much for your warm Midwinter's Day greeting. Midwinter's Day is an important holiday for us in Antarctica as it marks the halfway point of our service to international scientific cooperation this winter. I wish to return your acknowledgment of our holiday here with the warmest greetings for you on Independence Day.

Though I am a garbageman and I spent Independence Day sorting through vomit-covered aluminum cans, the warm glow of your Midwinter's Day greeting reminded me of my contribution to learning and knowledge. In your letter you addressed "scientists, researchers, and other professionals" so I have humbly included

myself in the greeting. Actually, at McMurdo, the largest U.S. station in Antarctica, there are exactly zero scientists serving here this winter. There is a science tech who fixes some of the automatic data collecting machines. He must be the researcher you mentioned. The other two hundred of us contract-workers such as janitors, plumbers, and construction workers must be the other professionals you mentioned. I'm glad we are helping students become better at math and science. In all honesty, I was never very good at math or science, which might be why my clothes caught on fire today while I was grinding down the surface of a dumpster for repairs. I am very good at reading and writing though. Perhaps you could send a greeting to U.S. students to tell them that math and science will help them be a fraction of the Antarctic population while reading and literature will help them be garbagepersons with burning clothes.

Of course, one of the greatest benefits of serving international scientific cooperation in Antarctica is the natural beauty that we encounter as we do our daily work. The storms are fantastic to see, and bright green auroras sometimes appear in the sky. Actually, because of the streetlights at McMurdo, we can't see the auroras unless we travel about a mile out of town. Recently we have been forbidden to do so by the National Science Foundation, the government agency who runs the station, because all the vehicles, here in this cold desolate place where we eke out our existence in unspeakable polar climes in service of science, are government property and we are told that if we drive away to look at auroras for ten minutes we will be terminated. Since you are in charge of the government, I was wondering if you could give us permission to use the government property vehicles to drive one mile out of town for ten minutes when we see an aurora in the sky, not more than once per week, say, just to be fair. We could walk out to see the auroras, I suppose. Today the temperature here was -32F and windchills were below -80F. How cold is it in Washington D.C.?

With all respect, I hope you had a glorious and heartwarming Independence Day full of amazing friendship.

Darin Nicholas Johnson

I realized one week in early July that it had become difficult to imagine being elsewhere. At the end of each day I stood at the fuel pumps looking down at the ice pier while my loader filled with diesel, then drove away with no one to pay. We filled five-gallon juice coolers in the office of the Heavy

Shop when we needed water for the break shack. We lived within a two-minute walk of a meal prepared by someone else. We knew each other too well. We received mail according to weather and season. We saw everywhere at all times ice-covered roads, tendrils of snow, growing drifts, diesel smoke, and lines of dumpsters. I practically lived in a Caterpillar—what would I do elsewhere when I needed to move a five-ton steel box? I could barely remember how things were anywhere else.

I mumbled this to Jane (“Caterpillar allatime. No grocery shopping”). She agreed that our routines were overwhelming. She pointed out that to walk into the Galley and sit down with a table of people one didn’t normally sit with would be a very strange thing. Though we still had a few months left, the social code discouraged new relationships. If you didn’t know someone already, there was little chance left in the season of getting to know him or her, although when the Winfly crowd arrived the winter-overs would all nod at each other in the halls. Our cliques had solidified, comfortable and courteous, with a tinge of uneasiness marring any extraordinary encounter.

Ivan and I began to play *Tomb Raider* on weekday evenings, whereas previously we had only played on the weekends. After playing the game for a few hours here and there all winter, we were on the last level. Once a level is completed (weapons found, foes killed, treasures collected), a short animation rewards the video-narcotized gamer with the next installment in the game’s story. The ravenous treasure-seeking and slaughter of wild dogs overshadow the finer points, but in *Tomb Raider 3* the story goes something like this: You are out to collect ancient artifacts also sought by other forces, both evil and good. One of the evil forces is a company that uses the ancient magic of the artifacts to mutate humans into murderous monstrosities. After three or four levels, after you have collected all the artifacts you thought necessary to complete the game, a purportedly good force shows itself to be an agent of the evil company and steals all your artifacts. Now, in order to complete the game, you must battle the company at its research headquarters to regain the artifacts that you worked so hard for. On the next level you are surrounded by ice and snow in Antarctica.

We battled half-seal, half-human mutants and researchers with red parkas and automatic weapons. We stepped over their corpses and rummaged through their offices looking for clues to the whereabouts of our artifacts. On the office walls were maps of Antarctica just like ours.

“Dude, do you think we’re the first in Antarctica to get to Antarctica?” I asked Ivan. “Mutant.”

“I see it.” Ivan dispatched the mutant with a shot to the head. “Good question.” He shrugged with his eyebrows. “Even if we’re not, we’re probably the first in Dorm 207 to get to Antarctica. And if that’s not somethin’ to be proud of, then I’ll let that mutant eat my head.” Ivan shot the mutant.

We also began to watch more TV. Ivan and I held weekly gatherings to watch old *Star Trek*. We watched *Star Trek* because outer space is where it’s at. It’s the final frontier, not some half-assed backwater frontier. On *Star Trek* there was no chance that once they entered the darkest reaches of space the criteria for their ten-year mission bonuses would be rewritten. When a succubus on an alien planet sucked the salt from a red shirt’s husked corpse, the Enterprise Safety Department didn’t remind the crew that alien succubi “are your responsibility.” Mr. Spock didn’t perform mind melds on the crew, send the results off to Starfleet Command, and then tell the crew that the results of the mind melds were none of their business. Unless they had been infected by a malicious energy vortex, the crew was not tense and angry, and we could presume that those who liked to direct plays or play music or write newsletters were free to do so without interference from Captain Kirk, who couldn’t hide his annoyance whenever he encountered totalitarian alien cultures. The Enterprise, whatever its faults, did not need a Quality Assurance Representative.

One day, as I was wearily loading pasta onto my lunch plate, Gail, the salad-maker who had taken me with her on the seal odyssey, came out of the kitchen to talk to me.

“You are going to love this,” she said. Gail was a fellow connoisseur of The Program’s small golden moments. I stepped away from the food line.

“The Galley’s about to run out of certain foods,” she said. “And underordering food is in the Galley metrics.”

“Metrics” is a potent word around town. The “metrics system” is one reason NSF slipped Raytheon the support contract. Each department has a “metric” that, if bungled, will reduce NSF cash to Raytheon at the end of the contract year. A command accompanied by “metrics” implies that all other concerns are overridden, as there will be a follow-up report during or after the task’s completion. “Metrics” means it’s time to bust ass. The power plant has a metric for minutes of power outage, Fuels has a metric for spills, and the

Galley has a metric for food supplies, so that Raytheon could take a pay cut if some staple were underordered. Gail said that after the recent food inventory had been completed, Denver instructed that nearly depleted items be kept in inventory so as to comply with the metric. This meant that if, for instance, the Galley had only one more case of powdered milk, it was to remain in the warehouse so that, on the books, milk had not been underordered. No milk would be served, but milk would officially be in adequate supply.

In mid-July, just before one of our monthly two-day weekends, we received an email saying that a problem with the water intake pipe had left the town officially on water shortage. We were supposed to cut back on showers, do no laundry, and eat from paper plates in the Galley.

The email had little effect. It was hard to imagine dying from thirst. While we could imagine getting permanent nerve damage from exposure to fuel, or falling in a crevasse, or dying from exposure in a snowbank, it was impossible to imagine being in a nice hot shower that suddenly ran dry, or trying to suck dribbles from the drip tube beneath the ice machine. It was hard to imagine this when we could melt snow in the microwaves in our rooms.

One morning someone posted this flyer in several places along Highway 1:

DUE TO WATER SHORTAGE, RESTRICTIONS WILL BE  
IMPLEMENTED AS FOLLOWS:

Job Points + (.125 x Months on Ice)  
= Gallons H<sub>2</sub>O/Day  
All Allocations Non-Transferable  
STRICTLY ENFORCED  
Have a nice day...

At this time the baker had been on an unofficial strike for a few days.<sup>1</sup> Her desserts were exceptionally good and often elaborate, but the community that gobbled them in great quantities had shown no gratitude for her efforts. Her means of protest was to put out pre-packaged frozen baked goods: small crumbly apple and cherry pies still in the tins, “confetti cake” with multicolored sprinkles still on the cardboard circle, and factory-made cookies. Many thought nothing of it, and some were happy for more familiar fare, but a few pastry-snobs could be seen at the dessert counter grumbling, “confetti cake.”<sup>2</sup>

The baker's protest—that people in a community should be grateful for each other—rested on misconceptions about the town. When one thinks of a town of a few hundred, one imagines the local shopkeeper sweeping his sidewalk and sneaking free candy to the children. Old men in rocking chairs pet dogs at sunset and wave to passing visitors. One might even expect such things of a small town in Antarctica, without the dogs and children of course, and expect firm handshakes to be delivered after the local barnraising for the newest office module.

In reality, the little polar town has a strict division of labor, and neighboring departments try to foist responsibility on each other for even the most inexpensive cargo damage. Overt interdepartmental favors, such as loaning tools or materials, chap the hide of anyone invested in the chain of command. There is the occasional exhortation to departments to work together better, but efforts to that end generally implode on conception, because scapegoating is the primary form of interdepartmental communication. New bureaucracy-busting plans are forever being formulated and implemented. Progress is achieved by addition, never by subtraction. In every department, people are busy at their jobs. The repaired truck goes out and a broken one comes in. A mopped floor is dirty again within minutes. Dumpsters never stop filling up. FEMC has two years worth of backlogged work orders. The desserts get eaten as fast as they're made. Everyone works in the same ceaseless tide. Pats on the back seem as pointless as heating a shack that has no door. Supervisors have been criticized for writing positive evaluations.

Though the advantages of a rigid division of labor are obvious in the weekly reports and spreadsheets, the disadvantages appear as mysterious aberrations, as problems to be solved individually. A sensitive baker realizes the icy divisions and brings attention to them, if only for a pat on the back. The Operations Manager calls on our sense of community so a water shortage doesn't affect operations.

But that's not our department.

On the Sunday of our two-day weekend, we voted to decide the Winter-Over 2001 t-shirt design. The winning design would be emailed to New Zealand and the shirts sent down at Winfly. There were about ten designs hung in Highway 1 for consideration. Laz submitted a design with a generic male figure fucking a screaming penguin. Above it was the ordinance from the Antarctic Treaty that disallows "molestation" of animal life without a permit

from NSF. The pocket design said, "Sure, I fuck penguins, so what?" This sketch was covered with a piece of paper warning that the design might offend. Some of the others were polished four-color Photoshop efforts featuring unmolested penguins. One had penguins holding hands (wings, actually), with Antarctica at the top of the globe.

One design was from someone who apparently learned to draw by studying fusion-rock album covers from the 1970s. It showed a penguin waving a cowboy hat and riding an angry unicorn with flames pouring from its nostrils. The crazed unicorn was charging through wispy blue strands of wind erupting from the mouth of a blue cloud with crazed eyes. The cloud's breath coagulated to read, "Ridin' out the storm." The design with the penguins holding hands won with about 30 votes.

The next day we got an email saying that the problem with the intake valve had been fixed and the water shortage was over. "It's amazing how a community can come together during a crisis like that," Ivan said.

The hint of dark blue in the sky and the imminent arrival by plane of the t-shirts reminded us that Winfly was just around the corner. Winfly, the season from mid-August to early October, brings two opposing emotions: relief that soon you will be in Christchurch lavishly spending instead of working, and disgust that from the first Winfly flight until then you will once again cram together with a roommate, find the Galley crowded, and encounter daisy-fresh assholes running around asking where you're from. Yet, a lot of friends would fly in, there would be new women around (or "Winfly Pussy" as Jane liked to say), and there would be furious storms, so Winfly was not without welcome diversions.

But even though we spotted Winfly on the horizon, it was still very much winter. Ted the Racist was fired from the Heavy Shop. He had already been banned from buying alcohol and from going in the bars, and now he had pulled a knife on someone, which was important news for the Projected Mayhem Index, though the asbestos incident had confounded our notion of what constituted mayhem, resulting in a kind of Mayhem Inflation that calloused our senses. Ted the Racist was still receiving paychecks, but no bonus, and was technically still hired as a "consultant." Whatever the official reason for this, we knew the paychecks were a payoff so he didn't go apeshit and hurt someone.

The Heavy Shop was bubbling with unrest. The mechanics were

grumbling. The Heavy Shop foreman had been promoted this year from his previous position as a welder, despite having one season attacked the stereo with a hammer. Now that he was foreman, he simply turned up the shop radio if the mechanics were playing country, and turned it off when they were playing classic rock, even though he spent most of his time in the office.

He decreed that bumper stickers were to be removed from every machine in the fleet when they came in for maintenance. None of the stickers were remarkable, usually asking “Where the heck is Wall Drug?” or advertising some podunk bar in the remote Midwest. The Heavy Shop GA, charged with scraping the stickers from the machines, was soon told to make exceptions for certain stickers: one for “This is a non-smoking vehicle,” and one for “Idaho” (the foreman’s home state). Jeannie asked the GA about the “Visualize Whirled Peas” sticker on the fuel truck. The GA said that the foreman hated it most of all, and that the policy was probably an effort to get rid of that one sticker.

The Firehouse was also having troubles. Because of air quality problems caused by the Firehouse ventilation system, the firefighters had been moved to 155 to sleep during their shifts. One of the firefighters had reported to Medical with complaints of nausea, dizziness, and chest pain. When other firefighters reported similar symptoms, the doctor researched the effects of long-term exposure to fumes of the jet fuel that heats the building and found it could lead to convulsions and death, so he brought the problem to the attention of Safety.

Safety was too busy formulating emails about the importance of reducing the overall injury rate to futz with nonscientific, subjective symptoms.<sup>3</sup> One of the firefighters wrote an email to her mother about the bad air, and her mother became concerned. She contacted OSHA, who suddenly had no weight in Antarctica, before calling NSF, who didn’t respond. Finally the angry mother contacted a North Dakota senator who faxed a letter to NSF, at which point the firefighters were immediately moved out of the firehouse to sleep in 155 until the ventilation problem was fixed. The whole mess was covered in the *Bismarck Tribune*.

By the end of July, Bighand was officially cut off from the bar. The Station Manager began looking out his office window a lot, reporting people who didn’t stop completely at one of the few stop signs in town. Some days were so cold that the hydraulics on the machines barely moved. During these spells,

the metal baler could barely even crush a barrel. Tires would freeze with flat spots overnight, and our machines sprang glycol leaks every couple of days and had to be taken to the Heavy Shop.

At the end of July there was an All-Hands Meeting at which the Housing Coordinator, a cheerful woman named Ellie who was universally described as nice, explained the Winfly Housing rules and expectations for room inspections. She said that we had three chances to pass inspection, with penalties from \$350 to \$500 if we didn't pass the third. Her PowerPoint presentation explained room assignment, with a humorous theme of "It's Not Me," pointing out that all Housing allocations were made in Denver. Friends chose friends to move in with, and others opted for random roommates who would come in at Winfly.

Ivan and I decided to share a room in 155. For a few hours here and there after work throughout the end of July, we cleaned our trusty winter rooms and prepared to move. Once Ivan began choking up:

"Remember that time I was cleaning the shower and you were cleaning the toilet? Ah, those were good times, weren't they?"

"Yes, they certainly were, my friend, they certainly were. Remember that time I needed the Comet when you were finished with it?"

"I do remember that, as if it were yesterday. Those were golden days, my friend. Remember that time I was cleaning the shower and you had to hold your horses for the Comet? Remember that?"

"Like a withered blossom clutching but the memory of fragrance I do. Flawless times, flawless. Hand it over."

"Great god, what an awful stain! I am scrubbing the shower, and I may be some time."

On August 1, Winfly room assignments were posted on the Housing bulletin board. There were problems, and the grapevine throbbed with controversy. Half the window rooms in 155 had been reserved for Winfly people, so a steamed winter-over wrote to Denver Housing: "You are telling me I am unable to get a room with a window because somebody who has been in Denver or any other place with 'sunlight' for the past seven months needs one more?"

Some people who'd selected Winfly roommates were instead given random winter-over roommates or told to move to different dorms. Jane, who had agreed to prepare for a Winfly roommate by the end of August, was told that another

winter-over was moving into her room and that she had to be ready for room inspection immediately. She thought it was just a paperwork error.

Jane went to the Housing Office. There, Franz told her to contact Debbie in Denver. Jane called Debbie one morning, while Thom and I were there drinking coffee. Debbie told Jane to talk to Franz. Jane told Debbie that Franz had told Jane to talk to her. There was talk of “miscommunication” concerning the Housing policy, and Jane asked what, exactly, the Housing policy was currently. We couldn’t hear what Debbie said, but Jane responded, “I’m not being unreasonable.”

Following the phone conversation, Jane wrote an email to Franz telling him that she had consulted Debbie in Denver, as he had suggested, without satisfactory conclusion, and that Debbie wouldn’t tell her what the new Housing policy was.

Franz immediately sent for Jane to come to the Chalet for a meeting with him and Ike, the Operations Manager, for whom we all had great respect. Jane asked Ike if this was a disciplinary meeting, and he told her it was not—otherwise HR would be involved. Franz eventually told her that if she didn’t comply with her Housing assignment by August 8, her bonus would be affected.

The hardships of moving one’s clothes and books and wall hangings and junk to a different dorm in Antarctica in one’s spare time are unlikely to stir the sympathies of even the busiest packrat, and are ultimately of minor importance, just as the South Pole itself is little more than an unremarkable point in a landscape of unrelenting monotony. But Jane’s Housing struggle is illustrative. There were a few different forces at work. An order to move immediately, retracting the options given at the All-Hands Meeting, was in practice an order to work longer days. NSF policy is that no one will get time off work to move, and to vacate and clean quarters inhabited for a year takes more time each night if done within one week rather than five. Most important in this story of a doomed struggle against power, August 8, the date by which Jane was supposed to have vacated and cleaned her room, was an arbitrary date set roughly two weeks before the first Winfly flight, a line drawn in the sand.

Jane had always put in longer workdays if it was necessary, but to do so because of a management “miscommunication,” and with no benefit to anyone, seemed unnecessary to Jane. Until the first flight arrived three weeks from now, her existence in one room or another made only the difference between two cells in a spreadsheet.

For working outside in the wind and cold, shoveling, sawing, welding, whatever it is that you do, The Program, in periodic memos and emails, will tell you that you've made a "sacrifice" for "science." But the cold doesn't consider your sacrifice. The cold doesn't care about you one way or another. The cold is not trying to use you in a media spin. Nor is it trying to make an example of you. You do not blame it, begrudge it, or believe you can profit from an insincere alliance with it. Your experience with the cold is so personal that you hardly ever mention it.

To work a long day in the cold was one thing, but to give up even ten hours of spare time for a low-ball glitch in paperwork, visible to everyone involved, was not the kind of sacrifice Jane wanted to make.

Franz: What you're trying to get at—you're trying and trying and trying and trying to do everything you can to stay in your room—

Jane: To make something fair—

Franz: Right. And I'm saying you've got two choices, because that's what policy decision—

Jane: Okay, if I don't move out of my room, I want to know what the consequences are going to be—

Franz: I'll write you up. It'll be documented and it will affect your bonus.

Jane: It'll affect my bonus how?

Franz: Because it's a written warning—

Jane: How does one write-up regarding not moving out of your room affect your bonus? Obviously I'll be recommended for Level A, B, or C. Does it move it down one level? Two levels?

Franz: I'll have to check with [the HR Guy], I'm not sure, but it's insubordination.

Jane: Can you get back to me with that in writing?

Franz: No.

Jane: Why?

Franz: Why, why, why is—

Jane: I want to know how my decisions are going to affect me. Why is that so surprising to you?

Franz: It's not surprising to me.

Jane: I want to make informed decisions.

Franz: Right. So one of your decisions is—okay, I've got these two Housing moves, or I could choose to stay where I am and accept the consequences of it—

Jane: Right.

Franz: —regardless of what those are.

Jane: No. I like to make informed decisions. That's why I want to know what the consequence will be if I get written up for not moving.

Franz: Then we'll just have to wait and see. I don't know—

Jane: . . . And I'm asking you to talk to [the HR Guy], find out, and to let me know before the 8<sup>th</sup>.

Franz: I don't think we can find out "hypothetically"—

Jane: You're asking me to move by the 8<sup>th</sup> but you can't find out the answer to a question by the 8<sup>th</sup>?

Franz: I probably could. —I don't understand why "why why why," Jane.

Jane: Why I'm upset?

Franz: No. I don't understand why you don't want to move. Why is this all so emotional and such a big deal for you? Why are you putting this much energy into this? I'm not sure what's behind it, to be honest with you. I mean, it's a very important deal with everybody in the community. I'm giving up a two-room suite with my own bathroom by myself for a roommate.

[Long discussion about the particulars of Jane's Housing status, housing points, job points, etc.]

Jane: Why can't I take until Winfly? Why is that a problem?

Franz: I don't know. I don't know who's coming in at Winfly. I don't know what their Housing points are—

Jane: If I agree to the move, or to have [Sasha] move in with me, why can't we take until two days before Winfly, which is the original time I was planning on—it's still a huge change to move instead of having someone move in with you. Why can't you make that concession? Why can't you say "All right"? Do you know how much respect you'd get out of the community if you said, "Y'know what? This wasn't clear. It wasn't clear because it was our job to make it clear, and we didn't make it clear. Therefore, the few people it affects, we're going to make it right."

Franz: I think it's just unclear to you. I haven't had to have this conversation with anybody else.

Jane: Did you read [So-and-so's] email?

Franz: I did. And it's been resolved.

Jane: You just said it's only unclear to me. It wasn't clear to him either.

Franz: But now it is.

Jane: Because his request was met.

Franz: Right. And unfortunately we cannot meet your request.

[long silence]

Ike: From my perspective, I won't even speak on the Housing

policy because too many curse words will fly out of my mouth. Let's just say I have an issue with them as well. But let's talk about Jane. If you choose to stay in your room, against the policy and against the move, you're going to get written up. You've already got clarification on that. And if you are written up for insubordination from the station manager, I'm not going to be able to assign you anything more than a 2, if I'm very lucky. And I had planned on assigning you a Level 5 if at all possible. And that's why I wanted to sit down with you and talk about that. Now, whether or not this is fair, whether or not this even makes any sense, I don't want to see you lose anything you're due, even though it might be unfair to you, and it may be unfair all around—we'll have to figure that one out later—what I'm concerned about is you getting through the season and getting the fair bonus you deserve for the work you've done, and I don't want to see you lose that because of an incident that may or may not have been your fault, that may be in question. In the end, you're not going to win unless you follow what the rules are supposed to be. Whether or not they're fair.

After weighing principles versus hard economics, Jane decided to comply because, as she told me, it was a lot of money to lose just to prove you can't trust the company. That was the end of it, or so she thought, until the end of the season, when her bonus was cut anyway. The meeting was documented as justification for the cut, despite her compliance, which was soon forgotten.

Though Jane's eventual defeat would by any measure be a small and insignificant provincial affair, the story must continue, because there are details that will change the story from an isolated petty occurrence into a timeless story of the circular seasons of human vengeance. To get there, however, we must understand why, at the end of winter, Jane and the Denver Housing lady huddled together in a janitor's closet.

All year long Jane had received high marks for her periodic work evaluations. But when she received her year-end bonus evaluation, she found that her bonus had been slashed. Jane's evaluation reported that she had been "abusive" to Debbie, the Housing Coordinator in Denver. The evaluation referred to an "attached email" from Debbie that supposedly validated the accusation, but it was not attached, and no one knew where it was, or what it said. Regardless, Jane's evaluation documented that at the Chalet Meeting, "Jane was warned that her near abusive behavior was not going to be tolerated at all."

This was a false statement. I had insisted that Jane take my MiniDisc recorder to the meeting, so we knew that “abusive behavior” had not once been mentioned or otherwise brought into question. And because Thom and I were present for the phone conversation Jane had had with Debbie, we knew the basis of the claim was false as well, so we wrote witness statements attesting that Jane had said nothing that could have been considered “abusive.” “Abusive” denoted a spooky subset of “inappropriate” that, if unchallenged, could be met with financial retaliation, a red flag in the HR file, and possibly exile.

“If the call wasn’t abusive,” HR countered Jane, “then why did your employees write witness statements?”

Debbie, the alleged victim of Jane’s abuse, came down at Winfly. She spruced up the Housing bulletin board outside her office, adding to the printouts of room assignments and lists of “job points” that ranked employees by position a glossy poster of a multi-ethnic band of smiling youngsters beneath the phrase “Smiles are Contagious.”

Six weeks after she arrived, Debbie and Jane stepped into the supply closet to get away from the crowded and noisy Housing Office. Amid the ammonia smell and brown bundles of paper towels, they discussed the sudden year-end allegations against Jane. Debbie clarified that she had never said or written that Jane was abusive, and was in fact thankful for their positive interactions since Debbie had arrived at Winfly.

But in the course of this irregular meeting in the supply closet, Debbie talked frankly about how the atmosphere in Denver may have influenced Jane’s downfall. Over the tops of partitions decorated with photos of families and pets, Denver was still talking about the death threat from last winter.

“People were so worried that things were going to be horrible,” Debbie explained to Jane. “I think that they were being very protective of the Housing Office, and that’s why they made me do everything from Denver, which was kind of weird, to protect [Ellie]. And then somebody—it was a weird setup in Denver, you know how they have those office dividers—somebody came over and said, ‘Whoa, you were handling that person really well,’ and the scuttlebutt got around. Someone asked, ‘Are people beating up on you?’ And I said, ‘No, I’m fine.’ And they said, ‘Nononono, you need to let us know.’”

Management’s black eye at the hand of an anonymous winter-over was still remembered in the hive of Denver. Between cubicles, suburban office folk said that something should be done about it. Someone should pay for the

death threat. Though Jane had complied, she had first resisted, so she was as good as anyone to atone for events of the previous year, when the Housing Coordinator had told people that policy was none of their business, and in return had been offered a knuckle sandwich. Debbie told Jane, "They wanted to really nail people this year."

Using recording devices to document the behavior of the professional manager is an Antarctic tradition that dates back to at least the IGY in 1957, when scientists tape-recorded the conversations of Commanding Officer Finn Ronne, whose duplicitous documentation to his superiors was inconsistent with events as recorded by seismologist John C. Behrendt in his book *Innocents on the Ice*.

Behrendt records that Ronne censored the messages they sent out by radio, refused to let someone who'd crossed him send messages to his family, confiscated a book called *My Antarctic Honeymoon* that was critical of him, forbade the scientists from fraternizing with the enlisted men, objected to people shooting movies, threatened to lock one of the men in irons, shoved an ice pick in a penguin's eye, and even cheated at ping-pong. Ronne once referred to the field of exploration as "the last of an exclusive fraternity." Behrendt wrote of his time at Ellsworth Station: "[Trust among the crew] is the only thing that separates the atmosphere here from that of a totalitarian police state."

Meanwhile, Commander Ronne sent to the U.S. press releases full of glorious embellishments, which Behrendt recorded in his journals:

[6 May] Ronne sent another press release which is full of the distortions which I am now convinced that everyone who writes for the public about Antarctica is guilty of, e.g. "Suns rays dipped below the surface 24 April [not] to return until latter part of August. Those who braved elements topside -37°F, 18-mile wind witnessed beautiful sight whole northern heaven aflame." It was actually about 0°F to -5°F with little wind, and we just saw a little color where the sun was. "Temperature hovers between -26°F and -40°F." Actually the range has been around 10°F to -10°F the last couple weeks...

[25 May] Ronne sent out another press release. It was nauseating, filled with distortions... "Killer whale packs several dozen still poke pointed heads up through ordinary ice floes... Their mouthful of teeth and snorting sound makes one tremble because they will attack human beings every opportunity. They

are the man eaters of Antarctica, wild beasts of the sea. I thought they had withdrawn long ago." No one has seen a killer whale since we quit our seismic work at the tidal crack. "Your breath gives hissing reverberation. Moisture you exhale immediately freeze[s]. Ice crystals grind together as they leave nostrils or mouth. One of the strangest things about cold temperatures." I have yet to observe any phenomenon like this.

[23 June] Just before the movie, while I was taking a gravity reading, Ronne came in and went over a news release with Kim, on the aurora program. He borrowed our thesaurus a few days ago. Kim told him he thought it was too flowery. Ronne agreed but said that's the way the public wants it... Kim tried to tame him down but to no avail. Ronne described red rings around the moon, which nobody has seen, and depicted the aurora as being all colors of the spectrum. Kim did manage to stop this last statement; the only colors he (or anyone) has seen are green and very occasionally red. The Captain changed his statement to "a symphony of color passing in review." Kim told him that "symphonies don't pass in review." So he changed it to "a symphony of color parading in review."

During that time, the civilian scientists and some of the crew expressed themselves through numerous media: publishing an underground paper called *The Daily Sandcrab*<sup>4</sup>; keeping journals; drawing cartoons of the time Ronne slipped and fell on the ice and blamed someone else for his fall; sending coded radio messages (when one of them wrote to a friend "Fervently hope you can visit with resupply to observe firsthand activity here—including Caligulas Rain," Ronne asked what the latter term meant, and the scientist told him it was a geophysical term); and recording disciplinary meetings Ronne held in his room as well as radio conversations to his superiors in which he accused the scientists of "causing hatred and discord among the men."

Sasha's fall from the good graces of The Program began late one evening in July. She and a couple of friends had been chatting over a bottle of wine in the deserted Galley when Franz passed through, perhaps to fetch toast or bug juice, and approached their table.

"I don't want to be a dick about it," he said, "but you can't drink wine in the Galley."

“I thought that was just in the summer,” Sasha said.

Franz said that wine wasn’t allowed in the Galley, even in the winter.

Later Sasha apologized to Franz: “I’m sorry we put you in a tough position.”

Franz, who didn’t drink at all, nodded and said, “I’m disappointed in you.”

Irritated by his moral bent, Sasha wrote to NSF asking about the policy, which had been initiated nine months earlier in the summer with this email:

To: McMurdo -- All  
Subject: Alcohol in Dining Facility

McMurdo Community,

The consumption of alcoholic beverages in the Dining Facility is not allowed, unless prior approval has been granted by the NSF Station Manager.

Generally, only the bars and the dorm lounges were good for drinking, because the Galley, with its fluorescent lighting and food court ambience, was an ugly place for a bender. Prohibited from something they seldom did anyway, much as if they had been forbidden to wear their shirts inside out, enough people nevertheless complained about the directive that an addendum came, explaining that the policy was “established over the concern that there may not be adequate seating in the dining area if people lingered at tables after their meals.” Now that the policy had been justified as for the good of the community, the barks of protest subsided.

Then in July, in the dead heart of winter, with the station population just over 200, in response to her question about why a policy to prevent overcrowding was enforced in the winter, Sasha received from NSF an email stating that the alcohol policy in the Galley “...was developed by the USAP Executive Management Board, which is made up of the Senior Representatives from each of the primary agencies (NSF, SPAWAR, 109th, CODE, RPSC).” The alcohol policy would have to be introduced “for reconsideration at the EMB meeting coming up in September. Any change to the current policy would have to be sanctioned by the EMB.” The policy initially willed by one local NSF manager and later rationalized as ensuring seating in the crowded summer had calcified over the course of the year into barnacled heritage through the inactivity of a hibernating

executive committee including government agencies, two offices of the military, and a corporation, all suddenly helpless to exercise power but for a small annual window period.<sup>5</sup>

On August 1 Sasha was also told to move from her room immediately, without the prior warning promised by the Housing Coordinator in June. Sasha had done six seasons, including winters, and she was fed up. She wrote a sarcastic email to Franz and Ellie asking if there were any other upcoming Sundays that she should plan on working. The next day Sasha was summoned into HR and written up for misconduct. The Counseling Notice said that Sasha's email had been "offensive and inappropriate."

Sasha wrote to Debbie in Denver asking for one extra week to move. Debbie replied that she wished she could grant additional time, but could not. Sasha wrote back, "I'm sorry you're not able or willing to compromise. I guess we're back to our starting point."

Sasha was brought into HR and written up again. The Counseling Notice said, "Sasha was asked to refrain from making any more communication of an unprofessional nature."

During this time, Sasha's supervisor, who had signed her disciplinary notices, called the doctor to find out why Sasha had recently visited Medical. The doctor warned Sasha's supervisor that her request could not be fulfilled lawfully.

On the day of room inspections, Sasha's room was the first to be inspected, at 8 a.m., by Ellie, the Housing Coordinator, who was known as one of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet. Sasha had cleaned her room well, and she passed inspection promptly. However, she had forgotten her wallet in one of the drawers, and Ellie put it in the skua pile in the hall. Ellie called Sasha at work, urging her to retrieve the wallet before someone took it.<sup>6</sup>

During room inspections that day, three people were issued fines of \$350 each on first inspection, despite the "three chances" that had been discussed at the All-Hands Meeting. A woman who had been in The Program for ten years was threatened with a bonus cut for leaving some shirts hanging in a wardrobe.

Ellie called the Paint Shop supervisor at 4 p.m. and told him that one of his staff, Ed, did not pass first room inspection and must go to his room immediately to finish cleaning it. Thus far we had been adamantly instructed that all room preparation was to be done outside of work time. The supervisor agreed to send Ed home to clean his room better. Ellie said to hold the line, then passed the phone to the HR Guy. The HR Guy told him to write up Ed for missing work.<sup>7</sup>

About this time, three TV stations and the radio feed went dead because of a problem out at Black Island. Apparently one of the vents was blocked with snow and some of the equipment was freezing. A party departed a few days later to fix it, and one of their vehicles caught fire a few miles out.

By mid-August we had light for about two hours a day, though the sun hadn't come over the horizon. Jane and I drove up to T-site with the loaders to change the cardboard and wood dumpsters. To the south, the sky was dark gray, and so was the ice shelf. The moon was huge, low, gold and streaked with black. To the north the sky was light with colors that predicted nacreous clouds. It takes about 20 minutes to drive from town to T-site in a loader, and at the top of the hill I noticed the view for the first time. All winter there had been no point in looking away from the station, because there was only darkness. The station had become everything. Even with the new light, the colorful moon and the mountains had almost not registered.

With Winfly imminent, one evening we had an Award Ceremony in the Galley. We received medals that read "Courage, Sacrifice, Devotion" and certificates that read, "In recognition of valuable contributions to exploration and scientific achievement under the U.S. Antarctica Research Program." At the bottom of the certificate was an official seal with a mighty eagle standing on a crest that depicted a test tube and a microscope before an ancient flaming lamp on an Egyptian pyramid. This was the old logo for the National Science Foundation, a relic of enticing Freemasonry, before democracy and public funding corrupted the elite society of science and the logo became a globe ensnared by a mob of generic human figures.

Franz brought out awards of recognition for some of the Galley staff for their hard work. A few weeks earlier the Galley staff had been unable to attend the traditional All-Station winter photo because it had been scheduled during lunchtime, so that other departments wouldn't miss a minute of work. Now, as Franz dispensed their awards, made from a template and printed in bright primary colors on the office printer, we applauded.

Just before the first Winfly flight, we had a final All-Hands Meeting. The NSF Rep read us a handful of dates and temperatures associated with Winfly, then reminded us not to get too territorial toward the Winfly people, as everyone had by now become protective of their favorite lunch tables and coat hooks. The doctor stood up and reminded us that Winfly marks the beginning

of “the crud,” a stew of freshly imported germs that would easily plow through our lazy immune systems.

Franz stood up and said niceties and then opened the floor for questions. I raised my hand and Franz called on me.

“Will our bonuses be affected if we ask questions at these meetings?” I asked. The Galley burst into laughter.

“Not if that’s your only question,” Franz said through the laughter.

“What other questions would affect my bonus?”

“I think it’s on the I-Drive,” he joked, and addressed the HR Guy at a table in front. “HR Guy—Disciplinary questions?” Now there was no laughter. “Did you have anything in particular?” he asked.

“I don’t want to get in trouble for asking questions.”

“Throw it out there,” he said.

“At one All-Hands Meeting we were told that we had three chances to clean our rooms...”

“Yep.”

“I heard a rumor that there’s up to three people who’ve been charged money and they haven’t had those three chances. I want to know if that rumor’s true.”

“If that’s the case,” Franz said, “it’s an HR issue which is confidential and none of any of our business.”

Franz covered the frosty ripple of murmurs by restating himself and someone mumbled “When are you gonna run for office?”

A woman got angry and stood up and asked Franz why we should be held accountable for violating publicly stated policies that were inaccurate and unreliable.

Franz listened to her politely, then said that whether it was one or two or a hundred people, it didn’t matter, and that it was a confidential HR issue.<sup>8</sup> Any more questions?

Silence.

I began clapping and a weak applause started and died quickly.

“Thank you,” said Franz, “that’s very sincere.”

Franz drew names out of a hat and gave us prizes of t-shirts and hats and other old stock that wouldn’t sell at the store.

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CHAPTER 10  
NOTES

<sup>1</sup> During Byrd's first expedition, the baker quit baking bread for a week to protest some of the crew's loud parties.

<sup>2</sup> "Talkers" are most obvious at the computers or in the Galley. "Potatoes," they say, as they scoop up potatoes. "One new message," they say as they check their email. "Glass," they say as they put a glass bottle in the glass bin at the recycling area.

<sup>3</sup> The Safety Department had once sent an email to all supervisors with the subject heading "Important Directive from Raytheon." The "important directive" was that future safety reports should be submitted in "10 pt Times New Roman Font."

<sup>4</sup> "Sandcrab," says Behrendt, is slang for "civilian."

<sup>5</sup> On October 26, 2000, in the afternoon, the Foreign Names Committee, with full endorsement of the Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names, officially declared, with electrifying decisiveness, that the ocean surrounding Antarctica might be addressed, for U.S. Government purposes, as the "Southern Ocean," as it has been illegitimately named for decades. The gravity of the landmark resolution was not lost on the reeling Committee, who wrote in their masterfully titled "Foreign Names Committee Report" that "The Committee's most significant decision during the reporting period [April–October 1999] was the adoption of the term Southern Ocean as a standard name for the body of water surrounding the continent of Antarctica." It took this network of responsive agencies just under one year to embrace the dream and, with it, to forge a new reality.

<sup>6</sup> In 1971 social psychologists at Stanford University put an ad in the paper for volunteers to join in a study of prison life for a wage of \$15 per diem. Of those who responded, two dozen participants were selected on the basis of their "normal, average, and healthy" responses during the psychological screenings. The participants were randomly divided into "guards" and "prisoners." The psychologists told the guards only to "maintain law and order," not to hit the prisoners with their billy clubs, and that if any prisoner escaped from the "prison" (the basement of the Stanford University psychology department—with offices converted into prison cells) then the experiment would be terminated. Other than that they were left to their own devices. The guards decided that the prisoners should refer to the guards as "Mr.

Correctional Officer,” while the prisoners were referred to by their numbers. On the second day, some of the prisoners ripped the numbers off their smocks and made fun of the guards. “The prisoners were punished in a variety of ways. They were stripped naked, put in solitary confinement for hours on end, deprived of meals and blankets or pillows, and forced to do push-ups, jumping jacks, and meaningless activities.” The guards also created a “privilege cell” where obedient prisoners were rewarded with better food and a good bed, which created “suspicion and distrust among the prisoners.” One of the experimenters wrote that “the group pressures from other guards had a significant impact on being a ‘team player,’ on conforming to or at least not challenging what seemed to be the emergent norm of dehumanizing the prisoners in various ways.” Before two full days had passed one of the prisoners was released by the psychologists for pathological reactions to stress. “[W]e worried that there had been a flaw in our screening process that had allowed a ‘damaged’ person somehow to slip through undetected,” wrote another of the experimenters in “The SPE and the Analysis of Institutions.” “If we can attribute deviance, failure, and breakdowns to the individual flaws of others, then we are absolved.” The guards woke the prisoners in the middle of the night, and tried to abuse the prisoners when they thought the psychologists weren’t watching, though the psychologists had secretly set up cameras. Another prisoner broke out in a full body rash and was released from the experiment. Though the study was meant to last two weeks, it ended after six days because the participants “were behaving pathologically as powerless prisoners or as sadistic, all-powerful guards.” The experiment was approved by the university’s Human Subjects Review Board on the condition that fire extinguishers be available, since access to the basement was limited. “Ironically, the guards later used these extinguishers as weapons to subdue the prisoners with their forceful blasts.”

<sup>7</sup> “At first, any suggestion of a comparison between people in the Antarctic who were in the mould of heroes with prisoners might seem to be either objectionable or fanciful. But both groups were in such geographical isolation and insulation from the outside world as to suggest that in some ways their behaviour might be similar... The prison analogy was to recur at different points in my research, and for me it now no longer remains an enigma. Essentially, adversity can be made tolerable when the boundaries of oppression are identified.” – A.J.W. Taylor, “Antarctic Psychology.” In a 1981 New Zealand study of the effects of Antarctic isolation on hypnotizability and pain tolerance, Paparua prison was used to simulate cramped Antarctic conditions for preliminary experiments with equipment before going into the field. (The results of this study showed that the sensory deprivation of Antarctic isolation increases hypnotizability. The Antarctic environment enhances the power of suggestion.)

<sup>8</sup> When I asked their manager about the “secret” fines, he wrote: “I knew exactly what the fines were for (as did the [fingee employees]), but I just disagreed with them. Essentially they couldn’t be Housing fines because all the people passed their room inspections within 24 hours of the first inspection. So, [Franz and the HR Guy] said they were for non-compliance—not following instructions, namely not having their room “ready for inspection.” [The HR Guy] insisted that they should get a written reprimand for failure to follow instructions and that one reprimand meant that they lost all their bonus. Management was being kind by only

fining them \$350 rather than taking all their bonuses. I disagreed with the written reprimand and also asked where it said that one meant a lost bonus. I never saw that in my Terms of Agreement, did you? At that point it just became a pissing contest to see who had the power, and they had the power.”