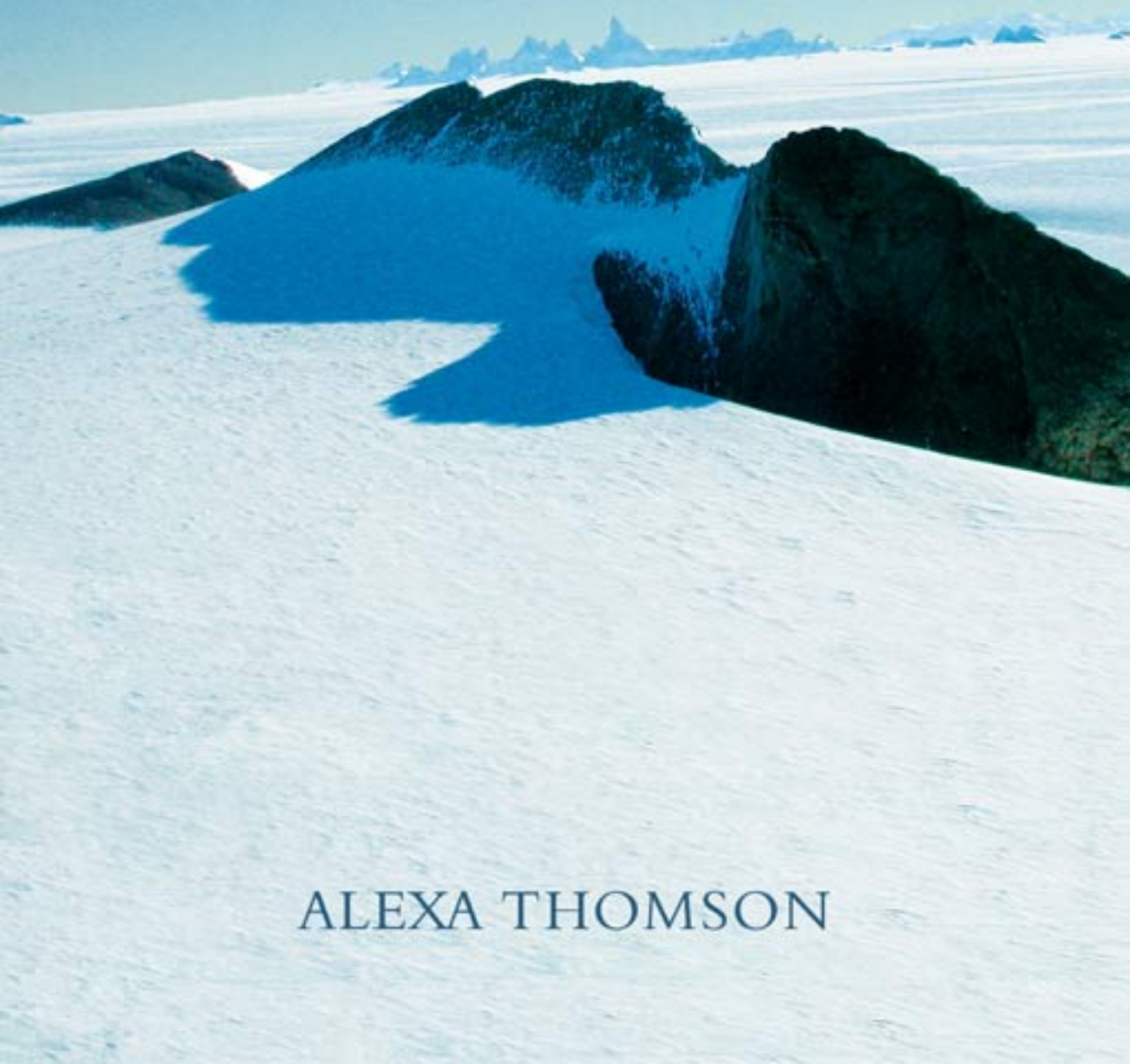


ANTARCTICA

ON A PLATE

MISADVENTURES OF A POLAR CHEF



ALEXA THOMSON

Miss Page

Antarctica on a Plate

First published by Random House Australia Pty Ltd in 2003

This edition published in 2005 by Summersdale Publishers Ltd.

Copyright © Alexa Thomson 2003

All rights reserved.

The right of Alexa Thomson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Condition of Sale

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent publisher.

Summersdale Publishers Ltd
46 West Street
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 1RP
UK

www.summersdale.com

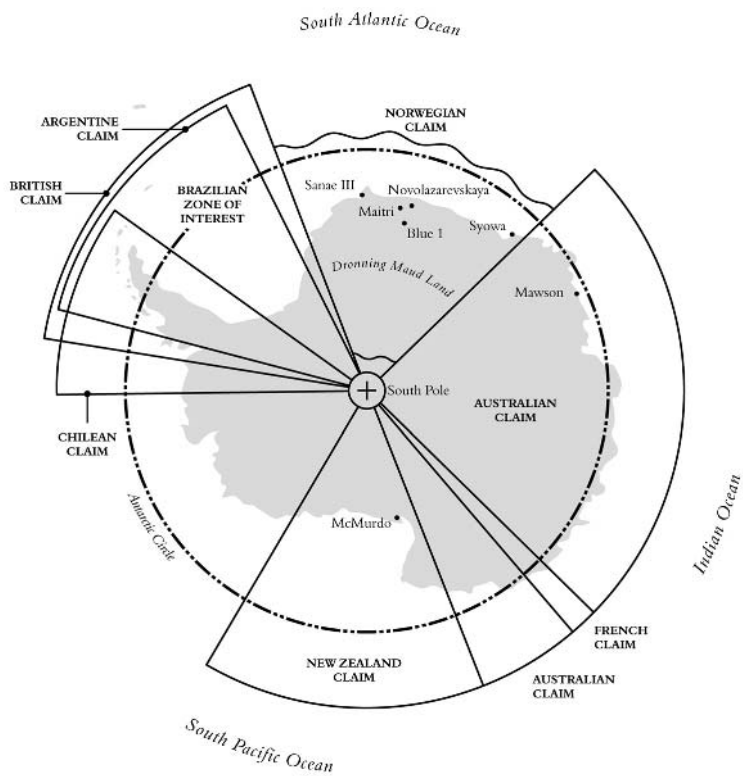
Printed and bound in Great Britain.

ISBN 1 84024 471 2

Pseudonyms have been used and other details altered where necessary to protect the identity of people and organisations mentioned in this book.

About the author

Alexa Thomson was born in Wollongong, Australia. She has worked as a web designer and writer for an investment bank in Sydney. She is a freelance writer for various Australian magazines and has written for the San Francisco online magazine Salon.com. She currently divides her time between Sydney and San Francisco.



Contents

ENTRÉE

Big city, small dreams.....	12
Gourmet beginnings.....	20
First leg.....	25
Barn storming.....	34
Point of no return.....	47
Arrivals.....	51
Departures.....	60
The transit lounge.....	65
Blue 1 citizens.....	69

MAIN COURSE

Storm.....	80
Acclimatising.....	95
The cook's domain.....	98
Radio etiquette.....	102
Fashion.....	107
Landscapes of the infinite.....	114
The neighbours.....	123
Charlotte's Tit.....	131
Antarctic real estate.....	135
Earl Grey tea.....	147
If you can't stand the heat.....	155
Manna from heaven.....	163
A walk in the wilderness.....	173
A weekend jolly.....	181
Base life.....	187
Na zdrowia.....	196
Maitri.....	210
Christmas.....	223
A day trip.....	236

DESSERT

The beginning of the end.....	248
Celebration.....	254
Confessions in the ice cave.....	259
Getting a grip.....	267
The last of First Air.....	279
Terra nullius.....	285
An about-face.....	291
Reckless.....	301
Northward bound.....	309
Epilogue.....	316

Acknowledgements

The seed of writing this book took hold on my return from Antarctica when family and friends who had read my emails encouraged me to expand on them. Novice writers are warned not to write a book on the advice of those near and dear. I am a happy exception to this rule.

I am beholden to the people I met in Antarctica, notably my fellow campers at Blue 1. Certain names and characters have been changed.

I wish to thank Derek Lucas and Irene Huetter who laid the groundwork.

I thank Jeanne Ryckmans for discovering my manuscript, her unceasing energy and encouragement; particular thanks to my editors, Karen Ward, Heather Curdie and Sophie Ambrose, for their insightful amendments and comments. I thank Fran Moore for her advice and enthusiasm.

I am indebted to my family for their unflagging love and forbearance: the Thomsons: Ken, Genelle, John, Sharon, Jane Henrietta and Milly; the Medways: Monique, Jonathan, Sam and Zoe; Suzanne and Mike Pain; Wim and Ger Pasman.

Lastly, I wish to thank my Antarctic weatherman. I will remember the Hermanus days forever. This book was written out of love.

To the memory of my aunt, Ineke Pasman

Allüberall und ewig blauen licht die Fernen!

Ewig... ewig... ewig... ewig...

Everywhere and forever, the blue distance shines!

Forever... (and) ever... (and) ever... (and) ever...

Songs of the Earth – Gustav Mahler

Somewhere in Dronning Maud Land, about 160 kilometres inland from the remote eastern coast of Antarctica, stands a bamboo pole. Tied to the pole is a black flag which marks the threshold of a runway. It is the only indication of an international airport.

On a perfect late spring afternoon, a speck appears low in the sky to the west. It seems to hover above the horizon like an insect smeared on a car windscreen. Gradually a hum can be heard vibrating the air. Then it's a drone and an outline becomes clearer to the naked eye. A small plane shimmers into view. It flies in low, making a few passes over the bamboo pole. The plane drops as if coming in to land. Its skis flirt with the icy surface, testing the virgin ground. It lifts and flies towards an isolated rocky peak before turning back to the south and then the west in a lazy half-circle. This time the plane drops onto the ice and its skis grip the surface with more weight and certainty. It bumps erratically across the icy ground and then comes to an abrupt stop. The propellers whirr in the wind but their buzz is swallowed in this vast space. Gradually the noise dissipates as the propellers are shut down. For a moment there is complete silence again.

Then a human shape drops from one side of the cockpit. Another emerges from the other side, followed by two more. The four figures stand there – some stretch their hands into the air and arch their backs as if they have been sitting for a long period of time. One shape moves ahead of the others and approaches the black flag.

A season at Blue 1 is beginning.

ENTRÉE



Before Antarctica, my encounters with the continent and its untamed history were few. My only association with Antarctic memorabilia was in the seclusion of the British Museum's Reading Room. In a glass cabinet Scott's diary was on display, opened at his final entry. I had little sense of the awe he inspired in the British public. At most I knew that his name was perpetually entwined with Amundsen, the man who 'beat' him to the South Pole. I leant over the case and looked at the timeworn paper and the faint words scratched onto it: *For God's sake look after our people*.

The words were barely discernible as I peered through the glass, my hands cupping my face to minimise the reflection. Reading the inscriptions around the display, I felt a strange horror at the suffering those five men endured in their desperate attempts to reach their food cache. I remember thinking that Scott must have had a death wish. It seemed hardly surprising to read that his mission failed so tragically – and yet it had been an almost Arthurian quest that would scarcely fail to tempt anyone with a sense of romance and adventure.

Maybe I leant over the glass a fraction longer than necessary; perhaps something stirred somewhere in my brain as I stood peering at the diary. If so, it must have lain dormant because I didn't give Antarctica another thought until many years later as I sat in a sleek office building in downtown Sydney looking glumly over the harbour. I was unhappy enough in my life

to do something a little crazy and circumstances were about to present just such an opportunity.

If you're not a scientist, if you don't have the budget to travel to Antarctica as a tourist or don't receive funding from a sponsoring body such as the US National Science Foundation, the only other way to get there is to have a practical trade. If you are a builder, if you're a communications expert or a cook or mechanic, you may find an opening for your skills down south.

I was none of these things. I was a Web designer working for an investment bank and living in Sydney when I heard about a private company wanting the services of a cook for their Antarctic operations. I hadn't cooked professionally for a long time but I knew my cooking skills hadn't been forgotten.

I had come to begrudge my Sydney existence. I was spooked by the classification I'd become: an educated 30-year-old with a great salary and career but nevertheless disaffected by the hollowness of my fabulous city lifestyle. I had moved to Sydney with big ambitions but slowly the place was squeezing me into a mould that I found repugnant and disturbing. I was living with my brother and had blundered into an intimate relationship with a friend of long standing. Neither of us made any plans to be together and I found our sporadic meetings were not enough for me. I was also conscious of my friends living with their partners or getting married. I wasn't interested in marriage but I loathed the idea that my single status somehow defined me. I wanted an experience that had nothing to do with my career or my life as an unattached woman in the city. I was languishing at the investment bank and wanted to break free of a pattern.

I could *sense* so much possibility and opportunity in the world but it seemed beyond my grasp. Materially I was in an enviable position. I could satisfy my desire for luxurious clothes and accessories, for furnishings for my apartment, for a hectic social life that allowed me to sashay around restaurants, bars and theatres. Unfortunately money was not making me

content. Instead I found my mind turning upon itself and rejecting material gratification.

And so, on a holiday with friends, a single word – Antarctica – cut through my thoughts like a depth charge. It echoed in the deepest recesses of my mind, where I'd discarded my unfulfilled dreams and aspirations.

'A bloke I know is looking for a cook to work in Antarctica. I've been asking around to see if anyone would be interested,' Derek told me. He was a former boss and a dear friend who inadvertently or otherwise set in train the events that would lead me south. I was in his four-wheel drive travelling with him and Irene, his partner, to their ski lodge at Guthega in the Snowy Mountains. I was sitting in the back seat, my feet stretched out and my arms folded, idly watching the landscape roll by. As his comment resonated through my brain I turned my head to look at his reflection in the rear-vision mirror. He wasn't looking at me, he was watching the road.

We drove on in silence. Through half-closed eyes I watched the paddocks unfurl alongside me and tried to imagine working on a continent that has more in common with Mars than with Earth.

'Do you know if he's found anyone yet?' I asked at length. I felt a vicarious thrill for the person who would end up getting the position. I briefly allowed my mind to fantasise about travelling to a world as remote as Antarctica. I tried to imagine the cold, the glaring white of such a barren continent.

'As far as I know, he hasn't. If you know of anyone, feel free to pass the information on.'

'Who is this guy?' I sat up from my slouched position and leant forward, my elbows balanced on my knees.

'Benjamin Willis. His brother William runs a company called Ends of the Earth that contracts to government bases down in Antarctica. He's the manager or something. I occasionally bump into him if he comes to the valley and he asked me

to put the word around about this job. He mentioned it in passing – he hasn't given me any concrete information.'

Antarctica moved through my mind like a king tide; it would rise and fall during my working days and in my dreams. One night I woke in a sweat, imagining that infinite nothingness. I couldn't relinquish its strange power. Yet I didn't have the courage to ask Derek for Benjamin Willis's number. I knew that I didn't have anywhere near the experience he would be expecting. At the same time, just because I was not quite up to the job didn't mean I couldn't indulge in a few wild-eyed fantasies.

I brooded. Every so often I'd reach for the phone thinking I'd call Derek only to have my fragile ego stop me. Each day I would go through the motions of my job and return home to a night in front of the television with fries and mayonnaise, having taken a hiatus from my social life.

My quiet mania was becoming all-encompassing but I told no one about it. I held on to the possibility of Antarctica as though shielding a flickering flame, knowing how improbable the plan was and sheltering it from prying eyes. It made absolutely no sense to throw away my job and my life in Sydney for the unknown perils of Antarctica but there was some strange logic that convinced me that it could offer a solution to my despondency. I knew I was unhappy with my life and I was contrary enough to believe that medical or psychological help was not for me. I needed something more dramatic. I'd always wanted to do something impetuous and hot-headed; perhaps this was the decisive opportunity.

During brief moments of sanity and reason, I attempted to temper my growing obsession, but it was as useful as telling a child to climb off the motorised elephant outside the grocery store; I wouldn't be persuaded. My brain see-sawed between exhilaration and despair.

I phoned Benjamin from work. I introduced myself and furtively crossed my fingers as I began my spiel. I looked about

my sleek office with its view of the boats on the harbour. I launched into the spin-doctored version of my cooking career and had the grace to wince as I spoke.

‘At the moment I freelance. I mainly cook corporate meals for a select clientele, but my experience is both in the boardroom and the outdoors.’ My left eyelid flickered like a wayward moth.

‘When was the last time you worked in Antarctica?’ Benjamin asked. I sucked in air. Shit. I rested my forehead on my desk and tried to stall.

‘Sorry?’

‘When and where have you previously worked in Antarctica?’

I wanted to swallow my fist. There are embellishments and then there are outright lies.

‘I ahh... I haven’t worked in Antarctica,’ I stated clumsily. There was a silence on the line.

‘I see. Can you send me your resumé and any other relevant details? I’ll be in England for the next four weeks so I’ll be in touch when I return.’

This had to be a brush-off.

‘Certainly. And are there other people you have in mind for the job? I am eager to meet you and talk further about the position.’ I wanted to scream down the line that if I didn’t get the job there could be blood on the streets – his or mine.

‘There are other people who are applying for this position – yes. Thank you for your interest, Alexis. Goodbye.’ ‘It’s Alexa to you!’ I hissed at the dial tone and hung up. And now I was truly in limbo. I didn’t know what my chances were. Instead of a definite yes or no I had another month to grapple with my rising expectations. My historical knowledge of Antarctica ran to the names of the big four – Mawson, Amundsen, Scott and Shackleton – but no further. I didn’t want to immerse myself in Antarctica’s harsh history in case my own Antarctic experience was going to be denied me. I felt

that if I didn't get the job I would hold Antarctica personally responsible. As if Antarctica would bust an iceberg whether I got there or not.

My mood became more erratic. In my rational moments I tried to counsel myself. I didn't have the lifestyle of an adventurer. My idea of a remote location was the distance between a taxi stand and a shoe shop. I didn't climb or swing from mountain tops like a modern-day Jane. And reading a compass was to my mind a disorientating business. How was I going to talk up my outdoor experiences to make it sound like the slopes of Everest were where one found me in my spare moments?

Finally Benjamin's four weeks away were up. On the day of the interview I borrowed clothes from my sister's wardrobe. Suzanne worked in an outdoor clothing store and had all the requisite gear to make me look as if I'd blown into the big smoke after months of scaling the walls of Shishapangma. I resisted the temptation to accessorise the polar fleece jacket with high heels.

Benjamin was a tall, barrel-chested man. I half-expected him to be wearing crampons and a climbing harness. His greeting was perfunctory as he ushered me inside his house. We sat down in a sparse living room. He spread a few glossy brochures on the coffee table in front of us. The pictures had the professional sheen of a *National Geographic* spread. In one a lone skier was gliding by a spire of rock that stretched into the air like a mammoth granite finger. In another, a group of people stood around a small plane with jubilant smiles on their faces and a vast field of ice stretching forever behind them. I took a deep breath as I looked at those pictures. Could that possibly be me in a few weeks' time? Benjamin was talking and I dragged my gaze from the images to concentrate on what he was saying.

'... and the tents should be able to withstand most weather down there.'

‘Tents?’ I had obviously missed something and that word made my ears twitch. ‘I wouldn’t be living on a base?’ My voice rose to a faint squeak.

‘Of course not. It’s a seasonal camp.’ Benjamin looked crossly at me. ‘There are no buildings there. At this moment there is a bamboo pole that marks the area where the gear for the camp is buried in crates from past seasons.’

‘What’s this camp called?’ I managed to ask. My mind was tottering at the concept of something as humble as a tent for living quarters. I had been bracing myself for many things but I was truly flabbergasted at the thought of bunking down in a tent. Tents and Antarctica were for intrepid adventurers – the Reinhold Messners or the Ranulph Fienneses of this world – not for a five-star-living urban überfrau like me.

‘The camp is called Blue 1. It’s in Dronning Maud Land, located at 71 south, 3 east.’

‘Great.’ Whatever that all meant. I couldn’t think of anything more intelligible to say. My brain was still grappling with the thought of living in a nylon tent on the frozen continent. Benjamin looked closely at me for a long moment.

‘Blue 1 is located on a huge ice field about sixty-five kilometres north of the Fenristunga mountain range. We’re basically running an international airport. Once a month a Russian Ilyushin will fly from Cape Town with scientists and some expedition teams. The plane lands on this blue ice. From Blue 1 they’ll be flown to their bases by a Twin Otter that will be at the camp. You’ll be cooking for these people as well as for the staff who will be living there.’

‘Yup.’ I seemed to have temporarily lost the power of speech. I was starting to feel flustered and incredibly uneasy. Did I really want the job?

‘Questions?’ Benjamin barked at me. Where would the good gentleman wish me to begin? Benjamin frowned.

'You're not hoping to experience some kind of spiritual enlightenment down there, are you?' He glared at me as if I'd just pulled a bible from out of nowhere.

'Not at all. No. I think it's a chance to go somewhere and do something that ah... look, I'd be kind of idiotic not to try for it. But as far as religion goes and things... I,' I had to change tack because I didn't know what I was trying to say. I took a deep breath. 'I am highly qualified and will be there to work,' I finished primly.

'Yeah well, some people go to Antarctica and come back thinking they have experienced some kind of epiphany. They go and find a rock or something and meditate on the meaning of life and that kind of crap.'

I didn't quite know how to respond. Clearly if I got to go I was not going to lash myself to the stove twenty-four hours a day and disregard the fact I'd be camping on a glacier in Antarctica. I decided that silence was the safest response. I was conscious that for me this opportunity was a metaphor as much as anything could possibly be.

If I got the job my wages would be minimal in comparison to the salary I was currently earning. I hardly blinked when Benjamin mentioned the figure. I was too conscious of wanting to stay in his good books to do something as crass as negotiate a wage rise. Benjamin could've told me that I was also expected to wrestle with Weddell seals and I would have happily acquiesced.

He told me that the cook would be entitled to one day off a week. It sounded positively Arcadian.



In my early twenties, Derek gave me a job as his chief cook. This was a startling expression of goodwill and nepotism if ever there was one. Derek had been a big influence in my youth when I would go to children's camps he ran on a property in Kangaroo Valley in south-eastern New South Wales. Chakola was a paradise for me. I always wanted to be more than just a client there and I was willing to do anything so long as I could spend my days cloistered in this wonderful world. It always seemed to be summer and the people were wacky, charismatic types who read you *Winnie the Pooh* before bedtime.

To be a counsellor was my ultimate goal. I thought these people were gods. They showed you how to shoot a bow and arrow, they took you on canoe trips down the river, they organised camp-outs in the bush with the wildlife, and they were witty and good-looking whereas I was spotty and awkward. I would watch with envy as they created exclusive worlds around themselves. They were everything my teenage self was desperate to be. They lounged in the kitchen and had bantering conversations with Irene the cook – and if you had recognition in the kitchen, you were someone. I wanted in on this exclusive little world.

And the mogul of Chakola was Derek. Derek was from the East End of London with an accent and voice that boomed through the Australian bush like a yodel in a supermarket. A big, sturdy individual, he inspired loyalty and respect in his staff. His personality was impressive – as was his temper

when roused, but he had the heart of a bon vivant. He loved his food and wine and took great pleasure in sharing these joys with everyone.

This was the world that I immersed myself in for over a decade. Every holiday and free weekend I could be found at Chakola. I went from client to counsellor to cook, without really planning such a trajectory. The cooking was a fluke. I had shown no aptitude for it in my early years and it was only my friendship with Irene that saw me in the kitchen on a regular basis. I enjoyed the gossipy, conspiratorial relationship we built up as we prepared meals for the clients. The kitchen was an ideal space to exchange thoughts and confidences and learn the finer art of cooking emulsion sauces and the difference between couverture chocolate and Cadbury's. The pots and pans hung from the ceiling, the spice racks lined the walls, the ovens spilled out their smells and the sink was always piled high with dishes.

The kitchen was the power base. As cooks you had jurisdiction over the camp. The kitchen was the centre of Chakola and everyone gravitated towards it – the staff, the clients, the boss, friends. I had a sense of purpose working in it. My apron immediately classified me but it was a satisfying kind of identity, a feeling of belonging.

If you were walking up the bush track you could smell the baking that was being done for the day or the mirth and conversation that were magnified as they echoed out from the kitchen vents. At night, enticing dinner aromas would waft through the trees. It was a kitchen where the food was prepared with love and attention. Irene was a dedicated and inspired cook and naturally her talents were evident in her food. This was my instruction class. Watching, observing, tasting, experimenting... I was being trained but I didn't realise it.

I had no formal qualifications for running a successful kitchen and everything and anything I'd learnt about cooking

was through Irene and working on the children's camps. I knew next to nothing about food handling and storage and I had no sense of *mise-en-scène*. When I cooked I inevitably used almost all the utensils in the kitchen and swallowed up all available bench space. I encroached on everyone's territory and pissed off many of the other cooks with my incessant untidiness. I also loved socialising with the people in camp. More often than not I could be found on the front verandah chatting to boys or gossiping with someone over a glass of wine. A call would go out from the kitchen and for a brief second I would wonder what the fuss was about, before leaping up and skidding guiltily back to my position in front of the sink. Why would Derek want to give me the responsibility of running his kitchen?

But despite what would appear to be a certain flair for lackadaisical work habits, I was a good cook and I worked hard. I never had misplaced visions of being the next Escoffier – in fact, it was my blissful ignorance of the processes involved in running a successful kitchen that proved a blessing. If I'd known exactly what was ahead, the concept of a mortgage, a bulging bank account and a career behind a desk may have been far more appealing.

They were long and exhausting days. If clients were in camp, I was in the kitchen. I organised the staff, the food, the menus, the ordering, the shopping, the cleaning... it was a big step for me after studying English Literature at university and slothing amongst the library stacks. There were moments when I'd stagger out of the kitchen late at night after a 6 a.m. start and seriously question my decision to take on the job. We cooked for staff and clients. Staff alone could number up to fifteen or twenty if the group was large. I stayed on because I loved the work and I loved the people who worked with me.

Derek had no concept of 'budget'. If I wanted to make chocolate marquise using Belgian cooking chocolate, Derek would be up to Sydney in no time to get me the choicest

morsels. If I wanted a new oven because the door on the one we used wouldn't close, the Zanussi catalogue would be slapped in front of me before I could bellow 'pronto!'. If we needed new pots and pans, Derek never blanched at the cost or questioned the reason. He was and is the only person I've worked for who never queried my requests. Once I was hired and he knew I could do the job, he trusted me. This was heady stuff for a novice and would give me confidence in future adventures to know I could work hard and be given responsibility. I was careful never to exploit this generosity and his trust in me. It was an illuminating moment to understand that some people don't believe you have to have written or formal qualifications to do a job. It was the work ethic you showed that earned you respect.

But Chakola would eventually grow too limiting for me. Sometimes I'd stand at the kitchen window idly looking at the kangaroos sunning themselves in the neighbouring paddock and wonder what was I doing with my time. Was I always going to be dragging out the slops late at night and wrestling with the goannas who came to feed on our leftovers? Or continue to live in a room no bigger than a rabbit hutch, shared with the odd bat? Sometimes I'd pore over the *Vogues* and the *Vanity Fairs* and fantasise eagerly about a very different kind of life. I convinced myself that it was time to become one of the glossy people.

Chakola was a transient career anyway. I think most of us who worked there recognised this reality. Perhaps that's why we participated so enthusiastically in Chakola's lifestyle. Maybe we were aware that the next career move was going to have to be halfway serious if we wanted some material rewards. It took me eighteen months to make a decision but eventually I forced myself down the driveway of Chakola, out of Kangaroo Valley and on to other pursuits. At that time I had little concept of just how far my Chakola training would take me.

The job is mine. Benjamin calls me at the office to tell me. He is brusque and matter-of-fact.

'We leave in three weeks. We have to go to Chile and South Africa first before going to Blue 1 so you'll have to pack some summer stuff because it's going to be stinking hot by the time we get to Cape Town. Anyway, I'll see you at the airport around midday on the twenty-seventh.' He hangs up abruptly and I drop the receiver into its cradle.

Be careful what you wish for...

I feel numb and horrified. I have pulled it off. It has happened so quickly and, in a sense, so easily. I want to feel a great sense of excitement but suddenly all I feel is nauseous.

I will have to put my brash words into action. The kitchen in Antarctica is not going to be a chef's dream – nightmare would be the more appropriate term.

I will not be exploring the continent. I will be ensconced in a tent with no electricity, no running water, just a gas oven and frozen food. There will be no heroic trekking to the Pole or carrying out scientific experiments of any earth-shattering importance; I will be there to work – hard.



I have stuffed a big rucksack and one duffle bag full with two sleeping bags, my new Sorel shoes, Gore-Tex raincoat and overpants, countless polar fleece jumpers and jackets and two down jackets. My gear has been cobbled together courtesy of family, friends, friends of friends, and my last pay cheque. I laugh when I hear about people travelling to Antarctica with government organisations. They are handed their gear – all of it. There are no tantrums in stores or anguished wailings over clothes and shoes. It's all arranged and presented in one tidy bundle. Very few people can give me a straight answer to advise or recommend gear that I will need.

I have managed to wangle out of Benjamin a promise that he will be bringing me two camping mattresses but everything else I have had to supply myself. I am concerned that the clothes I have chosen to bring with me won't be warm enough but there'll be only one way to find out.

My city clothes are going to be no use to me over the coming months. I look longingly at my velvet silk-lined dressing gown and my pashminas, and idly speculate about hauling them down to the ice to add a touch of class to the camp. Outdoor gear is so... practical. Where is the frivolity in it? I imagine myself traipsing across the snow in my Sorels, draped in my dressing gown with a shawl casually wrapped around my shoulders for warmth. It would make a delightful contrast at the very least. Despite my fashion musings I have sense enough to quell my desire to become the Nan Kempner of Antarctica.

Apart from a trip to the dentist and a regular medical check-up, I don't have any other tests – medical or otherwise. I feel I am living in a vacuum. I read that NASA regularly uses Antarctica as a testing ground for equipment used on missions to Mars. I can't help feeling like a test monkey that is scheduled for a rocket launch into space. I am going to be strapped in and flown to an unknown environment.

Friends and family organise a weekend away before I leave. We rent some houses on the banks of a wide lazy river. It's utterly idyllic but I'm feeling dizzy and fidgety. There is a woman who is doing all our cooking for us and I surreptitiously watch her prepare our meals. Is this what I want to do while living in a tent in subzero temperatures? Right now I would rather stay here, amongst friends and family where conversation, great food, no frostbite and a raucous good time are guaranteed. We have an hilarious few days dreaming up all kinds of scenarios of me attempting to hunt down seals and penguins for Antarctic pie. I cackle dementedly and enjoy the camaraderie, trying not to think too much about the life ahead. What if I can't acclimatise to the kitchen life? What if I disappear forever down the world's biggest crevasse or I find out that it takes three hours just to boil water?

Benjamin is to fly with me to Cape Town. During our initial meeting I'd decided he was a busy man and it would be best if I tried to second-guess him as much as I could without getting in his hair. This is not easy. He is a brusque, burly individual and has a habit of tipping his head back and eyeing you from the length of his aquiline nose. It is a little disconcerting.

I meet him at the baggage claim area and introduce him to my parents and siblings who have come to say goodbye. I make the introductions quickly and then try to hustle them away before my mother decides she doesn't want her precious daughter heading south after all. I am desperate to keep up my front of being someone who travels to remote areas of

the world all the time (for heaven's sake) and I am not about to let my mother ruin this little deception.

In Cape Town we will be meeting two women explorers, Liv Arnesen and Ann Bancroft who have leased a Russian Ilyushin cargo jet. It seems we will be hitching a lift on the Ilyushin from Chile to South Africa. Liv and Ann will fly with us to Blue 1 where they will begin their trans-Antarctic crossing.

'You mean they're going to *walk* across Antarctica?'

'Yeah. Women,' Benjamin says as he hoists his bag onto the scales and scowls at the check-in man.

I wander back to where my family have gathered at a café.

'Travel plans have been changed. I'm going to be flying on an Ilyushin, Illusion... something like that, to South Africa from Chile. Do you know that there'll be two women coming with us who are going to traverse Antarctica?'

'You people are mad,' my father tells me.

My goodbye is tearful. I look at my family and for the first time understand their incredulity at what I am doing. I can understand why my mother has been pestering me with phone calls about clothing and other essential items ever since I got the job. Things are no longer as simple as making a phone call and requesting to speak to a Mr Benjamin Willis. I can't make an about-turn now; well, maybe I can but the humiliation would be too much. I have no one to blame but myself. I hug everyone goodbye, thread my way past fellow travellers and present my passport to the poker-faced customs official.

In Auckland the two of us keep an eye open for Lisa. She will be the only other female working at Blue 1. She has been employed as a guide and general camp helper. I hadn't thought about the gender make-up of the camp until now. I spot a woman with a rucksack on her back, wearing a blue jumper and pink track pants and sandals. I watch as she casually swings through the crowd towards us and I know that this will be Lisa.

She strolls up and introduces herself. She is a no-nonsense English woman, forty-seven years of age and looks competent and assured. She has long, thick straight hair that is tending to grey. She makes me feel gauche and naive. This is to be her fourth season on the ice. My neurosis begins to escalate. I am grateful that the three of us will be sitting apart on the plane because I need time alone to stop hyperventilating and relax into the adventure.

We fly over the Andes. Twice. First to land in Buenos Aires and change planes and then back again to land in Santiago before flying on to Punta Arenas in southern Chile. I am overawed at the remote majesty of the mountains, and I peer out of the window, unconsciously pinching my palms in trepidation.

We arrive in Punta Arenas around midnight. I am so tired I start to sway if I stand still. I stagger into the arrival hall behind Lisa and Benjamin, completely numb. Two people are gesturing to us and Lisa rushes over to hug a small woman with close-cropped grey hair. She has an elfin face and her eyes twinkle happily at Lisa. I hang back, suddenly shy as I listen to the two of them exchange familiar greetings. Her name is Fran and she is the client coordinator for Adventure Network International (ANI). ANI is the only commercial travel organisation that flies tourists onto the Antarctic continent. Lisa and Fran begin comparing names and faces and in-house gossip. I start to shuffle my feet, feeling conspicuous and awkward.

Next to her stands a tall man with the makings of a seven-day stubble and flyaway hair that seems to stick out at all angles. He is wearing thin cotton trousers that show off strong thighs and a beautifully shaped backside. I am drowsily admiring his physique before I realise he is talking to me.

‘Mike Sharp. You must be the cook.’ I feel myself turning a mottled shade of pink. Jesus, Alexa, pull yourself together. It’s your new boss.

‘Yes. Alexa Thomson. How do you do?’ I put on my best finishing-school voice and grip his hand firmly, determined

to give him no cause to think that Benjamin's choice for a cook is a little strange. It is a cold evening but Mike in his thin cotton trousers, T-shirt and a pair of sandals seems impervious to the chill. He stares down at me and I smile hopefully up at him. Being so unsure about this venture, I want people to not look at me with quite the expression he has on his face. It's an intent, probing stare and he is blunt in his scrutiny. I'm the one who looks away, wary of this examination. It may have been Benjamin I needed to impress to get the job but Mike will be the person who gets to see me in action. I want him to like me immediately. I'm so pathetic. Mike Sharp has worked at Blue 1 during past seasons. He knows the area and he will make the all-important decisions of calling in the planes from Cape Town when the weather is clear. He also must ensure the communication transmission systems are working at all times. His height and those steady eyes make me think he'll have no trouble quelling any chef-like tantrums from me.

We drive into Punta Arenas in an Adventure Network International van. I'd studied ANI's website with the cross-eyed intensity of someone attempting a cryptic crossword.

Patriot Hills, located near the Ellsworth Mountains in West Antarctica, is ANI's official location in Antarctica. I would look at photos of Patriot Hills and try to place myself into that windy, ice-strewn world. The pictures alone made me shiver. Well-heeled clients pay a small fortune to travel there from Punta Arenas, and get the opportunity to visit an emperor penguin colony, be flown to the South Pole, climb the surrounding mountains... ANI's clientele are a mix of wealthy people who can afford the head-spinning costs, and sponsored explorers climbing Mount Vinson or attempting some other derring-do to account for their sponsorship dollars. Benjamin's company has dealings with ANI which may be why we're in Chile instead of South Africa. My nervousness around Benjamin prevents me from questioning him too closely.

Benjamin and Mike conduct businesslike discussions in the front of the van while Fran and Lisa talk nineteen to the dozen about what is happening in Chile. I spend most of the time peering out into the darkness, attempting to make some sense of the fleeting landscape.

We arrive at our hotel and pile out with our luggage. Everyone falls into the reception area in a general muddle and begins badgering the man behind the counter. I sit on top of one of my bags and yawn hugely, feeling the pull of fatigue. I am surreptitiously eyeing Mike. He sprawls on a leather bench, chatting and laughing with Fran. I wish I had this easy camaraderie with him as she seems to. I watch as he produces a bottle of red wine and badgers Fran for the use of a bottle opener from her penknife. I sit up straighter at the sight of the bottle. Doesn't anyone want to go to bed? Mike sets up a row of plastic cups on the hotel reception desk and happily sloshes wine into them. He gestures for everyone to take a cup, including the receptionist. He turns to face us: 'To the summer season.' He winks generally at the group and throws back the wine. I sway on my feet and peer at the liquid, say a silent prayer for the months ahead and raise my drink.

Strangely, despite my fatigue, I feel that my adventure has begun. Whatever happens, whether it all turns into a big sham and I disgrace myself thoroughly – it doesn't matter any more. This is what I've longed for, to be in a foreign country, not knowing what lies ahead of me. I feel rejuvenated and alive. It's a feeling I haven't experienced for some time. I inhale the aroma of the wine and take a big gulp. I am going to live on a continent that is as close to outer space as I'll get and it tastes like the most exhilarating feeling in the world. To the summer season – come what may.

I spend two delightful weeks in Punta. My initial timidity doesn't last long – there are too many people here who are intent on having fun before they leave for Antarctica. I am

wide-eyed as various Antarctic veterans start comparing stories about near-misses with aircraft, illicit affairs, staff going insane and needing to be medivaced off the continent, New Year's celebrations at the South Pole... I listen with increasing incredulity to these anecdotes, not daring to question their authenticity. Everyone seems to have scrambled up Everest at least once and I dare not reveal that the only summit I have climbed is Mt Kosciuszko. It's not unlike taking your dog on a long but not challenging walk. I am certainly not going to own up to my life as a Web designer, ensconced in a glass and steel skyscraper back in Sydney. They don't need to know that the most energetic exercise I indulge in is traipsing from office to bar to restaurant to theatre with the occasional blister from my stilettos to impede progress. Before the first week is over I move my belongings into the ANI staff house just down the road from the hotel.

I am sharing my room with Deirdre, a woman of about twenty-six years of age. She will spend a month at ANI's base at Patriot Hills as the camp doctor. The two of us are Antarctic novices and we share our hopes and fears in long, conspiratorial chats. Our mutual apprehension and reverence for Antarctica are strangely soothing. Together we can talk through our worries without fear of derision or suspicion.

My days are spent at the ANI office poring over inventory after inventory, attempting to get some idea of what's been buried at Blue 1. I have been told that our little camping ground is buried and everything, literally *everything* from previous seasons has been thrown in a crate and sits under approximately six metres of snow. But no one seems to know what this 'everything' entails. The lists all contradict each other and I begin to despair about ever really knowing what's down there. People are asking me about the longevity of gas and what would be better, frozen meat or fresh? Initially I am confused, why ask *me* this? I am the novice. After a while I decide it will be best to fudge my way through some of these

queries for form's sake. After all, I have signed on as cook so the least I can do is sound like I know what I am talking about. I figure that, in spite of the destination, cooking will still follow the same principles no matter where in the world I happen to find myself. My contingency plan for the food is foolproof: I will order enough food to cover any confusion with the lists.

My shopping is going to be done in Cape Town and the shipping company that is responsible for buying the goods needs all the lists in advance. I spend days at a computer in the ANI office, writing up a comprehensive spreadsheet before giving it to Benjamin to e-mail to South Africa.

To my great relief, the two cooks who are working at Patriot Hills this season are in Punta, arranging final food orders and keeping ANI staff and guests fed and watered at the social events that are being held. Ros, the senior cook, is an Antarctic veteran into her seventh season on the ice, and I leap on her like a flea on a dog. She is a correct, very proper English woman of about sixty years of age who has spent many years cooking for ANI's clients. A slight figure with a trim body and greying hair cut into a soft helmet around her head, she speaks with a faint lisp and is the model of patience with me as I flap about. She directs me towards the commercial areas of Punta Arenas and gives me my first real tips about cooking on the ice. Her inherent English politeness prevents her from reeling back in horror when I tell her how I have wangled my way into the job.

Ros is a breath of fresh air for me on a personal level, too. I have for so long been caught up in a world where career and the size of your salary define a person. It is a revelation to meet someone who lives to travel and uses her skills to get about. And Ros is a veteran traveller. Not for her pensioner package tours to Fiji or Prague, instead she makes solo trips across Siberia, walks the Kokoda Trail, hitches from one end of South America to the other – all this while in her fifties.

To me she has the aura of a character from a Graham Greene novel. She has never married and when she isn't spending her days in Antarctica or hitchhiking to Machu Picchu she lives in Scotland where she tends her bees and cultivates her roses. I can't imagine a more exotic lifestyle. I don't say much about my life in Sydney, I am sure she'd find it deeply nondescript.

Gerard is employed as Ros's assistant. Like most people I meet in Chile, he also has an Antarctic history. He has been the cook at Rothera, the British base on the Antarctic Peninsula. His cooking career is also far more up-to-the-minute than mine. I go to great lengths to conceal my hopelessly outdated cooking career and this applies in particular to Gerard. He had quit his job a number of years ago to work full time as a freelance cook. His skills have taken him around Europe and he has had a few seasons cooking at the world-renowned restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. I have a minor crisis of confidence when listening to his experience. The two of us bond over our growing taste for pisco sours.

Punta is a luxury layover before the real fun begins. I am spellbound by the possibilities that open up for me. No one I meet has any desire to have a mortgage and a steady career. Gradually I feel an unencumbered me begin to emerge from behind the corporate camouflage. I feel a vigour and strength that have been missing for a long time. Finally, I stop believing that life is being lived just over there. Life is here.

All of us are chafing to head south. Even those who have been to Antarctica before are caught up in the last-minute plans and errands that are being carried out. Everyone blazes a trail up and down the boulevard between the house and the ANI office. One day I become convinced I can see icebergs in the bay beyond Punta from the office window. Someone points out that I'm actually looking at Tierra del Fuego. I'm too euphoric to be mortified at my complete naivety in thinking icebergs can travel this far north.



The Ilyushin has arrived. Fran sees the Russians swaggering around downtown Punta Arenas in their matching leather jackets. The pace starts to pick up. The Ilyushin will fly to ANI's base at Patriot Hills with a load of fuel before it returns to Chile. Then it will be time for us to fly to Cape Town before the final leg to Blue 1.

We are all recruited to load the plane with fuel. We crowd onto a bus and putter out to the airport, which should be renamed ANI International. Most of the planes on the tarmac have been leased to them. There are three Twin Otters, a C-130 Hercules, a DC-3 and the Ilyushin. We roam about with no airport security checks conducted on any of us. Staff at any other airport would have an apoplexy at our comings and goings.

Someone commandeers an old cattle truck to ferry the fuel to the plane. The rest of us are driven to the Ilyushin. We pile off the bus after dire warnings not to wander onto the tarmac proper or risk being swiped by an incoming jet.

The Ilyushin is huge. It is approximately the size of a 747 and it has distinctive sloping wings that look like they've been injected with steroids. They slant from the body of the plane, giving it a menacing stance, a bodybuilder flexing shoulder muscles. There are few windows, just the cockpit, the navigating windows underneath the cockpit and four portholes on each side of the plane. This mammoth machine is going to land on an isolated ice field in Antarctica? I daren't dwell on it.

The first load of fuel arrives on the back of the truck. The ramp at the back of the plane is lowered to the level of the truck and the barrels are rolled onto the ramp and then up into the cavernous interior. It's backbreaking, sweaty work; the barrels are extremely heavy.

I stand to one side gossiping with one of ANI's employees. I have no intention of injuring myself before I get to Blue 1. Some of the Russian crew oversee the loading and we eye each other with mutual curiosity. We have no idea where the plane has come from. We do know that one of the reasons it's late is because Peru wouldn't allow it to fly over their air space. This adds a certain frisson of espionage to the proceedings.

The interior resembles an empty, metal-clad barn. The ceiling is a myriad of wires and what looks like worn and ripped calico, and the sides seem to be clad in cheap chipboard. There are crude benches that run half the length of the plane. The floor is metal, and metal studs protrude from its surface. At the front of the cargo is a desk with a swivel seat that vaguely resembles a dentist's chair. Above the desk is a bank of flight instruments. Next to the desk is a table strewn with old tea bags, flasks and milk cartons. As a concession to decor, the table is covered in a flowery plastic cloth.

Some of us take advantage of the gloom inside the plane to have a quiet snoop around. Someone comes across a crate of vodka, which is later surreptitiously moved by one of the crew. Rumours are rife about the Russians and their flight procedures. Having spied the vodka I am starting to believe some of them. I find the situation a little less amusing knowing I am going to be their cargo in a matter of days' time.

The ANI office staff are beginning to look stressed as more and more tourists start to arrive in Punta. A common assumption by tourists is that a flight to Antarctica is similar to getting a shuttle from Oshkosh or Baton Rouge or wherever

it is that they've come from. Rachel, the ANI office manager, tirelessly repeats herself.

'You won't be flying to Patriot Hills for a number of days yet. I am sorry, I know you thought you were flying to Antarctica today but the weather has put the season back by about three weeks.'

'But I have to be back for a phone conference to New York by next Tuesday! What the hell kind of company are you running here?'

Rachel has the patience of Job but it's wearing to face up to client after client with the same irate questions. Our twenty-first century lives are incapable of fathoming a continent that cannot be governed by timetables.

Rachel gives a talk to the clients who have begun arriving. One German couple, a perfectly matched pair of plump, excited newlyweds, can hardly contain themselves when I ask what they're hoping to see. They almost squeal with wonder and start chanting, 'The emperor penguins, the emperor penguins!' They are jumping up and down in a little group hug and it's touching if not a little nauseating to witness. Fran tells me afterwards that they have been attempting to see the penguins for the last two seasons but the weather has not yet allowed them to get to the colony. I take a closer look at the couple – they must have Deutschmarks coming out of their wazooes. It's not cheap to go on tours with ANI. At a starting price of about US\$25,000 it is well out of orbit for the average backpacker.

Blue 1 has one client here. Severin Klemenc is a Slovenian man who climbed Mount Vinson a few years ago and this time around will attempt to walk to the South Pole from Blue 1 on his own. To go anywhere in Antarctica is a feat of logistical, mental and physical planning. It has to take enormous will-power to believe such a journey can be possible. To walk to the Pole, some 1,500 miles from Blue 1, is not something one dreams up over

a leisurely Sunday breakfast. To attempt it on your own seems the bravest absurdity I've heard in a while.

A few days ago our advance party began the long trek to Blue 1 in a Twin Otter. First Air, a Canadian company, has leased the plane to Ends of the Earth. On board are our leader Mike and Geoff, another member of the team, and the two First Air pilots, Blair and Charlie. Geoff is a guide and has years of Antarctic experience. They will cross the Drake Passage before landing at Rothera, the British base on the Antarctic Peninsula. From there, the plane will fly progressively closer to Blue 1, landing at bases along the way to receive vital weather reports. Once they arrive at Blue 1 they will begin setting up camp and prepare the blue ice runway for the Ilyushin to land.

The rest of us fly out of Punta Arenas for Cape Town at midnight. Rachel, ANI's office manager, travels with us to help with any last-minute arrangements. I say goodbye to Gerard, Ros and Deirdre, who will leave for the ANI base at Patriot Hills in three weeks. At this unearthly hour, and boarding a Russian cargo jet, it feels like a clandestine secret service mission we're embarking on. It is not for the faint-hearted. There are no safety instructions, no soothing airline staff to serve tea and coffee and cover you in a synthetic blanket if you get cold. The plane is little more than a flying tin shed.

Immediately after take-off, the crew change out of their work shoes and bung on sandals and socks. They stand around the navigator's table and light up pungent cigarettes and slurp lemon tea which they pour from flasks. The vast cargo hold is empty except for our luggage and Severin's sledge. We're enveloped by a faint smell of jet fuel and brake fluid.

The crate of vodka is not in evidence, unless it's spiking the tea. The crew take surreptitious glances at their passengers. They mumble gutturally to each other and jiggle their hands in the pockets of their flying suits. I am fascinated by their

laissez-faire slouches in this cavernous machine. They are sky sailors, able to balance and sway with the turbulence of the jet. I gaze at these unfamiliar people and wonder about their lives.

Most of us roll out sleeping bags and mattresses and try to get comfortable on the floor. The Slovenian trekker Severin and myself are the only two who stay awake for the journey. I am too exuberant and fretful to sleep and Severin keeps walking over to his sledge to pat it and take longer and more furrowed looks at its design. His day of reckoning creeps closer.

We land in Cape Town at about two in the afternoon, after a ten-hour flight from Chile. The jet banks over Robben Island and the coastline glistens in the late spring afternoon sun. I am starting to sweat. My head is swimming with logistic details that completely consume me. Benjamin has told me that I have to buy an oven and we are really racing the clock now. Our advance party has been at Blue 1 for about a week and Mike will be giving us constant updates on the weather from hereon. If the weather is *good to go* today, we will fly in a few hours' time. I still need to pick up vital kitchen equipment: the oven, pots, pans, tea towels, plates, cutlery, spatulas... and we need to take a look at the food order that is waiting in storage.

Gerald is our contact while we are here and he is impressive. He heads a shipping company and he fields all our requests with remarkable aplomb. I am quickly soothed by his capable nature. His mobile phone seems to ring every two seconds and he switches from German to Dutch to Afrikaans to English with the ease of a musician changing key. I tell him in no uncertain terms of the urgency of getting kitchenware and my oven. He is handling so many enquiries that I wonder how he can possibly prioritise any of it. But by the time we arrive at our hotel Amelia, an employee of his company, is there to whisk me away to a catering warehouse.

It's now five o'clock on a Friday afternoon. I wish my frustration could simply mutate into an 'I don't give a shit' approach but I don't have that sangfroid. I fantasise briefly about a more competent me – someone who could arrive in Antarctica and create Martha Stewart miracles out of snow and ice – but I can't manage it. Amelia is trying to calm me down but I am having none of it. I am sure everything will be shut but Amelia is wonderful and while I bawl out my list with the delicacy of a drill sergeant, she manages to find my most essential items and succeeds in jollying me out of my manic frame of mind. She also lets me know that she thinks I'm certifiable. I can only agree.

By the time we return to my hotel I am so tired, my bones feel like they are melting. All I want to do is lie in my room and fall into an untroubled sleep. This won't happen. I'm sharing the room with Lisa and she tells me that Rachel has some news.

'Should I be worried?' I ask her. Lisa shrugs her shoulders. I go to Rachel's room and she drops the bomb.

'The food order didn't get through.'

'What do you mean – the food order didn't get through?'

'It's simple. The food for Blue 1 hasn't been bought.'

'Is this some kind of a joke?'

'I wish it were.'

'But I personally watched as Benjamin e-mailed it to Cape Town!' I want Rachel to put a comforting arm around my shoulders and tell me it will be OK. I want my headache to go away. I want to curl up in bed and sleep for a year.

'I don't know the full details but apparently Benjamin is at Pick 'n' Pay right now buying Blue 1's food.'

'You can't be serious. What should I do? Where is Pick 'n' Pay? Do you know how long Benjamin has been there?' I stop piling Rachel with questions she can't answer. I look at her dumbly as if she were about to take a pistol from her belt and shoot me between the eyes.

My addled brain has a meltdown. I am overwhelmed. I don't know what I should do, and I can feel frustrated tears creeping into the corners of my eyes. I phone Gerald. Gerald of course already knows about the food debacle. He explains the unfortunate turn of events. We had sent our food order as an attachment to the e-mail. When the e-mail arrived in Cape Town the file was opened and the only sheet that was on view was our beverage list. No one had realised the beverage list was one of many sheets on the same file. So in a warehouse somewhere downtown there are boxes of tea, coffee, wine, beer, brandy, Kahlua, gin... all the alcoholic delights a camp site could dream of but no food to accompany it.

'What will I do?' I asked Gerald.

'You will do nothing. You will accompany Rachel and Lisa to dinner and you will meet Liv and Ann and you will enjoy a fabulous meal. You are not to worry about anything. You will go out and enjoy the delights of Cape Town.' He pauses, 'There's nothing you can do tonight.'

'There isn't? But what about the food, what about Benjamin, what if we fly tonight?'

'You have to trust me, everything is under control. The plane is not leaving until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. You go out and enjoy yourself – I insist on it.'

I want to wrap my arms around Gerald with gratitude. At last, someone is telling *me* what to do and I am more than happy to follow his advice. I am so angry about the food stuff-up but I gratefully listen to Gerald's advice and go to dinner with the girls. I'll deal with it tomorrow.

I am not travelling to Antarctica on a whim, even though it seemed that way when I first applied for the job. When my appointment was confirmed I understood the responsibility I was taking on. Despite my limited experience in such a venture I knew I could rely on my terrier-like tenacity to do a good job. However, this incident in Cape Town is a real blow to my self-confidence. Of all the things to go wrong it

has to be the food. It is the one thing that cannot be blamed on anyone else. How can I explain away such a glaring lack of credibility to my fellow workers? ‘Hey. I’m in Antarctica. Wow! It’s a dream come true! The food? The food. Ah yes – slight problem back in Cape Town, lads. They stuffed our order so if you could hang on until December when the next flight comes in... meanwhile there’s plenty of booze, so drink up.’

My only solace is knowing the plane won’t leave until tomorrow evening at the earliest so I have all day tomorrow to comb through the food order.

The next morning I am up early and I march down to the supermarket with Benjamin. He and I have already had a terse exchange and I’m quietly simmering.

The two of us arrive at Pick ’n’ Pay to be met with open arms by the manager. They had stayed open for Benjamin the night before and they are looking to make a tidy profit on our little shopping spree. To be fair to Benjamin he has been incredibly thorough in his purchasing. In a small way the bungling of the food order gives me far more control over what is bought and what is not.

There are trolleys all over the store, piled high with sauces, flours, sugars, fresh vegetables, cereals, meats, condiments, and dairy products. Benjamin and I carefully scan our lists and check and double-check all the items. Benjamin has arranged with the store to leave the goods with them until we are ready to fly. This is just as well – I can’t begin to think where I’d be able to find a walk-in freezer to store all the perishables.

Meanwhile I still haven’t found an oven. And I can’t wander into any store and pick out a domestic one. In December a flight of some fifty people will be arriving at Blue 1, followed by another flight in January that will bring a further sixty or seventy-odd. Most of our clients will be government scientists who are to be flown to their bases in the region. Blue 1 is the international airport where they will wait for connecting

flights. If the weather turns bad (almost guaranteed), they will be staying with us until it is safe enough to fly them on. And so my oven needs to be able to withstand the grind for that amount of cooking. For the moment these are nothing but figures. I don't want to even entertain the possibility of catering for a camp of up to seventy people with only me as the cook and no oven to cook with.

It is becoming clear that I will not have the chance to find such equipment in the hours we have left in Cape Town. Every time I approach Benjamin on this subject he waves me away. He has other things on his mind. I have to trust Gerald that he will buy an oven to my exacting specifications. I dread unloading December's flight and finding a domestic oven nestled in amongst all our other supplies. I stress repeatedly to Gerald that it can't be a domestic oven, I say this over and over again in the next forty-eight hours and to Gerald's credit he reassures me every time. I wish he could come and work with me at Blue 1. A personality as unflappable as his would be so soothing.

The population of Blue 1 in November will be a manageable seven. Severin will be pushing off with Liv and Ann on their respective polar treks almost immediately after we arrive at Blue 1. We have one client who will be staying with us for November – a Ewan Fraser. He is a Scottish American who is to set up advance communication systems for the expedition he is on. Ewan is part of a ten-member Belgian team who will be climbing a mountain in the area behind Blue 1. I'm told he will be setting up a weather station for Stanford University and he is also collecting lichen samples for NASA. I decide that if he's working for such venerable institutions he must be a geeky scientist with Coke bottle glasses.

My predictions are all wrong. The only concession to geekiness is a beard but even that is too neatly trimmed for nerd status. He has a hypnotic accent. It is a wonderful blend

of Scottish brogue and San Franciscan slang, an unusual combination. It's a deep voice with a sonorous hum running through his words. He has spent the two weeks waiting for us trawling through Cape Town with Alain Hubert, his expedition leader, buying last-minute food and gear. Alain has already flown back to Belgium by the time we arrive in Cape Town and we won't be seeing him until December with the rest of his expedition. The rest of us staying at Blue 1 are employees of Ends of the Earth.

All three polar trekkers are conscious that the season is well under way by the time we arrive in Cape Town and they are anxious to get to Blue 1. Liv and Ann look the most assured and ready. Severin can often be seen gazing into the middle distance and sometimes I wonder if this is his manner of saying, 'What the heck am I doing?'

Both Liv and Ann have completed previous South Pole treks. Liv is a tall Norwegian and she seems incredibly fit in both a physical and emotional sense. She gives the impression of a woman who would not embark on any adventure without careful consideration. At the same time, she is almost frightening in her single-mindedness. Ann has a similar streak in her. She is a happy, bubbly personality but underneath one senses a will of iron. Their trip seems almost military in its organisation. The women have a website that will be updated as their trek begins and they have a support team of volunteers and workers back in Wisconsin. A media team from Associated Press here in Cape Town will accompany them as far as Blue 1 before leaving them on the ice. Ann and Liv also have two friends who will accompany them on the flight so we are a happy, excited and somewhat anxious band of men and women flying to Antarctica.

We spend two days in Cape Town before we fly to Antarctica. Rachel has constant radio schedules with Mike for updates on the weather but it all seems a little unreal. We spend our

hours eating delicious seafood, beachcombing at Camps Bay and ogling the beautiful Cape Town homes. Rachel is fielding calls from Blue 1 on her mobile while we loll on the beach. It's too bizarre to grasp. My moment of truth is fast approaching but I rock myself into a false sense of security. I feel like a wimp but Cape Town has such gorgeous weather, the food is plentiful, I can shower every day... I am torn between wanting desperately to get on the ice to start my job and wanting to explore South Africa.

At 5 a.m. on Monday Rachel receives the call. The weather is perfect; we are *good to go*. The tension escalates. We had repacked our gear the night before, keeping our extreme weather gear separate and doing final checks on the luggage and other vital supplies. When Rachel knocks on my door, my heart begins thumping at a tempo that would worry a marathon runner. It won't ease up until I land on the ice.

Most of us are staying at the same hotel so we all meet in the reception area. I stow my bags with Lisa and then go with Benjamin to make a final check on the food. The two of us will leave for the airport from Pick 'n' Pay.

At the supermarket most of the food has been packed away in boxes. I methodically run through my list and check the items off as I see them being loaded. All the while my hands are shaking and my mind is fizzing like a glass of freshly poured soda. Until this moment I have felt smug at my ingenuity in shrugging off one life for another. Now that the other life is about to take hold, I start to panic. This is complete idiocy. How have I managed to fool myself into thinking I could get away with something as daft as this?

We arrive at the airport and customs officials whisk us through, ahead of other travellers standing in the queue. I wish I can enjoy this celebrity moment but I simply feel like throwing up.

The Ilyushin is waiting well away from the commercial flights. As a cargo jet it doesn't need to park up against

passenger walkways. The crew are already there, doing final flight checks and casually standing around smoking cigarettes. Ann and Liv's sledges were loaded the day before and the two women are looking relaxed although a sense of occasion is settling over the departure. The film crew are milling about, wanting interviews and 'spontaneous' shots of Liv and Ann. Severin's sledge is also loaded and I watch as he gives it a gentle pat. Antarctica is happening for all of us.

The truck arrives with the food and it is loaded onto an electronic platform and then lifted to the plane. The food is the final cargo to be loaded. I have insisted on this, wanting it to be the first off when we land. I climb onto the platform and help load the boxes. I have no intention of watching the food order somehow get away from me again. As the final boxes are loaded, the pilot starts the engines. We can't hear each other talk. I look back to the mountains behind Cape Town, already hazy in the morning humidity and I want to gulp in the heat and the smell of the sea and take it with me. During lulls between loading, I gaze at Table Mountain. I can't grasp the idea that soon we'll be airborne and, short of a hijacking, I'll be in Antarctica in time to cook dinner. This is madness. I turn back to the food boxes and keep loading. I need to be busy. For so long it has been a scenario of *hurry up and wait* but now that the weather at Blue 1 is clear, everything is happening at 120 revs per minute and my head can't keep tempo.

Finally everything and everyone are loaded. The rear ramp is raised to its closed position; the crew and passengers climb aboard and we take our seats opposite one another at the front of the cargo section. The loadmaster takes his position at the control desk in front of us and the engines begin to whine in anticipation. We sit in the gloom and watch the cargo and each other begin to vibrate as the plane turns and begins its rumble down the runway. This is it. The accumulation of all my scheming and hoping is

happening now. I slump a little on the uncomfortable bench and wonder at my perhaps misguided and rash attempt to change careers. Did it have to be this excessive?



The flight to Blue 1 is not a social affair. The noise of the engines makes conversation impossible. The South African camera crew are sitting opposite me. We glance across at each other and occasionally smile or raise our shoulders in gestures of, 'What the...?' We fly in a state of suspended calm. But that changes about four hours into the flight.

As we're approaching the Antarctic continent Benjamin thoughtfully yells in my ear that we've passed PNR.

'PNR?' I shout back.

'Point of no return,' he bawls, enjoying the look of dread on my face. 'That means...' I wave him away. I can guess the rest. The plane can only go forward. If the pilot hears from Mike that the weather has suddenly changed at Blue 1, well, that's tough because there's only enough fuel to land us in Antarctica. There'll be no slinking back to South Africa now.

I grip my knees and wonder why no one seems to be changing into warmer clothes. I am still wearing jeans, a T-shirt and my sneakers. I keep stealing glances at Lisa and Ewan who have done all this before. I'll follow their lead but surely now is as good a time as any to change our clothes? I glance down at my small rucksack, it's bulging with my polar gear and my Sorels sit on the bench next to me. I scuff my feet and gnaw on a finger, trying not to think too much about what lies in wait 30,000 feet beneath me.

We've flown over the barrier, the edge of the ice cap, and for brief moments I stand at the porthole and stare at tabular icebergs nudging the ice shelf like shards of glass. It is a

landscape of bleached bleakness, indescribably pristine from this height.

A crew member strides towards the cargo and bends down to yank on the tie-downs. He stands and gives a few of them a good kick and frowns. I avert my eyes as if caught staring at a doctor thumbing through a surgical procedure handbook.

The plane lurches and makes an ominous drop in altitude. My ears pop and abruptly everyone stands as if the full-time whistle has been blown. There is an almost unseemly scramble towards our polar clothing. I start pulling on my Gore-Tex pants and jacket and then realise I have to first change out of my jeans and put on my polar fleece pants. I force myself to take a deep breath. I take a few. I then sit back on the bench and begin to unlace my shoes. The least I can do is look the part when I arrive, even if everything else will be a strictly seat-of-the-pants affair.

Liv and Ann are the first dressed. They look solemn and expectant. Their red Gore-Tex clothes are covered with sponsorship badges. Their clothing is spotless. I, on the other hand, am wearing a mix of old and new gear. My jacket is about four years old and my overpants belong to my sister. However, my boots are brand spanking new. I look like a true novice, the kind who turns up on ski slopes wearing everyone else's cast-offs.

The plane dips and there is another drop in altitude. I am rigid with expectation. My stomach has rolled itself into a cramped ball and when I take a breath my heart bumps uncertainly in my breastbone. Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.

The disorientation is total. The plane pitches and yaws with each thrust of the engine. I stop my ears with my fingers and attempt to think about something other than the landing; failing to complete last year's tax return... anything but this awful nauseous apprehension. Rarely do jets of this size land at Blue 1. Flights from previous years have been made in

much smaller planes. We're an experiment and I can't recall being asked if I'd like to be part of it. I am an Antarctic crash test dummy.

The machine starts to shake unbearably. My palms are sodden and I am stiff with fear. We're all shuddering on our wooden seats and avoiding eye contact with one another.

Now the plane is making an ever-increasing crescendo of high-pitched shrieks. The machine is thumping and thudding jerkily through the sky. We have not landed yet but the bumps are so strong that after each of them I'm astonished that we haven't touched down. I grip my knees together and hang on. I dearly wish for the constricting bond of a seatbelt. If the tie-downs are not secure we'll be crushed by the weight of the cargo as it snaps free and crashes into us.

I'm starting to think we have hours of this when there is an almighty stagger. And then the unmistakable thud of touchdown. BANG... LURCH... BANG. My body is flung back and I crack my head on the wall of the hold. We have thumped onto the ice with the delicacy of an apartment block being dropped from a great height. The plane screams and screeches down the ice runway. The tail is swinging in a wide arc.

The cargo is straining with each bump the jet makes as it slides and skids down the runway. And then the plane seems to come to grips with the slippery surface, the brakes somehow manage to get a hold on the ice and the shriek of straining engines lessens. The passengers are looking a little less grim-faced.

I still have no concept of what's outside – of the weather, of the temperature, of the landscape. It's like waiting for the curtain to go up in the theatre. The others are standing up and crowding around the portholes. Strangely I feel reluctant to join the queue. I can feel the plane turning to cruise back up our runway. I sit on the bench and look blankly in front of me.

The plane comes to a stop with a final shudder. There is a moment of suspended animation as we adjust to the silence when the engines slide from a shriek to a low whine. The air temperature drops undeniably as one of the crew heaves open the side passenger door. Antarctica is here. We all rise as if some mesmerising force has entered the hold. There is no unseemly stampede for the exit. We all linger in the plane, waiting for someone else to make the first move to the door.



It is the realm of Hans Christian Andersen. I am looking at the home of the Ice Queen. I stand at the door and gulp at a panorama of ice and snow. There are mountain ranges to the south that send a shiver of awe through me. Every book on Antarctica emphasises that it is the highest, flattest, driest, coldest... I knew it was the land of extremities but it's one thing to read about it and quite another to bear witness to its blazing, frigid perfection. I stand at the exit of the plane and gaze mutely about me. For a silent moment I don't notice the cold or the bustle of people below me.

The Fenristunga – the Jaws of the Wolf – is the closest mountain range to us. Its peaks and spires jut thousands of metres into the air and the most spectacular of these is Ulvetanna. It stabs the air with the arrogance of a pointing finger. The Sigyn glacier separates the Fenristunga from the Høltedahl mountain range. The two ranges rise distantly before us, glistening with a purple sheen in the early afternoon sunlight.

I swing around and see for the first time the blue ice runway that we had minutes ago boomed down. Our runway has been lined with sophisticated markers that would have been the pride of any international airport: black plastic garbage bags, weighed down with snow.

We drop down the ladder one at a time. The cold makes me gasp. I feel I've been whacked in the solar plexus. I flex my fingers in their gloves and wriggle my toes. We have all been warned that the blue ice is incredibly slippery and to take extreme care. My turn comes to clamber down the ladder and it's me that lands ignominiously on her bum. Welcome

to Blue 1. Mike envelops me in a hug that chivvies me out of my embarrassment. Antarctica cannot be an episode out of *Benny Hill*. Its gravitas shouldn't allow for that, I think. I stand upright and surreptitiously brush my backside. I gaze about me and my mind whirrs to a halt in this enormous nothingness. There is a clean, cold breeze that scalds my nose with its freezing touch. I sniff to clear my nostrils and I feel my face tightening with the caress of the icy wind. The air hints of nothing. There are no smells to remind me of civilisation: no traffic fumes, no scent of plants or trees and the vastness has drowned any fuel smells from the plane. The sounds I focus on are the scraping of my clothes as I walk on the mottled ice and the whisper of wind in my ears. If I walk far enough away from the plane there are no sounds at all, just a gradual obliteration of noise and thought. It's a vast, empty nothing that I sense could swallow me in its void. I bring my hands up to my face and push on my cheeks with my gloves. I splay my fingers over my eyes and look through the cracks at the world around me. The glare burns my retinas, even through my ski goggles. I keep widening and then screwing up my eyes, attempting to relax.

I turn and walk back to the hustle of unloading. Mike informs me they have found an interim oven. I'm impressed and give him the thumbs up. He smiles at my happy expression then leans towards me: 'But we put an ice axe through the door as we were digging it out, so you'll have to use the MSR.' I look startled. What on earth is an MSR?

I scramble from Mike to Geoff and lean in to hug him as well but he rears back at this vision of yellow and black lurching at him. Next a figure in a grease-stained flying suit and gumboots (*gumboots* – what is going on here?) walks towards me. It's Charlie Sutherland, the copilot of the Twin Otter.

'It's the cook. You're here! I can't wait for some decent food!' Charlie looks ridiculously happy as he hugs me. I'm duly flattered but feel a panic creeping up to my throat. Do

I tell someone that I don't know one end of an MSR stove from the other? I extract myself from his arms and gaze on the figure of Blair, the other pilot. He is resting casually against a fuel drum, looking like Dr Zhivago. Well, sort of. A magnificent beaver's-fur hat hugs his head like an embrace. From his neck up he could be Omar Sharif, waiting for Julie Christie to step from the barouche. From the neck down he's in street clothes. I'm aghast. Aren't these people about to drop from frostbite?

I decide to abandon, for sanity's sake, my thoughts on the fashion trends here on the ice. Instead I take a deep, shaky breath and really take a look at Antarctica. It's a stunning summer day here. There are no clouds in the sky and the blue is almost black in its intensity. Everything around me has the clarity of a sumptuous movie. I feel as if someone has wiped the steam off a window and suddenly I can see every object in true Technicolor brilliance.

All the passengers are delicately picking their way across the blue ice and onto the snow where some eighty fuel drums are waiting to be sucked into the Ilyushin. I am beginning to understand that nothing we do out here will be easy. Mike's team have spent a backbreaking week flying fuel in from the Russian base Novolazarevskaya, some 160 kilometres to the north. They then had to move it all down to the fuel point on the runway using only a long wooden sledge hooked to a snow mobile known as a skidoo. (Cooking has to be a doddle in comparison.) In the meantime we had to bring in the correct parts to connect our fuel nozzles to the Ilyushin. If they don't fit, the fuel for the jet will have to be pumped by hand. Blowing up a hot air balloon by mouth would be easier. At this news I think it prudent to get busy with my food before I am roped in for the task.

Charlie helps me load up a sledge with the first of my food boxes and we ride 800 metres to the camp on the skidoo with the sledge attached. It's true, there are only tents on the ice.

I had clung to a fantasy that when they said ‘camp’ they may have meant something like a luxury safari camp, only in a colder climate. This vain hope is duly crushed by the sight of the structures before me. Our personal tents are flimsy nylon shelters. They have had some polar modifications. Extra long nylon skirts have been sewn onto them and are weighed down with snow – to keep them from blowing away, Charlie informs me – but they are tents nonetheless. I can’t stand up in my tent, there’s no ensuite with bathtub and heated floor, nor is there complimentary champagne to mark my arrival. I try not to think too hard about a similar tent I had when I was nine and how it was washed away by a brief thunderstorm. Charlie opens the flap for me and proudly points to the one ‘luxury’ supplied to me: a mattress. I’m touched. He tells me it’s only because I’m the cook and they have to keep on my good side.

The next task is to get the mountain of food stored. Charlie turns to me and asks innocently what I’d like to do. I look at the pile of boxes on the sledge and think about the amount that is still waiting on the plane. I have no earthly idea what I should do with the food. I could tell Charlie that I should never have been allowed near the continent with my laughable qualifications but I bite my lip and decide to continue on in the spirit that got me here in the first place: I’ll bluff. There’ll be plenty of time for him to observe my attempts at coping with these living conditions. I straighten my spine and set about shifting the first of many loads of food and gear.

The main tent is what’s known in the business as a weather haven. It is a reinforced tent with marine ply boards for the floor. Not bad, I think, for a holiday in the tropics but as protection against the vagaries of Antarctica? The canvas is UV-protected and is draped over curving poles that rise from the floor. The tent is approximately two and a half metres wide and about fifteen metres long. In the middle is a minuscule fuel stove. Attached to the stove is a big square metal box. I

am told this is where the snow gets melted for our precious water. The eastern end where I am standing is the makeshift kitchen that the boys threw together during their first week here. The western end has the communications table with an HF and VHF radio, a satellite phone sitting in a briefcase, and a laptop. Underneath the table is a jumble of wires and batteries to power the electronics. In the middle of the tent opposite the stove, there are two all-purpose tables where we will eat, play countless games of Scrabble and cards and write poignant e-mails back to the worlds we have left behind.

At the kitchen end, two tables with assorted foodstuffs and the dreaded MSRs, which look like metal spiders, face another two tables with more junk and mess. Each is connected to a small red fuel bottle by a tiny hose. Scattered around me are countless plastic Rubbermaid boxes in a variety of colours packed with spices, sauces, mixes, powdered drinks, coffee, tea... all these items are over two years old and look rather worn. I don't quite know where to begin in such disorder and I start moving about like a demented hummingbird, flitting hither and yon, before realising that all this movement is achieving nothing. I take a deep breath and concentrate on storing all the food that is waiting outside the door and down at the plane. To make up for my complete unfamiliarity with food storage methods in the ice age, I give orders like a football coach at half-time.

Put the oranges there, leave the potatoes and the pumpkins under the table on the left, flour and sugar can be stored outside, don't leave the coffee and tea outdoors because we'll be using them all the time, place those apples outside near the door...

Needless to say I forget about the apples and discover them bruised and unappetising a few days later. And I can't find my avocados. So much for my expertise. I think mournfully about fresh apple crumble and lashings of fresh cream... that will have to wait for December. All afternoon I bend, rise, stretch, reach and attempt to store all the food that is arriving

at the camp. I have to sort the old from the new and place stickers on the boxes that must be stored in the ice cave. This is one of the first myths that is broken today. We will have to dig ourselves a freezer because it will get warm enough for things to defrost.

As the food piles begin to mount both indoors and outdoors, my hitherto controlled hysteria begins to rise like hot air. What is my plan for all this stuff anyway? Can I leave most of it outdoors – but what if there is a blizzard and it blows away the food – do we have a seal colony nearby as contingency sustenance? I start to mutter to myself and it's a habit that will last for my season down here.

On one of the benches are zip-lock bags of frozen eggs that the boys have fished out of one of the crates from previous seasons. I shudder to think how old they might be. They were taken out of their shells for easier storage. They have been defrosting for the last few days. They look like dozens of yellow eyes lying in runny, viscous liquid. I gag quietly at this unappetising spectacle and wonder if it can possibly be safe to eat something so disgusting. Maybe we will all be dead from botulism within a week.

My primary focus is the MSR stoves. They represent everything that I know nothing about: extreme travel, outlandish adventure, tents, deprivation, high-altitude, polar living. They seem to mock me with their compact shape and space-age design, but there's no escaping them. I'm going to have to use them or serve up frozen chicken with raw sauce.

Geoff steps into the tent and asks me how I'm getting on.

'I love it,' I say with all my fingers and toes crossed. 'The sun, the planes, the tents, the ice, and the frostbite.' Again I can feel a pocket of unchecked hysteria bubbling at the back of my throat. Geoff looks at me strangely.

I had met Geoff briefly in Punta before he flew to Blue 1 as part of the advance party. He is a quiet, reserved man with

an English reticence. His reputation in Antarctica is assured. A decade or so ago he and five other men had trekked across Antarctica using sledges and dogs. They had begun in the dead of winter and the trip had lasted for over 220 days.

I couldn't envision such a journey in all my nightmares and probably said so. My newfound extreme-living friends mocked my incredulity, but strangely, their attitude made me even more tenacious about my trip south. I may not have climbed Aconcagua with one hand tied behind my back and gripping a porta-ledge between my teeth but it didn't mean I would turn tail and head for the day spa at the slightest hint of hardship.

Geoff is idly rummaging through the kitchen end of the tent, looking for something to eat. As the cook I can't let people see that someone other than me is taking over in the kitchen. (An altogether ridiculous notion considering most of the tent is the kitchen and I never turn down offers of help when working.) I leap up and tell him that dinner will be ready in a few hours so if he could wait... Geoff has been doing the cooking before I arrived and he tells me he would be happy to make my life easier by helping out, but I won't hear of it.

'I am the cook and so – I will cook. No discussions. However, could you give me a quick demonstration with the MSRs? In Australia we don't use those things – we use restaurants,' I babble and twinkle like a society princess. There is no stopping my galloping nerves.

Geoff gets one started and then turns it off again to give me a go. He pads off to the other end of the tent. I pump the gas a little as told and then hesitantly light the fuel dribbling into the burner. The flame leaps to life and begins to steadily climb. Is it supposed to go this high? Am I to turn the gas on now? Maybe *now*? I don't think the flame should be almost reaching the tent ceiling. I am standing well back, gnawing my lower lip and thinking about my insurance. I clear my throat and call to Geoff who has his back to me. 'Ummm...

Geoff? Is the flame supposed to be like this... Geoff?' He turns around and leaps towards the MSR and turns it off. Oh yeah, the off switch. I want to smack myself and send me to bed without dinner.

The Ilyushin has been refuelled and those who are flying back to the civilised world are getting ready to leave the relative warmth of the cook tent for the plane. I have been feeding the film crew bars of chocolate. I accompany them down to the runway. It is around eight in the evening and I am not getting any warmer. The cameraman takes some final film of Liv and Ann before boarding the plane. We hug Rachel goodbye and promise to try to contact her in Punta Arenas by radio. We shake hands with Benjamin and watch as the last passengers ascend the ladder. The engines are whining in the thin evening air and I want to ululate like a mourner at a funeral. Don't leave me here! I'll go mad and end up killing everyone with my new kitchen knives. I feel they are truly abandoning me. They are my last link with the outside world and suddenly I love Benjamin like a father. The doors close and there are no more faces to wave to. The engines shriek in anticipation and the plane pulls away from the few fuel barrels left on the ice. It positions itself with its nose pointing south down the runway. The engines are now demented screams. The jet begins to pick up speed with the subtlety of a prehistoric beast. It booms down the blue ice – one kilometre, two kilometres... its body lifts slowly and undeniably into the air. It banks and pulls away to the south-west. I can still hear the engines but they are getting fainter and fainter. Soon the plane is no more than a smudge on the horizon and then a vapour trail and then nothing.

My last glimpse is of the sun glinting on its tail as it heads home.

I stand alone, waving frantically at the plane – as if that will bring it back. There are ten of us left on the ice with three ready to begin their treks south tomorrow. The season has begun; my bluff has been called.



It is summer and the southern hemisphere is tilting towards the sun, giving Antarctica twenty-four hours of daylight. My first night in sunshine is like falling down a black hole – I slip into total oblivion. I am too tired to care whether it is day or night and the luxury of climbing into my sleeping bags is like the warm embrace of a lover. I am sleeping in two bags. I have no intention of being cold while I sleep.

I wake in the morning and immediately jerk upright. My still skittering nerves don't allow me the luxury of stretching out and enjoying the comfort of my warm bed. I'm dragging a hand through my hair and I'm panicking. Shit. I must get up. What if everyone's in the tent waiting patiently for me to cook breakfast? I yelp in alarm and thrash about, madly scrabbling for my underclothes and trying to emerge from my sleeping bags. The tent is surprisingly warm but it takes a few moments for this fact to register. The sun won't set until the end of the summer season. I'm eager to experience this phenomenon.

Meanwhile, I am grunting and groaning with frustration, attempting to pull my boots and clothes on without the luxury of standing up. There. I'm dressed. I yank open the fly and shriek with fright at the blast of frigid air that stings my cheeks. Christ it's *cold*. I wriggle out of the tent feet first and scarcely look at the world around me, so desperate am I to get to the cook tent 100 metres away and to my position behind the MSR's. I skid to the door, yank it open and almost fall headfirst inside.

'Here she is.' Most people are up.

‘Morning – morning!’ I trill with attempted nonchalance. ‘Who wants bacon and eggs?’

Everyone looks at me as if I’m certifiable. Most of them have eaten and are enjoying a last cup of tea or coffee before Liv, Ann and Severin head south. The three trekkers look well rested and calm. Severin is fiddling with his communication system and compass. Mike is quizzing him on the value of such equipment. It seems a strange time to be testing such stuff at this point of the journey. Severin shrugs Mike’s comments off and watches us with steady eyes and a slight smile on his lips. Liv and Ann are sitting at the communal table laughing and talking. They are relieved to be at Blue 1 after waiting for weeks in Cape Town for the Ilyushin to arrive. All three of them seem in no hurry to charge out the door and I get a few minutes to chat to Liv and Ann about their trip. Ann seems more interested in talking about my background, which startles me. I have decided I’m the most boring person down here and try to keep my personal anecdotes to a minimum. I have yet to appreciate the reality that, in a way, each of us is alien to one another, and we each have our own tales to tell.

Lisa has spread a map of the area on the table and we crowd around while she points out crevasse fields to the south. Lisa, her husband Maxo, Ewan and his wife skied around Blue 1 last year and this makes her the acknowledged expert of the region. I take furtive glances at our three expeditioners. I can understand two people setting out together to attempt a long hike but not over the distances and the landscape that Liv, Ann and Severin will be experiencing. They all laugh and joke and sip their mugs of tea but I want to reach over and grab hold of their lapels and stare deeply into their eyes. I am hoping to catch a glimpse of the will and determination that must be bubbling like hot mud beneath their outward expressions. The only hint of what lies ahead of them is in their initial reluctance to leave the tent. It will be some time

before they can again have the luxury of leisurely breakfasts and slow, lazy days.

Someone stretches, another person makes a remark about the weather. Suddenly last gulps of tea are swallowed and chairs are pushed back. An unspoken signal has been made and the expeditioners are going to hitch up and begin their treks. The residents troop out of the tent with them, an informal guard of honour. We accompany them with cameras and video recorders. Severin is the first to hitch up. Severin's sledge has a chair attached to it. He designed it hoping he will be able to navigate his kites from a sitting position if the winds are strong enough for him to 'sail' across the ice. For the time being it's strapped to the back of his sledge. The chair is on skis and flexes with the movement of his body. Ann sits on it and looks impressed. To me it just seems something else to drag across the interminable snow ridges known as *sastrugi*, but I keep my comments to myself. Severin's sledge looks incredibly heavy and cumbersome. I am anxious for him – I think about him fiddling with his apparatus and wish he has as smooth a journey as can be hoped for.

We all snap away with our cameras and make silly remarks. Severin is smiling and smiling. He straps on his skis and then, well, it's goodbye. I look south to the distant mountains and I think how cold I am and how much this little group of tents consoles me, knowing there is nothing between the tents and the elements. I find intense comfort in knowing I'm not the only one on the ice. If I were to go a little crazy someone could smack me out of my hysteria. Severin is going where no sane man should go. At least not on his own. Even people like Ranulph Fiennes take companions on their adventures. Severin will know that Liv and Ann are somewhere out there with him, but is that enough?

Again I gaze at the frontier stretched before me. The landscape is a vast, shining glare with a backdrop of looming mountains. It's unearthly. We are here and can communicate

with Severin, and if he has an accident we can fly out to rescue him, but such contingency plans can easily change from a 'get out of jail free' card to a more taxing sentence. If the weather is bad, no one will be flying anywhere, if Severin falls down a crevasse and can't make radio contact... the possibilities of things going wrong are endless. It's best not to dwell too much on that factor now. Not when the journey is about to begin and you have a crowd of well-wishers looking on expectantly and invoking the gods to shine favourably on your trip. It's easier to grin defiantly at your fans, raise a ski stock and push off.

Severin's departure is a little anticlimactic. It's not as if he's going to suddenly sprout wings and zoom across the ice at breakneck speed. His skis make an icy squelch, a kind of snow squeak with every step he takes. I wonder if his smiling face masks a grimace of pain and exertion. His sledge has to weigh around 200 kilos. Five minutes later he is still within conversation range.

We take a few more photos, perhaps to mask our self-consciousness as he continues to haul his way out of camp. My eyes scan the terrain ahead of him, down the Sigyn glacier. The Sigyn glacier snakes between the mountains of the Fenristunga and the Holtedahl. Both parties will take this route on their way to the polar plateau. The mountains sit massively and imperviously on the ice. They don't so much loom on the horizon as dominate it. The polar plateau is an environment of hypnotic white and terrifying winds; a wasteland of ice, cold and desolation. I doff my cap at his nerve and cunning (or should that be folly?) to take on this continent.

I'm getting cold and I don't think I can stand outside much longer. Liv and Ann seem in no hurry to hit the snow and their sledges are some metres from the main camp. I decide to say goodbye now before my brain ices up. I look to where Severin is straining with his load. Lisa is whispering to Geoff that

he's headed in the wrong direction. He seems to be pulling towards the east – not south. Lisa wants to know if she should say something. It's decided that Severin can make his own mistakes. It's not like we can babysit him to the Pole.

Liv and Ann want to use the loo one last time before they begin. This is my cue. I hug both of them and wish them the best of luck. And wimp that I am, I bound back inside where I can alternately develop a close and passionate relationship with the stove and attempt to sort out the food stores that are still crowding the tent. Throughout the day as I trudge between the big tent and a smaller storage tent I see all three of them pulling slowly south, until a ripple in the landscape finally obscures them from view.



The transit lounge

The airport is officially open and I'm quickly familiarising myself with our camp site. The dining tent is the hub and everything else radiates out from it. This tent is where we all live. It's where I cook, where Mike makes his daily radio checks with the nearby bases, where Lisa attempts to contact her husband Maxo, who is flying a DC-3 somewhere out there for the National Science Foundation, an independent science agency of the US government. This is where Geoff does the washing up, where Ewan tinkers with his electronics and where our pilots Charlie and Blair relax after countless fuel flights to the Russian base of Novolazarevskaya.

Scattered around the cook tent are our personal tents. I've christened mine 'the hangar', as it is closest to the Twin Otter.

We treat the little plane like a trusty farm vehicle. From the way the boys park it, to the loads it ferries to and from Novolazarevskaya, it is the ultimate pick-up truck.

The boys meander out to it, sometimes clutching a toasted bacon and egg sandwich and climb aboard with their lunches tucked into their flying suits. Sometimes they'll start the engines and seconds later Charlie will wander back in asking for some chocolate biscuits for the trip. Back out he goes with Blair gunning the engines and the propellers working overtime. All that's missing is a dog they can whistle in to the hold. To complete this barnyard scene, I'll stand in the blazing sunshine with my apron flapping around my knees, waving goodbye as they take off into the white blue yonder.

When they return from their fuel trips to Novo, they park the plane bare metres from my tent with the nonchalance of tired farmers coming back after a hard day's work in the fields. I half-expect them to toss me the keys and let me take it for a run to the nearest drive-in. Overnight the plane's wings and nose are strapped down. Anchors have been dug into the snow and the plane is clipped into them to stop it from flipping should a storm blow up. Comforting.

Behind me, living in the suburbs of Blue 1, is Ewan. He is completing the construction of his weather station and hopes to have it working soon. Living in the salubrious Blue 1 Heights is Lisa and in the grungier part of town are Mike and Charlie. Geoff is almost in another state, having pitched his tent the furthest from the dining tent. And Blair lives in downtown Blue 1 where his front door is mere steps from the central business district of the cook tent.

Near Blair's tent is a supply tent. It holds food reserves from previous seasons and spare parts and tools for the Twin Otter, including the plane's seats.

At the southern end of Blue 1 lies the industrial estate. This consists of a garish orange tent, christened the Orange Palace. It's a classy structure with wooden floorboards and an upended box which holds a big black bucket lined with a heavy-duty plastic bag. There is a hole in the top of the box, over which a toilet seat is neatly resting. Welcome to the ablutions block. To the west of the Orange Palace is the town dump where numerous fuel barrels are regularly filled with food and bodily refuse. All this gets flown off the continent and back to Cape Town. As this precious cargo gets closer to warmer climes and begins to defrost, the stench becomes unbearable. Even in subzero temperatures our Orange Palace is no place to linger.

Further out to the west are patches of blue ice that are the outdoor loos. The boys regularly saunter out to them and casually take a piss. The women have to be a little more

circumspect. We squat over a container in the Orange Palace and then we tramp out to the ice to empty its contents. I've half-thought about dropping my pants and squatting on the ice but that's a flaunt too far. I would give anything to have a penis down here. The men get it far too easy.

A few metres from the eastern entrance of the cook tent is an area zoned off by Tibetan prayer flags. This is our reservoir. Each day countless trips are made to this area where we fill a huge blue bucket full of virgin snow to be melted back inside. It becomes a common sight to witness at some point each of us bent over at the waist, dragging this bucket in and out of the tent. Along with our snow/water supply is a huge stainless steel pot, about the size and height of a small table. This is our slops bucket; all our washing water is strained into it. This pot gets dragged out the western door where it's wrestled onto a plastic sledge and is then pulled to the nearest patch of blue ice, emptied and left to evaporate in the twenty-four-hour sunlight.

Unsurprisingly these tasks are two of the less popular chores in the camp. We're all terribly polite and wait for someone else to perform these jobs. Geoff is usually the first to crack. At least it beats emptying the bog bags. That job is off-limits to the cook. I can't be seen to be handling bodily wastes for God's sake! I merely need to hint at the lack of tap facilities and the threat of shit ending up in the food before I'm excused from this task. I make the most of my job perks.

My first week on the ice is nerve-racking. The dining tent is awash with boxes and boxes of food and the kitchen is so makeshift as to be almost unworkable. The oven with the broken door stands uselessly on the southern wall and I chafe at the MSRs. I wanted to *cook* not add water to dehydrated foods. Any ninny can manage that. I am also freezing. My feet are always cold and I'm growing depressed at the thought of never getting them warm ever again.

Despite my general moaning there are some bonuses. With so few of us in camp, no one is expecting me to bound out of my tent at an ungodly hour and cook breakfast. This is a pleasant surprise for me. I am expecting to cook everything but I am happy to acquiesce to Mike's wishes that people get their own breakfasts. November is going to be a wonderful month.



We quickly settle into our routines. Most of us rise about 8 or 8.30 a.m. and plop into the cook tent looking like we've wrestled with polar bears. With the lack of washing facilities we begin to develop quite crusty, musty exteriors after a few days. Thankfully the cold is a godsend for disguising our mothball odours.

Geoff rises at around six. Of all of us, Geoff is the most private person and he relishes the hours of solitude he can have at this time of the morning. He seems to be of another era, a Wilfred Thesiger character used to living and thriving in remote areas of the world, adhering to a strict timetable and maintaining that very English sense of what is proper and correct. He is courteous and shy but there is a hint of mischief when he is relaxed.

His childhood was spent in the Sudan where his father was a doctor. His passion for Antarctica is evident. He looks very much at home on the ice and seems to be impervious to the cold. If there was an Antarctic citizen it would be Geoff Somers: he has worked in Antarctica regularly since first coming here with the British Antarctica Survey (BAS) in the 1970s, back when dogs were used by some of the bases for transport on the ice. He has a complicated relationship with the 'new' visitor to Antarctica, the tourist. I do all I can to hide my city ways from him. But trying to keep myself under wraps is a futile exercise.

Geoff is a wonderful companion in the kitchen and he puts me at ease enough to allow me to ask him to peel my potatoes or prepare fruit salad. He gets incredibly annoyed

at my excessive use of every pot and pan but it's a habit I can't break. I don't realise that Geoff has a big reputation down here. To me he is the tidiest man in camp and I'm grateful for his help and patience with me. He has a wonderful knack of showing me how to live and manage on the ice without making me feel like I'm being hand-held. I remember a day the two of us had helping unload fuel from the plane as it made numerous trips to and from Novo. We would unload the plane, grapple the drums onto the sledge, attach it to the skidoo and then the two of us, one riding shotgun, would haul them down to the runway. Geoff was more than happy to show me the intricacies of sledge pulling and parking. He was the perfect teacher. He had no interest in showing off his skills at my expense. It was soothing working with him.

Mike is also a BAS veteran but it's pointless to compare the two men. They're like wine and cheese. They complement each other with their knowledge of the continent but they each have their individual outlook. Mike left BAS because he found the environment stifling. It was a regimented atmosphere, a kind of old boys' network for a particular kind of man. Mike eventually got bored with that and went on to work for the fledgling Adventure Network International (ANI), a far more fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants organisation and well suited to Mike's laid-back approach to life. Amusingly the two of them will bicker about any little issue that comes up, from weather reports to radio etiquette. Geoff is a traditionalist, Mike is a hedonist and the two of them have little common ground.

Mike has a glint in his eye. It is the look of a man who likes to think he knows what is going on in a woman's head. He sees no point in being polite if there is something to say and although at times it's a jaw-grinding experience coming up against this characteristic of his, I also find it refreshing. It gives me no incentive to be polite in return.

I'd been told in Punta how lucky I was to be working with two Antarctic veterans in the form of Mike and Geoff. I'm beginning to realise that now. Of course, the season is only beginning and I am wide-eyed with the wonder of it all.

Charlie is in competition with Blair and Ewan to take the prize as the camp's most mellow resident. I occasionally see him sitting cross-legged just inside his tent with his watercolours, painting the transcendent landscape. Like Geoff, he looks good in my kitchen and it's a delight to watch the two of them putzing about in there, cleaning up after me.

Charlie treads around camp in a heavy cotton flying suit and a pair of gumboots. He eschews the outdoor fashions for comfort. He is a wise and sensible man. I was mortified in Punta when all of us had our gear checked. Lisa went through mine and declared I would be the best-dressed female down there. That accolade was perfectly acceptable back in fashion-conscious Sydney but did I detect a sting in the words when spoken by Lisa? Charlie couldn't have cared less if he wore sackcloth. I longed for such nonchalance. Well, I did and I didn't. If I were to walk around Blue 1 wearing what he did, I'd be mummified by the cold inside a second.

Blair is a tall, reserved-looking man and quite shy. He spends many hours reading and sleeping when he isn't flying the 'ute' to our nearest neighbours, the Russians. With such a small group, there is much probing about where we come from, how we found ourselves at Blue 1. Blair rarely contributes to our outpourings. He comes alive when food is served and is never short of compliments about the desserts, which has endeared him to me no end. But when he leaves in December I will be none the wiser about who he is and what makes him tick.

Lisa's personality has the bite of a perfectionist. She has no qualms about letting those of us who are annoying her know about it. I am impressed at the number of times she casually tells people to 'fuck off'. It's not the language that shocks me but the absolute righteousness in her tone when she utters the

phrase. I am completely gripped by this audacity, and try to keep out of her ‘fuck off’ range. I make a real effort to show her I am a competent person who has talents beyond looking natty in my polar gear.

Lisa is a vegetarian. I have conflicting feelings about this, which is a polite way of saying it pisses me off. I’m a cook and I’ve never denied myself the pleasures of the palate for ethical motives. And besides, I’m lazy. I don’t want to be cooking two separate meals, day in, day out, because someone won’t eat meat. There will be times when I want to yell at her to cook her own damn meals but our relationship doesn’t allow any such outburst from me. So for the season I will bite my tongue and prepare non-meat meals. The two of us have lived different lives and I think we’re both conscious that if it weren’t for the isolation we find ourselves in, we would be on nodding terms only.

It doesn’t faze me that the only other female here is the person I find the most difficult to understand. I admire her honesty and some of me would long to have the spunk to make a stand the way she so effortlessly does. Instead, if something or someone is bothering me, I take myself for long walks around the camp, until the cracking of the ice has me heading back to the tents at an over-eager shuffle.

Ewan continues to overturn my preconceptions. I was irrationally annoyed to hear we’d be hosting a client for November. I wanted my first weeks at Blue 1 to be witnessed by staff alone. I didn’t want to have a paying customer, an American to boot, demanding little extras and bleating on about the quality of my cooking. My prejudices prove completely unjustified – and in any case, for the first few weeks we hardly see Ewan. He has been assembling a weather station for Blue 1 and testing the communication equipment he will be using on the expedition that will be led by Alain Hubert. Alain and the rest of his team are due to arrive at Blue 1 in December.

This is Ewan's third trip to Antarctica and his second to Blue 1. He is a quiet, intelligent man with a warm smile who at first enters the tent with the air of someone gatecrashing a private gathering. Perhaps he is not sure of his position down here but this will soon change. He forgets to eat and so I often tramp out to his tent to let him know a meal is being served. I come across him sitting in the entrance of his tent with a computer on his lap, glasses perched on his nose, typing code for his weather station and keeping an eye on proceedings around him. Alternatively I put food aside for him so he doesn't waste away to nothing. He has the air of an absent-minded scientist, which is a little bit of a disguise. He lives in San Francisco and works at a startup company as a hardware engineer. He mentors students at Stanford University and has designed the weather station with the help of students from the university.

So here we all are. A photo of the group is sent via satellite to Ewan's website and it captures the citizens of Blue 1 to perfection. Lisa is sitting in the far left of the picture, her back resolutely to the camera. Blair has his Russian fur cap on and looks content. Next to him is Geoff, looking inscrutable, and beside him sits Mike, all wild hair and glee. I sit around the corner from Mike and am angling my head to be seen around Charlie. I look eager to please and have the air of a mother happy to see everyone at the table eating. Next to me Charlie smiles cautiously at the camera. Ewan is front and centre, dressed all in black with his arms folded across his chest. He is viewing the camera with the attitude of someone itching to make some minor modifications to its design.

As the days progress my nerves abate. I am relieved and thankful that any effort I put into my cooking is much appreciated by the others. It allows me to relax into my job and I start to enjoy the challenge of managing the kitchen and the food. I have a small book on basic cooking and a folder of my favourite recipes from Chakola. Apart from that, all my

menu planning is rather spur of the moment. Evening meals are planned a little more carefully because I have to ensure the meat is defrosted before serving it up to my eating public. Soups are turning out to be a real hit for lunch and I decry the lack of electricity down here. I would sell my Gore-Tex parka for an electric mixer. I spend long hours using the potato masher and the whisk to bring the soups to a suitable smoothness. My only consolation is knowing my arms are going to be sculpted to the perfection of a Rodin by the end of the season.

The best news is the oven works. I entered the tent one morning and found Charlie and Geoff growling over the useless thing. A few hours later, with the help of aluminium foil and a piece of metal from the tail of the plane, the door had been repaired and the oven was ready for action. In honour I whipped up a banana cake. The smell of baking was sensational in the tent. And now the oven serves a dual purpose. I furtively turn it on to keep warm, even if I'm not using it. The fuel stove we're using at the moment is completely useless. All its energy is given to melting the snow for our water and it throws out hardly any warmth. I find it ludicrous to be this cold so I put the oven on and as I'm making soup for lunch or preparing the evening meal, I stand pressed up against the door and revel in the heat. Geoff is the one who catches me out but I blithely explain to him that an oven has to pre-heat before I can place anything inside. He looks at me with narrowed eyes; I don't think I'm convincing him.

To the east lies our closest nunatak. We have christened it The Wall because the side facing camp is a massive cliff face. The nunatak looks like an immense beast at rest. I'm quickly picking up the Antarctic vernacular; anywhere else our mountain would be called, well, a mountain. Here it's a nunatak – a rocky outcrop. From the tent it looks a mere

stroll away. However, appearances are deceiving. We take our first seasonal stroll to it one overcast November afternoon. The damn thing is miles away. We trudge and trudge... and trudge but still it seems no closer. The landscape is also subtly changing. What looked like a flat expanse of snow between the camp and the nunatak is nothing of the sort. The land dips and undulates like frozen waves. We are walking along a thin ribbon of snow between massive ice fields. I keep looking back over my shoulder as we walk further and further from camp. When we dip with the ice below the line of sight back to Blue 1, I feel myself shrink as a world of inexorable simplicity opens up. It is the first time I've ventured out of the kitchen. I feel the force of Antarctica's latent power and detachment. I shiver, shaking mentally and physically at the soundless, mindless wilderness around me.

I may be more relaxed and *au fait* with my domestic duties. However, I am still cautious and alarmed by the environment outside our tented neighbourhood. I think of the Andrew Wyeth painting called 'Christina's World'. The image of the paralysed girl sitting in the field near her home and surveying her world strikes a strong chord with me. I am in a world that I am powerless to control but the freedom of being here is the most exhilarating feeling I have experienced in my life. At the same time, I lie awake in my tent at night, spooked by the pistol shots of the ice cracking around me. My heart flops in my chest like a gasping fish as I imagine a crevasse opening up directly under my mattress.

To the west of Blue 1 are flat expanses of ice fields, stretching to the horizon and beyond. A few years ago, a National Geographic team stumbled across a dead seal about six kilometres west of the camp. Blue 1 is a good 160 kilometres from the edge of the ice cap and the open ocean is another sixteen or so kilometres beyond that. There is no marine life at Blue 1. It would be impossible for penguins or seals to find any food in this landscape. The seal is an anomaly in the

landscape. It's like finding the skeleton of a shark on South Australia's Lake Eyre. Only snow petrels and skuas can find sustenance here. And that's only during the summer months. When winter falls the birds will fly further north to survive.

There has been much speculation about how the creature made it over 150 kilometres inland and how old it could be. Guesses range from 10 to 20,000 years old. Radiocarbon dating tests have been carried out but no one really knows. Some of us reckon it has travelled from the Pole and it has never seen the ocean while others, not given to flights of fancy, think the seal might have struggled this far south looking for food. Whichever theory you subscribe to, it's one of the more peculiar sights around here.

The dead seal is a perfect destination if someone wants to get out of camp but can't be bothered walking and would rather take a skidoo for a spin. It's also a good test if one is learning to use a global positioning system (GPS). The coordinates are given to you and you're set free to attempt to find the seal. You commandeer a skidoo and putt-putt across the ice, trying simultaneously to read the GPS and keep an eye out for crevasses. I can't think of a more relaxing way to spend an afternoon.

I haven't tried to find it on my own. I'm wary enough of the landscape to imagine myself heading west in search of a rotting carcass only to really lose my way. I have visions of me being the next creature they stumble across, twenty years from now, frozen solid to the seat of a skidoo. I have no intention of being the next dead exhibit.

MAIN COURSE



For the first three days the weather is calm. But normally around seven in the evening, the katabatic winds pick up. These winds are the result of cold air dropping off the polar plateau and rushing down to a lower altitude. Blue 1 is a respectable 1,000 metres below the polar plateau and the katabatics flail our little camp with fierce unconcern. Our tents start to flap in the evening wind and for the first few moments before drifting off to sleep I listen to the noise and idly wonder what would happen if the wind were to really blow – would it rip my tent from its moorings and toss it west like a tumbleweed into oblivion? I cross my fingers against this possibility. I've been told Blue 1's mild weather is practically tropical in comparison to the rest of the Antarctic continent. Nature is about to show me otherwise.

Mike tells me that Blue 1 was blown away a few seasons ago. I look at him sceptically, 'You're joking. The camp blew away?'

'The only things left were the floorboards, the satellite phone, someone's sandals and my tent. Believe me, Alexa, an Antarctic storm is no picnic.'

I chew my bottom lip and think, who in their right mind would wear sandals down here? As usual I am not concentrating on any implicit messages, just the ludicrous anecdotes. I'm too preoccupied with the sandals image to give a storm my full attention. Or maybe I want to lull myself into a false sense of security.

The two pilots and Mike are waiting on weather reports from Syowa and Mawson. Syowa is a Japanese base to the

north-east. The three of them will be flying there before going on to Mawson, one of the Australian bases. Mawson is roughly 1,500 kilometres to the west of Blue 1. It was established in 1954 as the first Australian wintering-over base. We have a helicopter part for the Australians that must be delivered. I am working on Mike to tag along. I figure they will need a cultural attaché to help them understand the subtle nuances of the Australian psyche but no one seems to be buying my line.

While the pilots wait for the weather to clear to the east of us, I fail to grasp a common weather phenomenon. In simplistic terms it moves in an east-west pattern. Mike has daily weather schedules with Neumayer, the German base to the north-west. We are warned that unstable weather is due in the Blue 1 region over the next couple of days. I don't care to know what the definition of unstable weather happens to be down here. Our little village is constructed with varying strengths of nylon. There are no solid buildings to shelter in if we need serious protection from an Antarctic storm. I rely on my inflated sense of optimism to reassure me – which, as it turns out, is truly a bad idea.

Thankfully I have completed a comprehensive inventory of the food that we brought in. What hasn't been stored inside has been packed in Rubbermaids and sits just to the north of the weather haven under a heavy tarpaulin. And, miracle of miracles I have found my avocados and they are delicious despite being frozen solid for a few days.

We have also spent backbreaking days digging a freezer for the perishables. We've grunted and sweated in the sun, everyone taking turns with the shovels, digging three metres down to the blue ice where the meat will be stored for the season. Sometimes Antarctica means beauty and bleakness and other days it means hard physical labour and pinched sciatic nerves.

This afternoon, while some of us are nodding over our books or playing cards, the first hint of what is coming startles us out of our homey world. The tent is shaking noticeably. It's not excessive, just harder and stronger than we have previously experienced. I step outside to get more meat from the Rubbermaids and I notice the Tibetan flags are straining at the poles and the stove's chimney is rattling in the wind. It's a prelude to something bigger, something nastier. I don't dwell on it because I am not prepared for this. I don't know how to 'read' the wind or the snow. In my efforts to ignore what is going on around me, I fail to ask the experts what to do in the event of a big storm. And they don't think to inform me.

By the evening the weather is definitely growing wilder. Someone decides to stretch a rope from the main tent to the Orange Palace, some twenty metres away. Apart from this safety line, nothing else is secured for the storm. And it is now a gale out there. We're raising our voices to be heard above the clanking of the tent and the increasing lament of the wind.

My mind keeps returning to Mike's story of the camp upending. I feel bubbles of terror rising to the surface of my mind at such a possibility. Why oh why did Mike have to tell me this now? I look to Mike and Geoff for any outward signs of nervousness. If they start to look goosy I am going to lose my reason. I am already fretting because I need to go to the bathroom. I know I'll have to step outside into the squall and I've watched as people have struggled in and out of the door at the eastern end of the tent. It's no stroll down the boulevard out there. I drag on my outer gear with the enthusiasm of Marie Antoinette heading to the guillotine. The door is made of moulded plastic and sits in a metal frame. There is a lever with a catch that connects to the frame. It seems to be frozen solid. I push as hard as I can on the lever but it's stuck fast. I push harder and it gives slightly but I can feel the wind forcing

it shut. I ask for assistance and two of us manage to shove the door open. I plunge outside and enter another world.

Immediately I am flattened up against the door and I have to force my body into the wind. It shrieks and howls in my ears like a demented being. I turn to my right and grope along to the edge of the weather haven where the rope has been tied. I peer blindly into the white-out and place my hands in front of me, fumbling and groping around for the knot. I find it by chance and grab hold of it in a grip that drains the blood from my arms. Using my hands, I slide along it. I am trying to concentrate on my bladder; I don't want to think about coming to the end of the rope and finding nothing else beyond it. In this wind it would not be impossible for it to have become untied at the other end.

I have no protection from the wind at all. It's a brutal physical assault and I'm outraged at its ineluctable malevolence. I bury my head further into my jacket in an attempt to hide from its aggression. I am flung to the ground and I think to myself, maybe I should just pee in my pants. No trip to the loo is worth this kind of pain. I struggle upright; I still have the rope in a death grip. I inch forward and thankfully I'm standing in front of the Orange Palace. I struggle with the door and almost cry with relief when I manage to force it open. The Palace is slowly filling up with rime and I shiver uncontrollably as I yank down my pants and take a seat on the loo. The wind is horrendous. Surely this is not natural?

Tonight I go to my tent with extreme reluctance. I hate being alone with such savagery swirling on the other side of the nylon. I hardly sleep and keep taking deep breaths to stop myself from rushing out of the tent in a frenzy of hysteria. It's too much for me. I have never encountered such a maelstrom without the protection of bricks and mortar. I have no faith in these fragile walls. They shudder like tin foil in this fury and feel about as insubstantial.

The gusts are the worst. The storm blows at over sixty kilometres an hour but the gusts are twice as strong, sometimes measuring over 100 kilometres an hour. They slam into our tents with no warning. They are heavy with ferocious power and they smash the camp like a boxer's fist. I sit on my mattress with my hands pressed over my ears and whimper in fright. Someone hold me please and tell me it will be all right. I can't understand why the storm hasn't blown itself out.

I am trying to sleep but the howl of the wind is making my hands and my feet sweat with dread. They are dripping with moisture and I alternately sit up in my sleeping bag and flex my fingers or try to cower inside my bag in an attempt to calm myself. If I call out, no one can hear me. If the wind were to rip the tent open, no one would see me in distress. We're all inside our individual tents and no attempt has been made to keep in contact or forewarn of the inevitable dangers brought by the weather that is caterwauling relentlessly around us.

I consider myself to be a practical person. But this trait has completely deserted me now that I need it most. I feel I am in imminent peril and I cannot see how I can extricate myself from the danger. I don't know what to do if the tent were to be shredded by the storm, I don't know how to protect myself from the elements if I were to find myself suddenly exposed to them. I don't lie down at all now. I am dressed only in my woollen tights and vest. Ironically I am warm in the tent but I am gripped by complete indecision. My mind has enough sense to know that if the tent were to go, I'd need to be dressed in far more appropriate clothing but I feel that if I make a move to climb out of my sleeping bag to drag on my overclothing and my boots, this will be when the tent is ripped from its anchors. Surely it's best to stay put in the event of this happening? I am whimpering with fear and panic, and feel truly alone.

I curse myself for not heeding the environment around me, and I curse my cavalier attitude to this adventure I've embarked upon. I curse my hesitancy in not learning more about survival techniques for blizzards like this one. I ping-pong from anger to fright, to anger... I feel dizzy trying to pull my brain into a more coherent thought pattern. Think, Alexa! It's too late to berate myself or others for this predicament. But no solution is forthcoming.

I glance at my watch. It's eleven o'clock. Ominous night has begun. I'm so tired, I want to fall asleep but if I were to nod off, what would happen? I attempt to talk to myself but I can't hear my voice over the noise of the wind. I remain awake, only occasionally falling into a trance where I am visited by amazing visions. They are not dreams but strange hallucinations that seem to stretch time like sticky toffee. I jerk out of these trance-like states, thinking hours must have passed only to look at my watch and realise about five minutes have gone by. I think I'm going mad.

At one point I seriously contemplate stepping outside to have a look at the elements. I have no idea what my plan would be beyond this but surely it's best to face my fear head-on? I stretch out my hand towards my boots and it stays there – hovering as if in mimicry of my mind's complete indecision. I start screaming at the noise, I shout and I holler and I yell – I don't know why. Maybe I think my yelling will bring the noise to heel like a rebellious child being punished. This does not work.

I lie back down again. I am shocked to see a tiny tear in the northern wall of the tent and I reach out a hesitant hand to touch the material. The wall is stretched taut with the strain of the gusts. It quivers in jerky movements and as I touch this tiny indication of the fury outside, a sob of fear hiccups out of my mouth. I look towards the entrance of the tent and see snow building up on the inside. Instinctively I shrink back into the warmth of the sleeping bag. In a

coherent moment, I drag my headphones over my ears and attempt to play Bach on the portable CD player. Just as quickly I throw them off. I need to be alert to the sounds around me. I want to be able to hear the tent ripping, not just see it.

Can time move so slowly? Gradually I'm aware of another creeping emergency: I need to relieve myself. I don't believe this. I lie with my knees pressed against my chest and my arms wrapped around my legs. I desperately try to think of something – anything but not this. I look wildly around me, feeling betrayed. I have my pee bottle with me but I need to do more than pee. I screw my eyes shut and grind my teeth until my jaw aches, then open my eyes and stare horrified at the ceiling. There are zip lock bags in the tent and I have nappy wipes but that's not the point. I don't want to have to climb out of my cocoon and attend to bodily functions. Not when I'm expecting to be swept across the icy desert steppes once and for all. I am firmly convinced that any move out of my bed will simply be a signal to the squalling hurricane outside to begin ripping the delicate fabric of the tent to shreds.

In the end, the urge to relieve myself is a primitive force that won't be quelled. I manage to struggle out of my bag and squat at the entrance of my tent. My sockless feet are shoved into my boots that are rigid with cold and I can't even laugh at the picture I must present to the world. I am blubbering with frustration and panic, convinced that I will be exposed to the storm at any moment. I am crouching in the snow inside my tent with the world going mad around me and I'm having a shit. Maybe it's my body giving the storm the metaphorical middle finger. Right at this moment I am not thinking about the symbolic significance of this action.

The new day is worse. The gusts are stronger and my claustrophobia is like a weight pressing on my chest. I feel breathless and I cough and clear my throat. I'm so tired, I am so fucking *tired*. I feel useless tears dribbling down my cheeks

and into my ears as I lie in the tent. I brush at them furiously. What am I going to do – call in the National Guard?

Should I stay here and gaze at the snow being blown into the inside of my tent or attempt to find the cook tent? I tentatively extricate my limbs from the sleeping bag. I have no confidence that the tent will continue to hold up against the storm but I desperately need some human comfort so I climb into my clothes. After I dress I sit for a while on the edge of my mattress and then I lie down on my back and watch the netting above my head jerk and flap in syncopated time with the wind. I am coherent enough to know that if I step outside I'm going to be helplessly lost. Visibility is zero. I know the direction of the cook tent but there's every chance I'll stumble right by it and find myself in no-man's-land. So I wait. My brain is humming and leaping from one topic to another. I know that someone eventually will come and get me. That is, if they themselves haven't been blown away by the storm.

I wait and wait. I am now too tired to panic and I slowly start to drift again into my hallucinatory state. I feel I've taken a strong dose of LSD and my brain twists and turns the sounds outside into amazing images. It's the only respite I have received since the storm began. I occasionally look at my watch – about three hours have passed since I got dressed. Strangely I'm starting to feel relaxed. I think some sanity is starting to exert itself over my addled brain. It tells me that if the tent hasn't blown away yet, it will probably stay put. I'm not entirely convinced of this theory but I'm willing to listen to any positive thoughts.

I can faintly hear someone shouting outside. I sit up and cock my head. I think it's Geoff. I yell back, 'Can you hear me?' He places his mouth to the wall of my tent.

'Do you want to come to the cook tent?'

Is he mad? 'Yes!' I holler as loudly as I can. 'I'm coming out!' I thrash about, reaching for my scarf, pulling my gloves on and

groping for my beanie. I attempt to open the fly but a wall of snow has blocked the entrance. In my panic I start pounding the wall with my fists but it's too solid. I take a calming breath and lie back on my mattress and with my feet I methodically start to tap away the snow as gently as I can without ripping the tent. It takes a very long ten minutes. Maybe Geoff has gone back inside. Can't say I'd blame him.

The entrance is wide enough for me to wriggle out. At last I emerge into the tempest. I can't see anything and the snow lashes my exposed face. I turn my back to the wind and peer into the whiteness. Geoff materialises about two inches from my face.

'Hello there.' Geoff is swaddled in what looks like an orange boiler suit.

'I can hardly see you! Where is the cook tent?' I grab hold of his arms and hang onto him with the grip of a floundering swimmer.

'Wait for a break in the wind, we should be able to see it soonish.'

The two of us stand hunched against the screaming gale, waiting. I think there's a greater chance of getting a glimpse of the Second Coming whereas Geoff stands as if his local bus is a little late. He is dressed in the gear he wore when he walked across Antarctica. He looks completely at home in this environment and I envy his relaxed pose. Me, I'm hopping from one foot to the next, partly because my Gore-Tex and boots are soaked through by the snow and I'm stiff with cold and partly because I have no desire to be part of this storm. It may be OK for Geoff to stand in the whiteout but I am desperate for the warmth of the main tent and the solace of my fellow campers.

A glimpse of the cook tent is not forthcoming so Geoff decides to walk in its general direction. I cling to the back of his jacket with two hands and the two of us stumble and sometimes fall to our knees as we inch forward in a vaguely

southerly direction. After a few steps I turn my head into the wind to see if my tent is still there but the storm has closed over all traces of our village. I can't see the plane and I wonder if maybe it has been blown away. The two of us struggle on and miraculously we slither down a wind scoop and crash into the corner of the tent. I let go of Geoff's jacket and grab the door handle. I tug and yank and finally it gives. I make an undignified entry, tripping over a small mound of snow and almost falling to my knees. I look around me wildly and find it hard to believe the serene scene before my eyes. Lisa is stirring the soup, the two pilots are hunched over books and barely look up and Mike is fiddling with his radios.

'If anyone,' I pause for dramatic effect and hold a finger up at the assembled group, 'if anyone tells me that this is merely a squall I am on the next flight back to Cape Town. I'm deadly serious.' Someone waves a vague hand in my direction as if that will placate my thumping heart.

The storm gets worse, if that's possible. All day wind and snow are flung, pounded, and hurled across the desert. The weather haven starts to come apart. Sections of canvas begin to loosen and we stand on chairs to attempt to tie them back together. I am rushing around trying to cook a roast dinner. I feel completely undone. I decide that cooking a traditional roast lamb dinner will keep me from the brink of insanity. Everyone watches in confused amazement as I dash hither and thither – but anything is better than listening to the fury outside.

Mike and Geoff leave for their tents in an unexpected lull after dinner. There are five of us left in the main tent; Ewan, Lisa, Charlie, Blair and myself. Lisa struggles outside to visit the Orange Palace and stumbles back inside with further bad news. It seems almost impossible to get back to our tents without the help of rope. I think of the previous night and my heart begins to palpitate at the thought of another vigil alone. I make a suggestion that we stay in the

main tent. No one seems to want to do this and eventually Lisa, Ewan and myself decide to find our tents together, considering we're camped closest to one another. Blair and Charlie feel up to finding their tents on their own.

There is no rope leading to any of the tents apart from the Orange Palace. Thankfully there is a plentiful supply in the main tent. Lisa instructs Blair and Charlie to feed it out the door as the three of us walk to the supply tent. We step outside. Lisa is in front, I'm in the middle and Ewan brings up the rear. On a calm day, I take no notice of how far apart the tents are. Normally it takes me under a minute to lope from my 'door' to the weather haven. But now as we push against the wind, and shield our faces from the lacerating snow, I'm trying to calculate in which direction and how far they are from the weather haven. The supply tent is about fifteen metres to the north-east of the main tent. From the supply tent, the tents belonging to Lisa, Ewan and me are bunched together about another twenty to thirty metres to the north.

It takes about half an hour to reach the supply tent. None of us has any idea where it is exactly and we can't see more than a foot in front of us. We stumble and fall like drunks evicted from a pub. Strangely I am not frightened with the others around me. I have given over all responsibility to Lisa. I numbly follow the figure of Lisa and, thanks more to her dead reckoning than calculated navigation techniques, we come up against the supply tent.

The three of us collapse inside and gaze at each other in wonder. The howling wind and snow are too unreal to be true but my soaking outer gear and freezing feet are physical signs of the situation. We are panting with physical and emotional exertion. Ewan and I instinctively look to Lisa to get us through this mess. She needs to go outside to secure the rope to the skidoo that is near the door. From this point we will keep moving further away from the hub of the camp in an attempt to find three separate tents. Lisa steps outside

and disappears. Ewan and I look at each other but don't say much. I begin to pace to slow the sensation of cold creeping up past my knees. The noise is horrendous.

Lisa has been yelling at us for about five minutes. She has been standing outside unable to open the tent door because the zipper handle is on the inside of the tent. We only realise this after both of us notice the door shaking with particular vigour. Lisa falls back into the tent, angry at us for not keeping alert. I can understand her fury. Again we step out with her. In theory her tent will be the closest to the supply tent. At this point it's anyone's guess where we will end up. I'm laughing hysterically but I have periods of lucidity. I have complete confidence in Lisa getting us to our tents. We find her tent but this is only going to be a stepping-off point to keep looking for the other tents. I don't know how much time has lapsed but I hazard it has been about two hours since we left the cook tent. And we still haven't found my tent or Ewan's.

Suddenly a structure is visible directly in front of us. A tent! Holy smoke! The three of us are so surprised we gather around and stare mutely at it. It's a Monty Python moment. The blizzard screams around us and three people are standing outside a tent gazing at it in raptures. No one makes a move to enter its relative safety. Lisa is the one who comes to her senses the quickest. 'Get IN! Don't damn well stand here!' It's Ewan's tent. For a nanosecond longer we continue to gawk at it in amazement and then Ewan bends down, unzips the fly and the last sight I have of him is his feet wriggling inside.

Lisa puts her lips to my ear: 'If we can't find yours you'll have to sleep in my tent!' I shrug. I wouldn't mind in the slightest. Now that our party has shrunk to the two of us I'm starting to feel the creeping fear rising inside me again. We backtrack to Lisa's tent. We put our mouths to each other's ears to yell at each other and gesture which direction we think my tent would be. It seems absurd to be doing this. If there was no blizzard, I would be able to see my tent about five metres from

Lisa's. But the storm has scrambled all rational sense and we have absolutely no idea where the hell it could be. Our only lifeline is the ropes that Lisa has stretched from the cook tent, to the supply tent, to the skidoo and we're holding the remaining metres in the vain hope of finding my tent.

We lurch out once again. I think we're moving in ever-increasing half-circles from her tent but I can't be sure. I do not have a clue which is up and down, let alone left and right. My mind pictures the camp and I cannot believe that we're lost between tents. Not lost, I feel we're in a fourth dimension where the rules of space and logic don't apply. How is it possible not to navigate our way between tents that in normal weather are the only solid human structures for miles around? The storm has crumpled our rational world and replaced it with noise and an horrific sense of claustrophobia in this vast space. We can't project anything of ourselves, not our vision, not our sense of distance, not our sense of balance. We have lost all sensory perspective.

Again and again we fall to our knees and struggle upright only to be flung back into a kneeling position by the deadly hurricane. I can't help thinking it's a malevolent being, determined to see us fail in our quest. I am soaked through but I don't feel cold now. I feel light-headed and strangely happy. My mind seems to be slipping from its moorings. I catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye. I nudge Lisa in the back. 'My tent – it's over there. Look... over there!' The two of us peer into the whiteness. There is nothing at all. I wipe a hand over my eyes and shake my head. I'm sure I saw yellow nylon off to the right. I take lungfuls of freezing, snow-laden air and I cough and attempt to spit it out, but it just as quickly fills my mouth as I pant with exertion.

My body is starting to become sluggish and languid. Maybe I'll curl up here in this bit of snowdrift and snuggle down for a little bit. I'm alert enough at this point to realise this would be a dangerous and stupid action to take. But the idea feels

so comforting somehow. I see more yellow nylon; I don't say anything to Lisa this time. It can only be my mind playing tricks. Soon I'll be seeing a beach, maybe a few palm trees and a hammock slung up between them.

The yellow nylon remains to the right of my vision. I squint a little more and wipe snow from my face. I shake my head like a dog. That *is* a tent. Again I tug at Lisa and gesture towards my vision. She peers in the direction I'm gesturing at. 'It's probably mine,' she yells. I convince her to take a look, yelling that if it is then I'll stay with her for the night. We stumble over. I reach down and struggle with the zipper. I kneel down and peer inside. I stand up again and give her a thumbs-up sign. 'It's mine.' Again I stand there looking at her expectantly. I feel relaxed and buoyant and completely out of my head. Again Lisa yells at me, 'What are you waiting for?! Get in the fucking TENT!' I gaze open-mouthed at her. I look down, I look back at her and suddenly I jump into the present. I have the sense to take a radio off her and she impresses on me that the rope will be tied to my tent and then back to hers if I need to escape. I nod frantically and then I have to climb into the tent and be alone once again.

I very reluctantly slither inside, over the mound of snow banking up at the bottom of my mattress, and collapse onto my sleeping bag. I'm frozen through. I am convinced that I can hear my limbs creaking with the cold. The radio is dangling around my neck and I realise I don't know how to operate the damn thing. I look mutely at the instrument and start to fiddle with the knobs on the top of it. It squawks to life. I timidly chirrup a 'hello' into the microphone. Nothing happens. I hold the radio in front of my face and examine it with careful concentration. Noticing the speaker button on the side, I depress it and try again. 'Hello...?' I let go of the button, not sure whether anyone is listening anyway.

Suddenly the radio hisses static, Mike's disembodied voice is recognisable over the crackle. Startled, I rear back at the

close proximity of his voice. I press the button and lean into the microphone. 'I'm here.'

'Where's here?'

'My tent.'

'Great, well done. I'll see you in the morning.' The radio goes dead.



The population at Blue 1 has shrunk. Mike, Charlie and Blair have left for Syowa and Mawson and we probably won't see them for about a week. The sun shines in complete contrast to the ferocity of the past four days but the landscape bears witness to nature's fury. The main tent and the supply tent have wind scoops curved around them and patches of ice lie exposed around us where before there had been deep snow. The Orange Palace has had to be completely overhauled. The interior filled with snow and it needs to be re-stabilised after the shaking it endured. The bad news is our freezer needs to be dug out again. The blizzard filled in our underground cave and we spend another backbreaking day digging it out again and securing the roof and surrounding sides with marine ply and hard-packed snow.

With our numbers down to four, Blue 1 is quiet. At first the silence seems a little self-conscious. Maybe we should make an effort and attempt to chat but after a day a natural calm settles over us and we spend long hours reading books and writing in journals. I am still fretting after the physical and psychological pounding I've endured. When the katabatic winds start to blow of an evening I feel myself twitch and fidget with a sense of impending doom. Antarctica is indifferent to all of us. I am conscious of the impassive power and savagery this continent wields. The storm was an infinitesimal demonstration of the fingernail grip we have on the continent.

'Severin, Severin, Severin – Blue 1, Blue 1, Blue 1 – how copy?' The sound of static fills the tent.

‘Severin, Severin, Severin – Blue 1, Blue 1, Blue 1 – do you read me?’ We haven’t heard from him for days now and we’re not sure where he is and how he is managing out there. We have to track his movements until he reaches the Pole then the ANI base at Patriot Hills will monitor his progress. We have a daily radio schedule with him at 9 p.m. and the last we heard from him was before the storm. Liv and Ann have an Argos system. They push a button on the Argos and it’s received by satellite and we get their messages via e-mail. So far they are fine but Severin’s communication is not quite so up-to-date.

‘Severin, Severin, Severin – Blue 1, Blue 1, Blue 1 – can you read me?’ Geoff makes a number of attempts on one frequency and then informs Severin he will try to reach him on another. The three of us stand around Geoff and strain our ears in the hope of hearing something. Tonight there is no news from Severin. We look at each other and shrug. There’s nothing any of us can do apart from continuing to radio him on a daily basis. No one speculates too much about his position and the conditions he might be experiencing. We all know he is climbing the polar plateau and attempting to traverse through crevasse fields. The temperatures would be far colder than here and he is pushing through all of this alone.

I wonder how Liv, Ann and Severin survived the storm that we experienced or whether they even felt it. I think of Severin back in Punta. He was unobtrusive, laid-back and calm. I thought then that he must be an experienced explorer to conceal his concern at the lateness of our departure. Now I’m beginning to wonder if it was something else that he was suppressing. He left a big blue container of some of his food and it sits outside the supply tent. At the time I thought it was strange to leave food behind. Isn’t that the one thing that you really need? I recall taking a sniff of the parcel. It contained a mixture of cheese, butter and chocolate. The stench was pretty sickly.

I have been here for about two weeks. Lisa is teaching me how to ride a skidoo. The two of us set off for a gentle spin around the tents while she explains how to start the machine. I am initially tentative on the skidoo. After learning the rudiments it's time to take it for a spin down the runway.

Gliding over the ice, we immediately notice its effects on the machine's handling. Our turning circles become larger as the caterpillar tyres attempt to grip the ice. The skidoo has been equipped with small pins that act like crampons but even this measure fails to overcome the slipperiness of the surface and the lack of control I have over the vehicle. Lisa is sitting behind me and she reaches over to my accelerating hand and with her thumb presses down on mine. Suddenly the skidoo slews and skids as it scrambles for a stronger hold and then we shoot off over the ice towards the nunatak. 'Let's really give this baby some juice,' she yells in my ear. I laugh maniacally. And we zoom across the ice while my eyes start to water behind my goggles at the sting of the wind and something else I can't put my finger on.

I navigate wildly, a reckless sense of freedom engulfing me. There are no stop lights or traffic rules out here. I point the vehicle eastward and off we charge. Occasionally we encounter drifts of snow and we become airborne as we hit scattered sastrugi. The skidoo seems to relish the grip of the snow. I look back to where the camp is. It's a colourful splodge on a blue and white wilderness. It reminds me of an artist's first daubs of colour on a blank canvas. We turn and ride back to camp at a leisurely pace. Lisa has her arms wrapped loosely around my waist. I feel wonderfully alive.



The cook's domain

The cooking has been something of a revelation for me. I was determined to enjoy my work down here but was always conscious of a nagging feeling that maybe it would be too much for me to handle. My big fear was I'd hate my job because the conditions would prove too primitive and uncomfortable and I would feel isolated as a result. My first few days were spent fighting this feeling. Using the wretched MSRs also didn't help matters.

I am conscious of my good fortune working here at Blue 1. I have a whole month to acclimatise to the job, the conditions, the weather – with only easygoing Ewan as a client, I am under no pressure to perform culinary feats. It is in this relaxed atmosphere that my ability and love of cooking come to life. Geoff has rigged up some shelves where most of my pots and pans dangle. I've lined up on these shelves spices, flours, sugars, cooking alcohol and other items that I use regularly and the chaos under my makeshift benches has subsided with rigorous inventorying and the storing away of less essential goods. My vegetables are stored in Rubbermaids under the tables and the cold seeping through the marine ply is enough to keep them at a refrigerated temperature which stops them going mouldy.

Being the cook prevents me from falling into undisciplined habits, which is the easiest thing to do here. By mid-morning I'm chopping onions and garlic for soups and mixing flour and eggs for cakes or muffins. The kitchen has now been moved to the western end and the tent has been extended in readiness for the incoming flight in December. The Ilyushin

will be back with more fresh food, and about forty scientists from Norway and Finland as well as Alain Hubert's team. The kitchen now has two proper benches, which have been fashioned out of packing crates. One faces the dining area and the other is against the northern wall. On the southern wall is my oven and a trestle table that holds various cooking supplies and the CD player that has been rigged to speakers. Underneath these benches are more supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables. Further down the tent are two more benches where all the washing and drying up get done. We have a bigger and warmer stove, dug out of the crates, in operation and that sits close to the northern wall across from the washing up. Next to the stove and nearest the kitchen sit two snow smelters on a large chipboard box. On top of one of my benches is a third smelter which I will probably need as a backup.

I am thrilled with my working area although I never leave it as tidy as I should. I think it's a combination of being too tired at the end of the day and watching everyone else sit about that makes me a bit lazy in this regard. My back door has a heart-stopping vista of Ulvetanna and on a still day I sit outside up against the warmth of the deep blue canvas and sip a quiet beer. One ear strains to the silence that hangs around us like an unseen shroud while my other ear rings with the domestic clangings and bangings going on behind me. I feel I'm perfectly suspended between two worlds.

We have discovered quite a number of food stores left from previous seasons. Amongst our finds are huge amounts of garlic. It has been frozen solid and is now defrosting. Unfortunately its properties are dubious, its flesh being soft and mushy but I use a lot of it in the soups I make. I figure if we can eat eggs that are over three years old, we can digest the garlic. We also have stacks of white bread that someone has fished out of one of the stores. I eye it suspiciously. I hate white bread – I might as well eat processed cardboard. I have no desire to live off this stuff for the season but I'm chagrined

to admit that my breadmaking skills are atrocious. This white bread could be seen as something of a salvation but I don't want to stoop to serving this crap on the table. In the end I compromise and during the course of the season I make many bread and butter puddings with lashings of sultanas, custard and Kahlua to disguise its cardboard-bland taste.

The ice cave is now fully operational as a freezer that holds all our meat, fish, dairy and bread. It's a cosy structure about four metres square. We've basically dug a pit in the snow until we hit the blue ice. Someone has fashioned an old tent as the door and there are about five steps leading to the floor of the cave.

The meat is stored in sections from beef through to chicken. I have found about fifteen huge Canadian salmon but I soon realise they won't be good for anything. The wrapping has come undone and they've been buried under the snow and ice for years. I throw them in the waste and a few hours later I notice some wag has stuffed one in the snow head up. Soon there'll be a chair out there with a hole dug around the fish and a fishing rod. We keep ourselves amused as best we can.

I am starting to plan my shopping lists for the flight that will arrive in early December. I need to get them e-mailed to Benjamin by the end of this month. He'll scan them and then send them on to Gerald's company in Cape Town. I have my fingers crossed that the lists will be read in their entirety. It will truly be a disaster if the plane lands and the supplies consist of toilet rolls and nothing else. I have no intention of eating the salmon I turfed the other day.

I have to take into account the number of people on the flight, Christmas and the residents of Blue 1. I start fielding requests. Lisa wants Special K, the meat-eaters want a big Christmas ham, Ewan is happy with anything so long as it's not eggplant, and we all want alcohol in various forms. We've been guzzling gin and tonics but the tonic has run out and it was about three years old anyway so the fizz was minimal.

We're getting bored with the South African Castle beer and long for some decent alcohol to enjoy.

I take a lot of pleasure and satisfaction in cooking for my small group here. I get a thrill out of creating menus from scratch each day. I'll step into my kitchen of a morning and the only thing I'll know about the food I'm to prepare that day is what meat I've dragged out of the freezer the night before. The rest is a mystery. I'll rummage around in a few Rubbermaids, poke about in the supply tent for further supplies, use a few of my fresh eggs, remember where I stored some Cointreau and slowly the kitchen benches fill up with ingredients that will be turned into meals for lunch and dinner – all without stepping into a grocery store or supermarket.

On a good day, my virtuousness is almost biblical. I can see the fruits of my labour and note with happiness as it's devoured with pleasure. I'm delighted when people are in the kitchen, either leaning up against the stove or one of the benches and chatting, making coffee for the rest of us, or volunteering to be guest chef for the camp. Ewan has made us his notorious orifice-stinging curries and Geoff is always being put to work making fruit salads or baking loaves of bread. Mike loathes cooking of any kind but is more than happy to splosh his way through a pile of dishes and fill me in on gossip about ANI at the same time. Charlie is a gem at cleaning up after the evening meals. He and Geoff, without fail, clear away the evening dishes and wipe the kitchen down in preparation for the next day.



The boys are back from Mawson and we're adjusting to having them around again. Blair did a flyover above the weather haven. This was probably naughty of him but with such a small camp it can hardly be a crime to have a little fun with the toys we have here. They brought back huge bottles of sake from Syowa and week-old newsletters from Mawson. I scrutinise them in the hope of reading something earth-shattering. None of us has any idea who won the US elections. It seems the rest of the world is also waiting to hear.

My mind seems to shrink on some days and expand on others. My overall enthusiasm for the job doesn't prevent me having off days. Sometimes it's a drudge being the cook. I'm tied to a strict routine, unlike the rest of the people here. Everyone needs and expects to eat and it is my responsibility to provide that sustenance. I'm excused from cooking breakfasts but sometimes I have an attack of conscience and whip up scrambled eggs and bacon for people as they come through the eastern door.

I worry about the life I left behind and whether I'll be able to find a niche when I return. It will be a miracle if I can return to Sydney and slide back into my former life. I describe these fears to Mike and he takes the opportunity to plant other seeds in my head. He suggests I toss it all in and travel and write and occasionally have flings with people I meet on the way. It sounds very Isabelle Eberhardt and his suggestions are seductive to my muddled brain. I entertain a brief reverie of travelling the world and cooking in one exotic place after the next, but decide I wouldn't have the stamina. Having

experienced an orderly life, I don't know if my nerves would be up to this hand-to-mouth existence in the long term. I'm a little appalled at myself: here I am coping admirably (at least I think so) with the vagaries of living at Blue 1 and suddenly I want to be back behind the desk in the office tower and going round the bend. What is the matter with me?

Mike of course has never held down a 'normal' job in his life. Living and working in Antarctica has been a dream of his since childhood. He tells me that as a child he'd sleep with the window open to the dark winter air to train for Antarctica. He is the only one amongst us who doesn't read for relaxation. Instead, when he's inside, he takes up position by the radio and either fiddles incessantly with battery meters and wires or natters to people around him. He is all legs and he sits at the radio table making ribald comments about life.

Mike's mornings are spent talking with the local bases about weather and flight schedules. The favoured expletive here is 'Oh fuck – over', an indication of the amount of time spent talking on the radio. First up the German base Neumayer is radioed for weather schedules. Then Mike calls SANAE, the South African base, for another weather schedule, SANAE being closer to us. If it's a calm morning I can hear the crackle of the radio and the distorted voices from the bases as I lie in my tent.

At the moment the radios occupy a table at the western end of the tent and the batteries are stored underneath. Outside are solar panels that power the batteries. Mike frequently emerges from underneath the table, swearing interminably as wires become entangled and batteries run out of power. He then plops himself back on the chair and twiddles with the mic again, the frequency dial, the antennas outside... it's a pernickety, tricky business.

'Neumayer, Neumayer, Neumayer – Blue 1, Blue 1. How copy?' Mike releases the microphone button and swings his foot in casual circles.

‘Neumayer – Blue 1. How are you?’

‘Yeah – great. It’s a beautiful day and we’re starting to emerge from our tents for breakfast. What’s the latest report?’

‘Cloud cover is minimal today but a front is moving in from the east – over.’

‘Anything looking cagey?’

‘*Bitte?*’ The German radio man’s English is impeccable but doesn’t extend to Mike’s colloquialisms.

‘Are there any weather patterns we should be aware of for the next couple of days?’

‘*Nein* – no. It is looking good for you for at least three days but if you have any satellite images available it is best to observe them as well – over.’

Neumayer has sophisticated weather detection systems; in comparison our checks are a little more perfunctory. On a good day Mike will trot out to the perimeter of the camp and scribble on a sheet of paper the estimated cloud height, cloud formation and visibility and then read the barometer pressure. On an indifferent day, particularly if there are no flights, someone will stick their head outside the tent for a quick squiz at the conditions and then report back to Mike who’ll be at the table drinking a mug of tea, nattering on the radio to Morné from the South African base about the chances of Lisa and I flying there for a Saturday night social.

Morné is the radio operator for SANAE and, unlike our German friends, prefers to get the weather predictions out of the way for more gossipy, salacious discourse. He is intrigued by our tented village and his curiosity crackles through the HF.

‘Do you think you’ll be flying to SANAE during the season?’

‘Yeah, probably. We’ve got some leftover fuel stored with you guys from last season so I think a few trips might be needed.’

‘Will you bring the girls?’ Lisa and I lean towards Mike as he depresses the speaker button, ‘We’re climbing into our

suspenders right now – make sure the beers aren't frozen.' Mike shoos us away.

'OK Morné, we'll talk again tomorrow. Blue 1 – going clear.'

'Charlie, Charlie.'

I am strangely entranced by the language used on the radio. Being the cook, I am the likeliest person to be indoors if the boys are doing fuel runs to Novolazarevskaya so I get to have the occasional chat. I ask Geoff to educate me on the finer points of radio speak. I diligently scribble down the radio alphabet and in my bed at night I squeeze my eyes shut and laboriously recite the terms: Quebec, Romeo, Sierra, Tango. I can never remember the 'U' word.

I sound like a complete prat when I'm on the radio. I am so anal and hesitant; I have none of the nonchalance of the pilots who speak in radio shorthand.

'Blue 1 – this is NDO. Do you read?' Blair pronounces the call sign of the plane in such a manner that he sounds like he's saying 'indio'. In comparison I stutter and stammer my responses in the halting manner of someone learning to read. I sound like Joyce Grenfell if I painstakingly follow formal radio etiquette.

'NDO, NDO, NDO – Blue 1, Blue 1, Blue 1 – I read you.' I wait a few beats and then: 'Over?' I voice it as a question.

'Excellent!' The radio goes dead for a few moments, no doubt as Charlie and Blair attempt to control their mirth.

'So, Alexa. What's on the menu tonight?' I wait an age and then the line becomes jammed as I realise there'll be no forthcoming 'over' and both parties attempt to fill the silence. As the season progresses I become a little more relaxed but I have none of the musicality the pilots have.

Everyone seems happy with the food and the desserts are greeted with cries of delight. We're all putting on weight but it's the combination of the cold and not being terribly active

that sees us all indulging in three solid meals a day. Mike takes me aside and, as he pats his stomach, suggests I don't need to make dessert every night. I acquiesce and of course the inevitable occurs. We finish the main meal and everyone looks at me expectantly. 'What's for dessert?'

'No sweets tonight, we'll die of sugar poisoning,' I'm met with howls of protest, led most vociferously by Mike, and that's the end of that dietary experiment.

There are no discernible cooking smells. Even when I'm baking muffins and cakes there are no comforting aromas that billow from the kitchen. I long to gulp in the warm, fresh smell of Geoff's bread or the irresistible combination of garlic, onion and bacon frying but I need to bend down close to the sizzling pan to get even a hint of this.

The only kitchen smell that seems to transcend the polar climate is coffee. It's a daily ritual that Lisa and I have begun. Most mornings one of us brews a pot of fresh coffee and the instant the hot water hits the ground beans, a scent of such exquisite pungency hits my olfactory senses that a contented tickle snakes up my spine. The two of us stand over the dripping pot and inhale and exhale like a couple of bong heads. I'm starting to create a mental list of things I'd bring on the next trip (being ever the optimist) and the first item would be my espresso coffeepot. It's a real luxury to sit down and enjoy a decent cup of coffee and although the pots we make are more than adequate, I would love to whip up a latte or espresso. My metropolitan Sydney self refuses to completely roll over and die.



At around seven or eight each morning I awake with a start and twitch like a dog. It takes me a long second to realise where I am. If the sun is shining, the tent is warm – around 25° Celsius. This never fails to astonish me down here. My body is still operating on freezing temperatures from the night before and I'm buried deep in my sleeping bag. I fumble frantically for the zipper and yank it down to my ankles. I lie in the heat and pant idly.

My wristwatch has an alarm and although it trills daily at 6.30 a.m., I rarely hear it because my arm is burrowed deep in my sleeping bag. I usually go to bed well past midnight and if the katabatics are blowing, it's a race to dive into my bag without getting too cold. Now, lying on my mattress and gasping in the heat, my mind is still groggy and refuses to believe that I'm in Antarctica. It's only when I take a better look around me that I'm willing to believe it.

My body clock adjusts quickly to living in twenty-four-hour sunlight. I find this surprising. Before I arrived I assumed it would unsettle me and turn my night-day routine on its head. Our clocks mirror the trajectory of the sun. At midday the sun is at its height. And as the day progresses we can see the sun sink into the sky but not below the horizon. This will occur as summer comes to an end but for now, when it's midnight, the sun shimmers ethereally to the south. Its brittle light catches the glimmer of millions of snow particles as the nightly katabatics blow them across the camp. The tents' shadows are elongated as the sun dips in the sky and this is the only indication that it's not daytime. Some nights I read my books for hours, unthinking and

uncaring about the time. The light in my tent is a strange non-time. If there is cloud cover, the interior can become subdued but it's never gloomy. I don't feel a sense of looming dusk and then dark enveloping me as I would anywhere else. It's only when the tent begins to heat up that I know the sun is swinging into daylight hours again. I mainly use my wristwatch to time my baking. I can tell the general time by glancing at the sun.

I have a habit of staying up very late. It's not because I am adjusting to the sun in the sky but because the light intoxicates me. Perhaps this is how I adjust to twenty-four-hour daylight – I revel in this luxury and want to make the most of the sunshine. If that means staying up playing card games or reading by the stove, I want to make the most of it.

Above my head is some nylon webbing where my socks have been drying overnight. The odour is a little claustrophobic and I stare at them for a few minutes, willing the stench to go away. I have a neat row of bobby pins fitted onto the webbing for easy access when I dress myself and need to give my hair some semblance of tidiness. I turn my head to the left and see my big red duffle bag. I haven't tidied my tent for weeks and out of the bag spills a riot of polar fleece tops, woollen T-shirts, gloves, long johns, scarves, a few chocolate bars, sorbolene cream, and nappy wipes. It's kind of depressing yet festive to look at. To my right are the clothes I threw off the night before. My Gore-Tex overpants and jacket are frozen as I've left them lying on the nylon floor and not on the cardboard that I use as insulation. I idly finger the stiff material and wish more than anything to climb into a pair of shorts and flip-flops. My scarf and gloves are resting on top of my jacket and look tatty and worn. Next to my head are a few books that I attempt to read before I sleep, and a half-eaten chocolate bar. I have the nauseating habit of munching on one before I fall asleep. It's oddly comforting.

Everyone has brought a supply of books and our library is a bookshelf above the dining table. We have quite a collection

of bodice-rippers, crime stories, biographies, classics and a couple of dictionaries for the Scrabble fanatics. I brought some heavy reading with me. I'm working my way through the Russians and I'm hoping to tackle *War and Peace* while I'm here. Tolstoy's tome is still in the library. Nobody is willing to immerse themselves to that extent yet. At the moment I'm reading an Australian woman's account of her time at Mawson, and a creepy crime novel. I have pencilled in an order for *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Architectural Digest* and *Harper's Bazaar* that I keep deleting from the list because I know there's not a chance in hell that Benjamin will get them for me.

At the foot of my mattress is a hollowed pit. The ice has eroded at the entrance and this is where my boots and dirty clothes collect. By the end of each day my boots are sopping with moisture. I don't know why this is but I suspect it has something to do with standing in one place for so long and not giving my feet a chance to breathe by walking around. Thankfully most days my boots have had a chance to dry out overnight but there are some overcast mornings when they are frozen solid.

I rub my eyes and look at the ceiling of the tent. I sit up and attempt to stretch without the luxury of being able to stand. I am moulting like a dog. My hair and skin are falling out in clumps and sometimes I'm convinced it's the beginning of a strange and terrible disease. I'm appalled at my physical state but there's not a whole lot I can do about it. We have no running water for showers so maybe it's simply my skin acclimatising to this new treatment. The closest we have to showers are sponge baths. We take hot water flasks to our tents with a bowl and sponge ourselves down with a washer and sometimes a little soap. So refreshing, you can't imagine. In lieu of a sponge bath there are always nappy wipes to use under the arms and around the crotch. I don't like cleaning myself in this fashion and I gag a little when I use these square bits of pre-moistened tissue – they're revolting. I keep telling

myself I'll roll around in the snow naked to give myself a truly icy wash but each time I get the chance I chicken out. It's too bloody cold.

Across the camp I can hear Blair unzipping his sleeping bag. We may be in the largest, most isolated desert in the world but when it's still like this morning, any slight sound has the clarity of a nail flicking a crystal glass. Mike's sonorous snoring has sometimes woken me up. His tent is a good seventy-five metres from mine.

I rummage through my duffle bag and fish out a T-shirt and a woollen singlet, furtively sniffing under my arms in the process. Not too bad. I lie flat again and ease my night long johns off my legs. Thankfully I have clean underpants and I pull them on, along with a pair of polar fleece pants. I think for a moment and then decide not to pull on the Gore-Tex trousers – it's too hot and besides, I have a big day cooking ahead of me so there won't be much chance of getting outside. I hastily contain my curls with a bobby pin and use a nappy wipe to wash my face. I reach for my socks in the webbing, pull my boots on and tie the stiff laces. Finally I slather my face in sunscreen. Antarctica is murder if you don't wear it. My *pièce de résistance* is my heavy-duty ski goggles that I wear outside. When I'm inside they are shoved on top of my head for easy access. As a concession to the cold I'll wear my Gore-Tex jacket between here and the dining tent.

Coming to Antarctica is a logistical nightmare for the uninitiated – what kind of sleeping bag to take, what books to bring, what footwear to have... The most taxing task for me was what to wear. Back in Sydney I had a wardrobe full of snazzy business suits, high heels, blouses, shawls and cocktail dresses. I loved this dressing-up aspect of my job and I had a ball shopping for clothes that allowed me to play at being something I was most definitely not. Coming to Blue 1, I had packed to clothe an army. I had intended to pack my gorgeous velvet and silk dressing gown, just for the laughs, and

I still wish I'd had the presence of mind to do so; at least I'd feel a little bit glamorous and human if only in the cramped confines of my tent.

The other campers here have a far more cavalier attitude to their clothing and the weather. It makes my head spin. Mike bounds about in light cotton trousers and wears a series of fetching children's head gear over his wayward hair. Geoff has a penchant for tracksuit pants and sneakers and Charlie wanders about in his gumboots as if he is about to head off to milk the cows. Fashion on the ice is an entirely personal affair. My assumptions that we'd all be running around in similar clothes have gone the way of the wind. My fantasies about stepping into the cook tent in a different outfit each day have also been scuttled. I'd be laughed off the continent. It's a badge of honour to see who lasts the longest without washing and one begins to love the cold because it hides all manner of body odours. At the same time, little idiosyncrasies have begun to emerge from the smelly masses. Blair wears his fur-trimmed hat at all times and looks like he's about to be carted off to the gulags for committing crimes against the state. Geoff will wear his shorts on sunny days and goes to the runway for his daily jog. A truly bizarre sight down here. Seeing him stride into the cook tent with his exercise gear on, you'd be forgiven for thinking he's off to mow the lawn.

Ewan is our resident Zsa Zsa Gabor. He has come equipped with his own fluffy slippers, encased in Gore-Tex. They work a treat at keeping his feet warm but he loses that 'hero of the Antarctic' look in a heartbeat when he plods about camp wearing them. Geoff, when he's not in his lawn-mowing gear, also has interesting footwear – he straps on 'slippers' of heavy canvas that wrap up to his knees. The soles are caribou and the whole shoe is held together with what appears to be twine. It's outrageous. I feel so pedestrian in my gear each morning that I rifle through my bag attempting to come up with something that will scream originality and eccentricity.

The nearest item I've got is a bandanna which makes me look like a girl from the 'hood'.

If I wake early enough I'll lie in bed with the tent open so I can watch the windsock blowing in the breeze. It gives me an idea of the wind strength and whether I'll need to keep piling snow on the windbreak I've dug that surrounds the eastern end of my tent. Most mornings are too rushed for that kind of luxury. I unzip the tent door and grunt my way out, headfirst. The temperature drops like a stock market crash. I roll onto my feet and squint into the sun. Lisa has her sleeping bag airing on the roof of her tent. I briefly think about doing the same but can't be bothered.

My feet crunch into the snow and my shoes squeak and squelch as I walk towards the dining tent. I know Geoff will be up and the dishes from last night will have been washed and stacked away. I walk past the dining tent and crash my way inside the Orange Palace to complete my morning ablutions, still rubbing my eyes idly. There is a mirror opposite the loo and I glance at my reflection and think how fetching I look. I lope round to the western door of the tent – the tradesman's entrance – and briefly notice Charlie out on the ice having a pee. Bastard! I stamp my feet to brush the excess snow off my boots as I enter. Geoff is pottering about the sink area and Blair and Mike are slouched over the table eating cereal. We all grunt good mornings at each other; a new day has begun.

Mike has established contact with Novolazarevskaya, the Russian base and our nearest neighbours. We have barrels and barrels of fuel drums stored some twenty kilometres from their base and about 160 kilometres north from Blue 1. The pilots ferry the fuel here in the Twin Otter in anticipation of the Ilyushin flights for the next three months. Each Ilyushin flight needs an average of 100 drums, sometimes more to get it back to Cape Town. The Twin Otter can carry a maximum of eight barrels so the maths is fairly simple – the boys are always flying. It's decided that two of us will accompany the pilots

to help load the fuel and that leaves two more, not counting Ewan, back here to help unload. Lisa and Mike accompany Blair and Charlie on the first trip.

Mike has struck up a relationship with Victor, the radio operator at Novo. Victor's English is very clear and he enunciates every word when relaying the weather at their end.

'Barometer reads nina, seven, one – nina, seven, one.' He pronounces his nines as 'ninas' leaving us in no doubt as to his figures. We have more contact with the Russians than with any other base in the area. At this point no one is sure if they'll bother to come and lend a hand loading the fuel but it's common courtesy to alert them to our presence in the area. Mike asks Victor if any of them will be up at the runway but Victor can't say. He has a young, vibrant voice and I wonder what kind of person he is. I'm hoping I'll get a chance to go on a few fuel runs. Our little camp is such a well-run machine that giving the cook a few hours off is not likely to bring the operation to a screaming standstill.



We have heard from Severin and it's not looking good for him. He says he has hurt his leg and some of his food has gone off. He is requesting a pick-up back to Blue 1. We give him a day to think about this decision but he is quite firm about aborting his trip.

People here seem unsurprised at this turn of events. They believe he wasn't equipped with either the practical skill or the mental stamina to make such an arduous crossing. His radio and other communication devices weren't really working properly even at Blue 1 and they had reservations about it working 'on the road'.

The logistics of picking him up are cranked into gear. Severin is about fifty nautical miles to the south of us.

In our cosy tent we discuss his predicament with the bravado of seasoned adventurers who regularly step out for short walks to the South Pole. Geoff and to some extent Mike are the only people who can speak with any authority about the conditions he is in. I don't say much, my only comment is brazenly self-serving: can I be a passenger if the boys do fly out to pick Severin up?

There seems to be an implicit assumption that Severin has given in. We rarely voice these thoughts out loud but there is a sense of *can't he try harder, he's only 80 kilometres south for God's sake*. We want him to succeed, we don't want him to be back at Blue 1 with his confidence shattered – besides, there won't be enough alcohol to go around. It's an interesting situation, is there more he can do? On the radio, when we do manage to talk to him, he sounds chipper and not at all like someone

gasping their last coherent thoughts before succumbing to the polar environment. No one wants to push him into something he doesn't want to do but we're all conscious that he gets no second chances. Once he's back at Blue 1, there'll be little prospect of returning next season for another shot. We bandy about all our theories and ideas while Mike continues to track down Severin's insurance company and wait for word from ANI. The plane won't be flying anyway – the weather is appalling.

After some negotiations it's agreed that he can be picked up. Mike relays this news to Severin and gives him precise instructions to mark out a temporary runway for Blair to land the Twin Otter on. The most obvious reason for this is the danger of landing on a crevasse field. Severin's voice is clear on the radio today and he sounds relieved and happy to know he'll soon be back in 'civilisation'.

Afterwards, Mike asks me if I'd like to tag along when the boys pick him up. Would I ever! I squeal with delight and resist the opportunity to grab someone in a square-dance hold and do a celebratory jig around the tent. My heart is singing with the thought that I'll get to glimpse more of this mysterious land mass. For a brief moment, I feel like I've been hot-wired to my psyche. It's like being a convert to a weird and wonderful cult. Ewan puts it best when he describes a euphoria he's savoured when exploring this continent: 'It feels like religion coming at you.'

A couple of days later Mike has other ideas.

'Blair and Charlie are going to fly to Novo with Lisa and myself – but you're not going to like the next bit.'

'What *next bit*?'

'We're going to make a detour and pick up Severin...'

'... And you're bumping me off the flight.' I feel deflated but it's hardly surprising. Plans change around here with tedious regularity. All plans go through a minimum of ten reviews before they actually occur. What you hear one day is

completely false the next. Antarctica rules us. That's the only formula that never changes.

'That's OK, Mike.' He looks relieved. 'But I'll have to poison your portion of macaroni cheese tonight.' He laughs and swipes my arm.

I watch as the plane takes off to the south. I'm standing outside the back door of the tent with my hands on my hips and my big plastic apron flapping around my knees. I shield my eyes to the sun and wonder what those unique mountain ranges would look like from the air. Watching the Twin Otter bank lazily towards the south, I mutter a few choice expletives about the timing of this flight that sees me still in the kitchen being the hausfrau while everyone else gets to fly off on these jollies. Back in the tent, I scowl at the general kitchen detritus that lies about me. Geoff is flight following and I listen with half an ear to the movements of the plane. My ears prick up with glee when Blair tells him that due to a lack of fuel and the weather closing in, they can't locate Severin. They will be coming home without him. I attempt to feel chastened as a big grin spills across my face.

When the weather clears I fly with Charlie and Blair to find Severin and bring him home. We have his coordinates and the conditions are perfect. It's now or never.

After lunch, the three of us walk out to the plane. I'm carrying my emergency gear in the event that we need to make a sudden landing due to bad weather or for other reasons that I don't care to dwell on. The boys already have their emergency gear on the plane. This is my first flight in a Twin Otter and I'm curious about our little plane. Climbing aboard gives me none of the heart palpitations that I experienced on the Ilyushin. Most of the seats have been taken out for the fuel runs to Novo. There are only two passenger seats at the front of the plane, directly behind the cockpit. The cockpit has no door and I can watch Charlie and Blair run through pre-flight checks in their laconic but professional approach as

the plane warms up. The propellers whirr furiously and we're all wearing headphones to communicate to each other. The boys periodically turn to me and make some remark about the card game we played the night before or express a desire for more icing on my chocolate cakes. I want to know who is serving the pre-flight gin and tonic.

I am desperate to catch a glimpse of the Fenristunga from the air before we fly further afield to the polar plateau. Charlie briefly runs through the emergency procedures then Blair starts the engines. We're all excited – it's not only me. All of us have cameras and video recorders and Blair turns around and says, 'Let's take a little look at those mountains while we can.' I give him the thumbs up. The two pilots make last-minute flight checks. The plane turns and taxis down to the beginning of the runway. Both of them place a hand each on the throttle and ram it forward. Ewan stands outside the dining tent and gives us a quick wave. Mike and Lisa are at Novo organising fuel supplies and Geoff is inside reading a book. Ewan can't see me in the plane but I wave furiously at him.

The plane gives a little lurch and we're picking up speed. The engines drone in my ear and we lift gently into the Antarctic wind. We're airborne. Blair banks the plane south and suddenly I have a clear view of our camp down below. It resembles nothing more than ice-strewn debris. From above I have a view that takes in the vast ice field to the west and north of us and the nunataks to our east. We truly are exposed down there. The landscape is empty, harsh and invulnerable. It takes my breath away. I feel I could see forever. Distances that normally would be shrouded by haze or vegetation or buildings seem to shrink as my eyesight stretches on and on.

I am crammed into my tiny seat behind Blair with the headphones on. The boys are making a regular flight check with Geoff back at Blue 1. The three of us don't talk to each other much but occasionally Charlie and I point out a

landmark that is familiar. Blair is flying up the Sigyn glacier but he decides to change his route and turns the plane westward and slowly we approach the mountain range that is most prominent to us from Blue 1: the Jaws of the Wolf, Fenristunga. Ulvetanna looms majestically to the right of me. It looks nothing like the jagged tooth we see from the base camp. The cliff face I am looking at is a sheer rectangle of smooth rock. Ulvetanna is almost 3,000 metres in height. I gaze mutely at its stark beauty. The plane turns lazily around this huge natural sculpture as I slowly bring my camera to my face and begin to snap pictures of the rock. Soon I lower the camera. Looking at the mountain range from a viewfinder minimises the scope and immensity of the geography below us. We're all conscious that Severin is out there beyond this mountain range and no doubt impatient to be picked up. So we leave the Fenristunga and continue south. We fly through the Jaws of the Wolf and I have my fingers crossed that Blair will return via this route. Such wonders are too breathtaking to leave behind forever.

It takes about another half an hour to locate Severin. He has made it onto the polar plateau. Blair makes a number of dummy runs over the smooth, icy surface to check for crevasses. He drops the plane to ground level and my body jumps and jerks as the skis bump and thwack over the surface. Blair keeps the plane flying at speed and the engine drones in my ears with the effort. Severin is off to my right and I wonder if he thinks we're playing with him. Hi Severin, we're here for a little jaunt but we're not going to land. Good luck in getting to the Pole. I glimpse his figure as he stands outside his tent. What is he thinking?

I don't want to give too much thought to Blair's continuous fly-bys but can't help recalling the fate of Ninnis, one of Mawson's companions, who stepped off the sledge only to disappear forever into a nameless, glacial grave. I don't want to step out of the plane and drop like a stone into oblivion. Blair

makes a final pass. I'm beginning to feel I'm at an air show with an audience of one. Each time the Twin Otter skates across the snow only to take off again, I wave frantically at Severin. It's OK, we're coming! I've prepared a special meal for Severin tonight.

Blair speaks to me over the headphones. 'OK – it's now or never. Hold tight.' For some idiotic reason I cross my legs as if I want to show people my best posture. I sit like this as Blair brings the plane into land.

I glance around to see if my emergency gear is at hand. If I were to drop down a crevasse I'd certainly require my down sleeping bag. A few nights ago, Charlie and I had practised the crevasse knot. At the time we weren't concentrating on the nature of the knot or its uses. The knot wouldn't look out of place in a bondage basement, and the two of us were more interested in making smutty remarks than really considering the possibility of putting theory into practice.

It's an interesting knot to tie. You make a series of butterfly loops and step into them. Then you tie the whole thing off at chest level. The length of the rope then stretches to the person who is supposedly dragging you out of the crevasse. Learning it in the warmth of the tent after a boozy dinner was quite different from thinking about it now as we are about to come in to land on a stretch of Antarctica that has never seen the footprints of humans, save those of Severin, or felt the weight of an aeroplane with skis. I feel the all too familiar sensation of wishing I'd paid closer attention to the practicalities of the situation instead of veering off onto more ridiculous scenarios. I'm beginning to think it's my favourite defence mechanism here: I create a parallel world when Antarctica becomes too much to bear.

The plane glides delicately to a stop. In comparison to the Ilyushin, the Twin Otter is a Rolls-Royce. The take-offs and landings are far gentler on the psyche and there's none of the bone-juddering and numbing fear that accompanied me

with the Russians. The plane stops about 100 metres from Severin's tent. Charlie turns around and tells me it's about -40° Celsius. Blue 1 could be St Tropez with the difference in temperature. I ease myself into my down jacket and then pull my Gore-Tex jacket over the top. I struggle to put on two pairs of gloves and then I clamber down the ladder to greet Severin.

I gasp as I drop to the ground. It's desperately cold. The air is thin and fragile, the barest whisper against my face freezes the blood vessels. I look around for Severin and see him approaching us with a measured walk. The two of us hug and I express my sadness that he has had to abort his trip. He shrugs his shoulders and raises his palms in a gesture of supplication. He's probably wrestled with these dilemmas as he's sat waiting for the plane. It's been about five days since he requested a pick-up and I don't imagine it was something he asked for on a whim.

I look about me. To the north stretch the mountain ranges that we view from Blue 1. They seem much further away and their presence must have been a comfort to Severin as he climbed further and further up to the polar plateau. They would be the last distinguishing landmarks you would see before you reached the Pole. My eyes stretch to the south, gazing with wide-eyed intensity. Part of me expects to see the figures of Liv and Ann, pulling their sledges and advancing slowly. I ask Severin if he's heard from them. He tells me he has had no contact with them at all. Apart from his communication equipment not working properly, neither party had made plans to keep in touch. It's not surprising. I would imagine once they were under way, they were concentrating on things other than comradeship.

The view to the south is desolate, desolate, desolate. When I was younger I would have recurring nightmares about the concept of infinity. I would lie awake thinking about being somewhere in perpetuity with no possible means of escape.

I have discovered that place. It is the polar plateau, eighty kilometres south of Blue 1. There is nothing but white, blank cold. I am gripped by a sense of panic. I have the distinct fear that if I were to walk a little further I would tumble into a white hole and be sucked away forever. I keep looking behind me to reassure myself that the plane and the mountains are still there to mark my position. Beyond me there are no points of reference. I can't look about me and place myself logically in the landscape. The horizon meets the sky in an indistinct blur of muddy white and this horizon stretches on forever.

Our figures against the ice are festive and garish in comparison. The four of us load the plane with all of Severin's gear. We move with exaggerated slowness, conscious of the thin, freezing air. I don't feel light-headed at all; I just feel incredibly cold and grim. I keep shooting glances down the white vortex and imagine being alone in it. I wonder if this is part of the reason why Severin has turned around and decided he'd rather have the warmth and camaraderie of fellow human beings than be left alone in this place.

Antarctica suddenly reveals itself as a landscape of the mind. It would be here that your thoughts could be set free, to exalt in the unbounded space around you but also to unravel your sanity. This is an unfettered environment with little boundary between the mental and the physical. I have been here for perhaps half an hour and part of me wants to sit inside the plane and look at the upholstered seats and the instruments in the cockpit to take my mind off the white hole. Another part of me wants to be immersed in the senseless land around me. Is it beautiful? I cannot say. It brings me to a standstill. To look south dwarfs my everyday life here – my chores and lists of supplies. The concepts of past and future seem to vanish, my mind is suspended within the landscape.

Charlie and Blair are refuelling the plane. They have to fly back to Novolazarevskaya to pick up Lisa and Mike who are

digging out fuel barrels. I step gingerly back in the plane and watch out my window as we glide back to our mountains and to human order and chaos. Away from white depths that I don't care to scrutinise.

Blair decides to fly back over the Fenristunga. As we near the mountains I undo my seatbelt, climb into the cockpit and perch on Charlie's lap to get a better view. We take out our cameras and video recorders, struggling with lens caps. We're probably breaking all aviation laws but right now it's the last thing we're concerned about. This will probably be our only chance to take photos of the world below us. Blair grips the controls with his knees and puts the plane on automatic pilot and we open the side windows and hang out of the plane to get a proper look at what's below. We're cruising at about 12,000 feet. It's mesmerising. It's only now, as we fly over the mountains, that we have an inkling of their scale. They are towering granite monoliths, thrusting up from the land in huge, immovable pinnacles of rock and ice and snow. Our little plane twists and turns through the valleys created by the mountains and I feel a wave of emotion at my inability to comprehend the vista before me. I have the distinct impression I'm flying through a world that doesn't exist, it's too perfect to be real. My only sense of reality is the shadow of the plane as it moves silently across the landscape.

We land back at Blue 1 and I trudge back to the kitchen to make a raspberry coulis to have with dessert. I divest myself of my outer gear and look for my apron. The tin opener lies on the bench next to two tins of raspberries. I pick it up absently and then let it drop as I walk to the back door to stare dumbly at the mountains.



Antarctica is an anomaly. There is no disputing its vastness, its width and breadth. But because we crave contact with one another in this enormous landscape, it has the illusion of being a small, closed-off environment. We shrink distances by developing friendships with people on the radio, we talk about our nearest neighbours with the familiarity we would normally associate with close friends. SANAE, the South African base, and the Germans at Neumayer may be hundreds of miles away, across terrain that would only be accessible by air but our daily contact with these bases diminishes the distance in the hiss of static. But our closest, most cherished contact is with the Russians.

The Russians are different. There are a lot of nationalities surrounding Blue 1. To the north-west of us are the Germans, the South Africans and the Finns. To the west are the Norwegians and to the north-east are the Japanese. We will meet the Norwegian and Finnish polar research teams who will be flown to this transit lounge before being flown on to their bases. The Russians are our closest neighbours being only 160 kilometres to our north. Only five kilometres from them is the Indian base of Maitri. I think perhaps the Russians intrigue me because they are living here in different circumstances to the rest of the bases in the region. They have little money to carry out their scientific work and we're aware that their food supplies are not plentiful. Antarctica is no place to be running out of sustenance. They seem to be living here on shaky ground.

Until now, our only contact has been with Victor. His voice has little of the Russian inflection that sounds as if vowels are being rolled out of the mouth like river pebbles. And his radio manner is impeccable. One senses a man eager to establish contact with us but hesitant about how to go about it.

The day Severin comes home is also the day the Russians come into our lives. While Charlie, Blair and I are picking up Severin, Mike and Lisa meet our neighbours – at last. As Lisa tells it, it is a big turnout. The two of them are digging the fuel barrels and planning the best method of loading them onto the plane when the Russians arrive in what looks suspiciously like an armoured personnel carrier. They are so excited to meet new people and to discover one is a woman. Lisa hastily shows them her wedding ring but assures them there is another female back at Blue 1 that they are bound to meet. After much exchanging of gifts and greetings translated with ease by the venerable Victor, the boys roll up their sleeves and throw themselves into work with masculine abandon. Lisa is forced to sit on her feminist principles and be treated with the care you would normally show a porcelain doll. If she even makes a tentative move towards a fuel barrel, a barrage of finger-waving and admonishing starts up from the affronted men. This is despite Lisa having more experience loading and unloading fuel than most of them. She says even she doesn't have the heart to override them.

Tonight Mike and Lisa arrive home with bottles of vodka and promises to the Russians that they will be seeing more of us before the season is over. Mike tells Geoff and me that we can fly there tomorrow to introduce ourselves. I gladly accept a glass of authentic Russian vodka and we all swallow nips laced with salt after toasting their most excellent health.

Meeting the Russians eases Severin's first hours with us. After we arrive back at Blue 1 he disappears to put up his tent and possibly readjust to a more populated world. I imagine he also wants to come to terms with the inevitable consequences

of his decision, without our prying questions. We have tried not to swamp him with enquiries about his short trip, and give him a deliberately unassuming welcome. Geoff was there to help unload the plane when we arrived back and Ewan wandered over a little later to say a quiet hello. None of us wants him to feel pressured about his decision but understandably we're all eager to hear about his experience.

As we're toasting the Russians, he enters the dining tent. Only Mike and Lisa have yet to greet him and the rest of us are too busy celebrating the Russians' thoughtfulness with their welcome gift of vodka. I make some inane joke about Severin wanting to be here because the food is better and Severin laughs it off. A lot has happened today and Severin is only a small part of it. I stumble to my tent at about three in the morning after a raucous night of card games and hilarity.

But now I'm flying north – to the runway at Novo with Geoff, Blair and Charlie. I think Geoff is quietly happy to be meeting the Russians but I can never be too sure with him. He is a solitary soul and does not seek interaction with people willingly. Every morning at precisely nine o'clock he retreats to his tent to play his flute. We badger him to give us a concert but he has no interest in performing. I suspect the flute is a form of discipline for him and when the weather is still, its piercing tones can be heard clearly across the camp. I find it oddly soothing to hear.

I am a little nervous about meeting the Russians. I wish I had a souvenir or some all-inclusive gift for them. Fortunately we haven't come completely empty-handed – we've brought with us three sacks of potatoes and some apples. We know they haven't had fresh fruit and vegetables for almost a year and I'm relieved that we can show them this small gesture.

The scenery is flat in comparison to yesterday's trip and it exposes the telltale dips of crevasse fields. We land on another ice runway and the plane comes to a stop by the fuel barrels.

Near the barrels is an abandoned green hut surrounded by discarded bits of metal and wood. The hut is partly buried in snow and partly exposed to the winds. I wander over while Geoff and the boys prepare the plane to load the fuel. I am poking about an old door, idly thinking I'll open it and have a nosy around when I hear a rumble in the distance. I cock my head at the sound.

It's a strange moment. For a month now I've been able to identify every man-made sound I hear. If it's a plane in the sky I know immediately it's Charlie and Blair flying back from a fuel trip. If it's a motor on the ice, it's one of our skidoos; if it's a cough in the stillness of the camp, it can only be one of us; if it's the wind, it will be another blizzard. I haven't realised how attuned I've become to my immediate environment and at the increasing roar of an unidentified motor I skid fretfully over to the boys, surprised by the intensity of my fear. For five minutes the noise gets louder and louder and all of us strain to see which direction it's coming from. I inch even closer to Geoff in my alarm.

Without warning an armoured tank bellows over a rise. All four of us stare slack-jawed at the sight. None of us can quite believe the display that is coming towards us. It's a tank all right but it's not likely to be included in the May Day parades in Moscow any time soon. Someone has painted the face of a shark on the front fender in bright blues and reds. And the fish grins evilly at us as it growls over the ice towards us. Along the side of the vehicle are lines of colour and the hubcaps have been painted in bright, garish hues. It lurches and shudders to a stop a few metres away, belches out the last of its diesel fumes and nine or so people pile out. They are waving and gesticulating to us and some of them hold cameras and videos.

I am acutely aware of an enormous cultural divide. It's immediately obvious in our differing modes of transport but more subtly in our clothing and our looks. We're rugged

up in anticipation of a long day working in the elements. We may think we have the appearance of trolls from the depths of a peat bog thanks to the lack of washing facilities but in comparison to the Russians, we look positively sleek. They are all men, most of them with big hulking physiques and their dress shows me how little I have adapted to the cold down here. One man is wearing cotton overalls with a thin woollen jumper. Someone else looks like his clothes have been salvaged from potato sacks; they seem to be made from hessian material. None of them has the functional look of westerners in the outdoors.

Some of their facial features hint at Asian ancestry. Others have full-lipped features and jowly chins, reminiscent of my idea of a KGB henchman. The driver of the tank is wearing a fetching pink sweater underneath big overalls. He's a bear of a man and between his forefinger and middle finger rests the biggest, meanest hand-rolled cigarette I've ever seen. He alternately takes long drags from this cigarette or spits gobs of tobacco onto the ice. I gaze at him with the intensity of a child. I am finding it so, so bizarre.

There is a brief moment where both parties look at each other and no one knows quite what to say. A man steps forward. He would be perhaps in his late fifties, with an unlined face and a neat moustache and beard. He addresses us in English and the minute we hear his voice, all four of us smile instantly in recognition. It's Victor. He courteously introduces himself and we shake his hand and express our gratitude at their kind gifts.

'Oh, we have more for you. We always have plenty of vodka.' Someone steps forward with several more bottles and we indicate that we have some gifts of our own. All of us troop over to the plane and hand out the potatoes and the apples. Victor thanks us profusely and then turns to the men and introduces them to us one at a time. I feel like we're a delegation from the United Nations. The men approach me

solemnly and offer their huge paws to shake. I grasp them with a strong grip, determined to give a small indication that I'm no pushover.

'Hello, Nikolai, nice to meet you, Yvgeny, sorry was your name Alexei...?' I won't be able to remember all their names but I repeat them over in my head. They have such an exotic ring to me. I shyly say hello and keep repeating my name and nodding my head. The men are deferential and courteous to me. My head is starting to whirl. Victor hovers near me, almost protectively, and tells me it has been over a year since any of the men have seen a female. Perhaps this should send me a warning; instead I look back at them bashfully and wish I could be more 'feminine' for them. It's a ludicrous idea and one to make my feminist beliefs keel over in horror but it upsets me that there's not much of me to appreciate. Right now I bear more of a resemblance to a frump than the chic, corporate executive.

They make a semicircle around me and talk amongst themselves and then look at me and then talk amongst themselves. I would give my month's wages to know precisely what they're saying. Then again, maybe not. I am beginning to feel like an auctioned bride when suddenly, to a man, their attention shifts to Geoff.

Geoff is being mobbed, if that's possible out here on an isolated runway in Antarctica. The trek Geoff made back in 1989 with five other men and teams of dogs, included a Russian, Victor Boyarsky. He is a national hero in Russia and now heads the Russian Institute of Arctic Studies. Most Russians know about the seven-month trek he made and they are beside themselves to know that one of his companions is in their midst. Geoff is looking a little wild-eyed at the attention. He seems happy to know that the trip still resonates with them but would rather the attention be focused elsewhere. Victor keeps looking over to me, almost apologetically as the rest of the men abandon me for bigger and better things.

'You realise who this is? This is Geoff Somers!' Victor tells me reverentially. I nod helpfully. Victor probably doesn't know that the man they're thronging around helps me peel the spuds and is our class-A dishwasher. Geoff is smiling sheepishly at all the attention. Thankfully, it has broken the awkwardness between the two parties and suddenly everyone is chattering and gesturing. I'm trying to converse with the base doctor in my schoolgirl German, the only common language between us. At the same time everyone is being herded into groups for photos. The men crowd around me and elbow one another out of the way to have the privilege of standing next to me. I giggle nervously at the thought of being the local pin-up.

Nikolai seems to be the official photographer and orders everyone around while busily taking pictures from about ten cameras around his neck. Finally, he finishes up and imperiously gestures for Victor to take one of himself and me. Two other men try to muscle in on the action but Nikolai waves them away with a few choice phrases which to my ears sound like, 'Piss off you yobs, it's my turn with the woman – she's bound to fancy me over you scruffy lot any day.' The men gesture good-naturedly at him and he winks conspiratorially at me as he fits his arm around my shoulders.

The radio in the plane squawks to life. Lisa tells us the weather at Blue 1 is closing in. We will fly only one load of fuel back to camp and call it a day. Nikolai is talking to Victor and he translates the conversation for us. Would we like to return to Novolazarevskaya and wait there while the weather clears? The four of us are not quite sure how to respond. In the end we decide to fly back to Blue 1. If we don't leave now, we may have to prevail on the Russians to stay the night.

We say our farewells and climb back aboard. Victor gives me a package and tells me to open it when I get back to camp. I thank him profusely and wave at the rest of the men standing

around the tank. Victor tries to extricate a promise from me that we'll all come and visit their base instead of this fly in and fly out routine we have going. I tell him it will be up to Mike and Victor waves his hand airily above his head, as if it's a done deal. Geoff leaps into the plane before another surge of adulation is heaped on him.

I look down as the Twin Otter lifts into the air and the figures on the ice become smaller and smaller as the plane turns southward back to Blue 1. In the package Victor has given me there are badges and patches for all of us. Victor has labelled each person's name carefully on envelopes. I'm touched and mortified by such generosity. I have brought nothing like this to give to anyone.



I'm having trouble adjusting to cooking for one extra. How am I going to feel when the December flight arrives with over fifty people on my doorstep? I think about this as I go about my daily work and I come to the conclusion that it has nothing to do with cooking for one extra. It's about the community we have here and our sense of place in it. When Severin abruptly returned he tipped a metaphorical set of scales. The seven of us had slowly achieved a sort of symbiosis, accepting each other's habits and routines. Now suddenly there is another person to factor into camp life. Initially I cope with this badly. I resent him coming into the kitchen area and offering to help me. I don't want his help, I have other people who do that, why would he want to? I become adept at avoiding him but am appalled at my behaviour, even the complimentary things he says about my food grate on my nerves. No one else seems to care about his presence and everyone goes out of their way to make him feel welcome. Except me.

Charlie and I are conspiring to 'steal' a skidoo this afternoon to whiz over to a nunatak to the north of us. Mike is taking an afternoon nap when the two of us decide to sneak out of camp. Charlie will be flying back to Canada on the December flight and I want to have one afternoon with him away from the camp. We have been spending long hours after dinner playing many variations of card games that we know and drinking whiskey. I am starting to feel panicky at his impending departure date.

The nunatak has been christened 'Charlotte's Tit'. It was named after a doctor who had been at Blue 1 a few seasons

previously. Dr Charlotte would regularly ski out to this landmark. Because she spent so much time there, Mike decided to name it in honour of her. I don't know what her reaction was when told the name of the mountain. In knee-jerk fashion I accuse Mike of being Mr Smutty but viewed from the camp, Charlotte's nunatak has the unmistakable silhouette of a female nipple. The name has stuck but I doubt whether it's showing up on any official maps of the area.

The two of us have a dilemma; it is too far to walk there and back in one afternoon and neither of us wants to disturb Mike to ask if we can take a skidoo – probably because we are both aware he could say no. While we are arguing the point and sounding like two teenagers wanting Dad's car, Lisa suggests we take Severin with us. I look aghast at her. This is my one afternoon off before the Ilyushin arrives and I don't want to spend it with Severin. I selfishly want Charlie and myself on this outing. I gaze open-mouthed at Lisa.

'Take Severin with us?' My mind is searching for a reason, any reason not to ask him.

'Yeah, why not? He's been cooped up here and I'm sure he'd love to explore a bit with the two of you.' Severin isn't in the tent at this point and I look at Charlie who simply shrugs and raises his shoulders in an I-don't-know gesture.

'But...' But what? I have no real justification not to invite him along. My only way out is to remind Lisa we can only take two people on the one skidoo. We'd have to take two if Severin is to come. 'Don't you think Mike would object to that?' I ask her pleadingly.

'Oh I don't know. Apparently we have a surplus of fuel for the skidoos so it won't be any trouble.' I am starting to quietly hyperventilate. This is not going to plan. Severin steps into the tent and I smile weakly at him, wondering what I'll say. I grit my teeth. 'Severin... um... we're going, that is, Charlie and myself are going to the nunatak and we're wondering if,' I clear my throat, 'we're wondering if you want to tag along?'

Severin looks at us and then out the door to the northern nunatak.

'Go on, Severin, it'll probably be your last chance to get out of here before you leave.' Lisa is this close to being smacked around the ears. Severin is not too sure about the idea. I grab my chance.

'There's no pressure. If you want to stay here and enjoy the quiet – that's fine.' I sound lame and obvious.

'Oh go on, Severin. It'll give you some fresh air.' Lisa and I sound like a duo playing different themes. I'm sure there's steam hissing out of my ears.

'I don't know. I think I will stay here. I feel a little tired.' Severin looks at me as he says this. Maybe he senses my mood. I grab Charlie and hustle him out of the tent, talking as I go, 'Okey-dokey, we'll be back before dinner. It just needs to be heated up if we're back a little late.' The door bangs as we depart.

I stand next to the skidoo as Charlie attempts to get it started. The engine stammers once but doesn't catch. I look towards the tent wondering if Severin will come out, having changed his mind. He doesn't. The engine splutters to life and I leap on behind Charlie. He turns the machine to the north and we fly across the Twin Otter's runway and clatter onto the blue ice. We're beyond the camp environment and I squeeze Charlie's waist as we zoom across the scabrous surface. Suddenly I feel awful about what has occurred. I have forgotten that Severin is a client and has paid thousands of dollars to be here. And I begrudge him his every move.

It takes about an hour to reach Charlotte's Tit. We park the skidoo near the lip of a wind scoop. I stride out ahead of Charlie, scrambling up the icy slope.

'You're not worried about crevasses?' Charlie calls out to me. I stop instantly and look down. The surface looks solid, apart from small cracks running jaggedly in different directions around me. I turn around as if teetering on the edge of a great height.

‘Should I be?’ I yelp. Charlie shrugs and walks heedlessly up to me, casually swinging an ice axe. I step in behind him and follow his footsteps – the servant following good King Wenceslas. Suddenly he drops to his knees.

‘Charlie!’ I scream with my hands covering my face. I open my fingers and peer through them. He is laughing hysterically at his silly trick. There is no crevasse, only my paranoia that has been beautifully played on.

‘You swine – do you know what happens to little boys who cry wolf?’

We spend two hours exploring the rocky tip of the nunatak, fossicking for rocks and watching the petrels drift and hover about our heads. We find skeletal remains of these birds that have been savaged by ravaging skuas, the larger predatory seabirds that inhabit the region. We stand on the northern tip of the nunatak and look incredulously at the drop beneath us. It would be a lethal fall, were anyone to accidentally slip. I shiver and move away from the edge and wander back to the southern side of the rocky slope. I am suddenly anxious to return to the tent and get dinner prepared for the rest of the camp. And I feel guilty about Severin. He easily could have accompanied us.

We head back to the skidoo and I take the wheel, yelling exuberantly into the wind as we speed home. I fly over sastrugi and ice like a reckless youth on a country road with Charlie gripping my waist and yelling in my ear to take it easy. We near the tents and all fear of crevasses fades at the sight of the camp and the plane.

Not two months after my careless driving over this deceptively safe snow field, a series of crevasses will open up underneath us. I know nothing. I want to become less intimidated by my environment but each time I unwind a little, Antarctica shows me otherwise.



Antarctic real estate

It is December and I am in the middle of baking muffins before the Ilyushin arrives in about a week. I spend my days in a frenzy of muffin trays, frozen bananas and chocolate chips, baking a surplus for all the people who will shortly descend on Blue 1. Mike and Geoff are beginning to query me across the meal table. After dessert one night, while I'm quietly congratulating myself on my superior cooking skills, Mike asks a question.

'Well, Alexa, you can give us the quality but can you give us the quantity?' The question plops onto the table with the finesse of a bird shitting from a great height. I'm annoyed at his presumption and his bluntness. I open my mouth to defend myself, then think otherwise. They'll have to wait and see.

Privately, I am nervous about the next flight arriving from Cape Town. My first month has been bliss. There has been ample time to organise my kitchen and supposedly dream up a menu plan for the December arrivals. I've organised the food supplies but menu planning has been nonexistent. December has always seemed too far away – until Mike's discreetly phrased enquiry. I look nonchalantly about me pretending everything is under control. Inside I'm frantically counting the days I have to prepare before the hordes descend. Amazingly I had the foresight at the beginning of the season to peel kilos of bananas and put them in freezer bags for cakes and other culinary delights. They are a godsend at this moment. At the latest count I have about eight dozen muffins. That should keep the happy campers in check for a few hours after they disembark.

The rest of the Blue 1 inhabitants are getting the camp ready to be a fully operational international airport – albeit the no-frills variety. The last flights to Novo are being made to bring enough fuel for the Ilyushin and the pilots are looking tired and run-down. Antarctica is notorious for never working to plan and Charlie makes calculations on his fingers about possible delays with the inclement weather we're having at the moment. He wants to be back in Canada for Christmas. The weather has been known to keep people stranded for weeks. Charlie and Blair are due to end their season when the Ilyushin arrives with their replacements.

Ewan is preparing himself for the arrival of Alain Hubert's team and Geoff and Lisa are erecting tents for our guests. It's possible that over half of them will be staying with us for a few days because of weather complications. In a perfect world the plan is to fly all of the Norwegians to Troll, their base some 640 kilometres away, in one evening. We want to then fly the Finns to Aboa, their base, the next morning. The odds of this happening to plan are about the same as those of the ice shelf melting tomorrow.

The fuel cache, some 800 metres away from the camp, marks the beginning of the runway. Nowadays if I look outside towards the runway I can see Mike filling garbage bags with snow to be markers for the jet as it lands. The runway has been marked for about two kilometres along the blue ice. Its surface is mottled and rippled unlike the smooth concrete of conventional runways, and it's not completely level but it's the most obvious place to land a jet. The blue ice around us undulates leisurely and the site of the runway has been chosen because it is the longest uninterrupted surface around these parts. Blue 1 is only here because of this feature and its proximity to the other bases where our clients will be flown.

The mood of the camp has shifted. There's a purpose to our days that had been missing earlier. Each morning at

around nine we receive a phone call from Benjamin who is in Cape Town organising further supplies and marshalling the Norwegians and Finns who have arrived there in anticipation of the Ilyushin flying them on to Antarctica. The sound of the satellite phone fills the dining tent and the rest of the camp. When Benjamin rings I tend to exit the tent and busy myself down in the cave with all my meats. His voice hints at the chaos that will be arriving soon and I don't care to think too much about it at this point.

I have e-mailed him a long, long list of foodstuffs. The Christmas ham is coming on this flight along with other treats like a huge slab of Stilton cheese and fresh fruit from South African farms. I am eagerly anticipating the arrival of more food. Our fruit and vegetable supply has dwindled considerably and at the moment I'm using more canned food than fresh which doesn't inspire my cooking half as much. My mouth starts watering as I peruse the list once again. While Benjamin is still in Cape Town there is always time to make last-minute requests. I have ordered mangoes, nectarines, peaches, pears, apples, oranges, single malt whiskey, Special K, Christmas wine... I've also requested extra fruit and vegetables for the Russians. While we continue to pick up fuel from them, I want to keep sending them goodies. The other week a bake-off began between the two bases. The boys arrived home one evening with homemade loaves of bread baked by one of the doctors at Novo. In reciprocation I whipped up the mother of all chocolate cakes and sent it back on the next fuel run. This barter has continued on and off over the last weeks.

In obstinate fashion I refuse to concentrate on menus for our impending visitors, instead I drool about my Christmas menu and what delights I'll cook. The thought of that slab of stinky Stilton with long drams of single malt whiskey is making my stomach growl with longing. I have also ordered in more supplies of chocolate bars and other healthy snacks

to see us through the festive season. I have no doubts at this stage that we won't starve in the coming months but when I head down to my cave and look at the boxes of meats that have been here since the dawn of the ice age, I am reluctant to break into it. I do so because it makes far more sense to use up the old stuff before the new but most of it is tough and chewy. I generally make lots of casseroles out of the meat. We sit at the meal table silently working our jaws like cows chewing their cud. There are huge slabs of frozen beef that I've defrosted and thrown in the oven with enough garnish on them to pickle them for a hundred years but even all my tender loving care is futile against the meat's hardness and dried texture. Chicken and bacon are the better meats to use; these seem to retain their juiciness.

I've perfected the roast chook and although I have to substitute dried tarragon for the fresh herb, it is a delight to pull the chicken out of the oven with the roasted potatoes and peppers nestled around it, simmering quietly in its juices. I've also perfected a sauce from my own chicken stock, white wine, the juices of the roasting meat and cream. It's a meal to induce heart attacks in the calorie conscious but no one would dream of going on a diet in Antarctica. We shovel the succulent flesh into our mouths and allow the juices to run down our chins. It's our favourite roast dish down here.

As the days lengthen I leave the back door open and watch the trajectory of the sun across the floorboards in the kitchen. By late afternoon or early evening I strip down to a woollen T-shirt because the heat becomes almost sweltering inside. If there is no wind, I won't need to close the door until well after nine at night. My quiet moments are spent out the back. It's my breather time. I plonk myself on my appointed chair just outside the door and look towards the west and the south at the mountain range. The colours of the Fenristunga change as the sun swings around in a domed sky. By early afternoon the range is a deep purple which deepens to a Cimmerian

navy as the sun's shadow lengthens across its peaks. The real estate outside my kitchen is incalculable. I imagine building a discreet but sophisticated dwelling. Exterior glass walls would be essential; along with heated floors, a big bath and a kitchen crafted out of stainless steel and wood with copper pots hanging from the ceiling. The kitchen window would face the Fenristunga and I could gaze at its beauty while scrambling the eggs. I could use the house as a summer getaway. Solar panels would be all I needed to power the place. I've stopped attempting to take in such a setting in between carrying out my domestic tasks. It beggars belief. It's best to believe I'm suspended in a dream.

The Ilyushin is on its way. It is already late; two days ago we were all ready for the flight to arrive but the weather socked in until today. Charlie and Blair are convinced they are going to be here for Christmas, an idea they're not at all happy about. Blair has begun to hang his clothes in the main tent because they are soaked through.

I have done all the preparations I can before people arrive. I still refuse to respond to Mike's challenge about my ability to do the job. My only stipulation to everyone here is that I will need help serving food and with the washing up that will plague us while the camp is full. The dining tent has been transformed with extra tables and chairs and every square centimetre is now valuable property. We have created a coffee and tea table that is squashed between the stove and a dining table. Our big concern is that there won't be enough boiling water. I have ordered extra thermoses from Cape Town but in the initial few hours fifty to sixty people will have to make do with the four thermoses we already have. I am feeling the familiar rising panic I experienced when I first arrived in Cape Town but I keep it down with fierce words to myself. There is nothing I can do from this end so it's pointless to expend valuable energy on such things. We have been working the

stove furiously to melt extra snow and all available containers have been filled with water.

The plane is due to arrive around four in the afternoon, which works well for me. My muffins will stave off people's hunger until dinner and there are our remaining fruit and plenty of biscuits and chocolate to consume as well. All my food has been defrosting since yesterday. Over the past two days I've been vacillating about what I should drag out of the ice cave. If the plane is delayed for a week I don't want to be continually defrosting the food. That would be an ignominious chapter in my Antarctic cooking career: would you like your pasta with or without botulism? For this reason I've been unfairly nagging Mike for an exact date of arrival. This is akin to someone predicting the vodka consumption at Novolazarevskaya.

This morning I wake to brilliant sunshine. I sit with my tent open putting on my boots. My mind is on other things and I am oblivious to the millions of light particles bursting from the snow around me. My heart is pumping with expectancy and not a little trepidation. I know without Mike telling me that the plane will arrive today. I heave a breath and struggle out of the tent. I march over to the Orange Palace and peer at my reflection in the mirror opposite the loo. No amount of face washing or combing of hair can disguise the rather unpalatable truth that I have gone without a shower for over a month. I take some comfort in knowing the rest of us down here look as dishevelled. I see Mike outside and he gives me the thumbs up. It's beginning.

I head to the dining tent. Inside, Severin is unenthusiastically eating his last breakfast in Antarctica. I suddenly have a picture of what he is returning home to. The Slovenian press has been interested in Severin's attempt to reach the Pole and instead of a victor's homecoming it will be a little less auspicious for him. None of us got the full story out of Severin. We were either too polite to ask or didn't feel like prying. Was he spooked? Did

his nerve run out when he reached the polar plateau? He has half-jokingly asked Mike if he needs more help at Blue 1. He knew the answer before he asked but it's an indication of his great reluctance to be returning so soon.

It's not only that he didn't end his journey but something more indefinable. When he steps onto the Ilyushin, Blue 1 will cease to exist. It's a destination he will not see again. Blue 1 is not on any tourist brochure. It's not marked on any of the major maps of Antarctica. Only a few people know about Blue 1 and its location. It is an elusive, transitory destination, it could be closed for years after this season – no one knows when it will be operating again. I sense a melancholy about Severin; a foretaste of what will probably happen to me at the end of the season. I ask him if he'd like a fresh coffee. Now that his departure is in a few hours' time I'm suddenly the perfect hostess. I'm appalled by my earlier attitude to him. I only hope that he hasn't been aware of it.

The rest of us are making last-minute checks on the tents, the food, the water, the Orange Palace that has been modified into two toilets to accommodate the hordes. I stand in the kitchen and read through my scribbled notes and tick items off the list and continue to put question marks next to other items. I still don't know exactly how many people I'm cooking for. To compensate I've made enough muffins for people to have at least two each, and the sauce for the pasta is huge. Later in the day I will make an apple crumble and custard for the dessert.

'Do you think you're prepared for today? You realise that there'll be a *lot* of people in camp.' I swing around and find Geoff standing at the back door in his blue tracksuit pants and thin sweater. I glare at him. People's assumptions that I'm going to botch my job are starting to bug me. I resist the urge to tell him to go to buggery. I'm sufficiently clued-up to know that if there's not enough food there's always the emergency dehydrated stuff to give them. In the meantime

I would appreciate a soupçon of encouragement if that were possible.

A strange calm descends on Blue 1. Charlie and Blair are over at the Twin Otter making last-minute checks on the plane. The skis have a few loose bolts but apart from this minor technical hitch, the plane is in good shape. The boys will be making the first two trips to Troll with the Norwegian passengers and then the two crew who are replacing them will take over. Mike is in the supply tent where the radios have been set up. We need the room in the dining tent and the comms were the first evictees. Mike is on the phone to Cape Town airport and then Benjamin calls for the latest weather updates during the course of the day.

I head back into the kitchen. I feel I need to hover and smack at hands that are already stealing my muffins. I decide it's best to potter about the kitchen and look sufficiently in control. The muffins have defrosted to room temperature and I have bags of pasta on stand-by for later tonight. The bolognaise sauce is almost defrosted as well. On top of my snow melter is yet more meat slowly thawing for the next couple of days. If by some miracle the Norwegians and Finns make it out of camp by late tonight, Alain Hubert's team will still be here before they head to their base camp in the Fenristunga mountain range. His team could be here for the better part of the week. It's going to be a while before Blue 1 is the quiet neighbourhood it once was. I am about as ready as I can be for the onslaught.

Part of me is eager for the flight to arrive. My new oven is on its way and we have a huge resupply of food to look forward to. I feel it's an early Christmas for me. But I am sad and depressed about the impending departure of the Canadians. Charlie assures me that the pilot replacing Blair, a John Millar, will more than compensate for his migration. I look morosely at him. I want Charlie to remain here and play card games and make me laugh. I remember meeting him in Punta and

thinking, goodness, he is a quiet one. We didn't get much of a chance to socialise because he flew to Antarctica only a few days after my arrival in Chile. I remember being told over a few pisco sours that he didn't like hot desserts and I thought it was the daftest thing anyone had said to me. Everything is so very different today. I'm clinging to the remnants of November with the longing of someone reminiscing about the best days of their lives. I don't want to lose the camaraderie of these weeks but the inevitability is all-encompassing. We spend our last lunch together resolutely playing a few last rounds of cards. Neither of us has their heart in the game but for me it's better than having a big sob in the confines of my tent.

Later Lisa and I are standing in the kitchen. Both of us are batting questions and last-minute verifications back and forth.

'Do we have boiling water for the thermoses?'

'Yes.'

'What about the chairs and tables – are there enough seats?'

'No – but people will be eating in shifts.'

'Are the loos functioning properly?'

'Well, the plastic bags haven't leaked yet. Do you need a hand with any of the tents?'

'No, they're all ready to go. Did you order my Special K?'

'No – just joking! It's on the flight.'

'What's that smell?'

'What smell?' I think Lisa is joking but suddenly a pungent odour assaults my nostrils. I immediately turn to the oven and check that it hasn't accidentally been left on but it's not the smell of gas. It's the smell of burning rubber or fuel or a combination of the two. It's an acrid, back-of-the-throat sort of smell. We are both making faces at its bitter taste on our tongues. We turn simultaneously to the stove. Nothing seems to be amiss with it. The smell is becoming stronger and we

start to cough and hold our hands over our faces. Surely it can't be my sauce? Without warning the stove gives a strange belch and a whoosh of flame shoots out the back. Lisa and I gawp at it in horror. Fire is a catastrophe on the ice. There isn't enough water to fight it and in this case, water would only redistribute the flames. The sight stupefies both of us. I abruptly snap to attention and dive for the fire extinguisher next to the stove. I'm madly struggling with the latches on it and yelling something nonsensical at Lisa. The clamp suddenly springs out of the safety catch through no careful manipulation on my part. I aim the hose at the stove that is now happily blasting fire out of its backside like someone demonstrating their farting prowess. I squirt madly at the offending flames until they are stopped by a cloud of noxious white powder.

The kitchen end of the tent is enveloped in a fine down of chemicals and the whole tent is filling up with the stench of the fire extinguisher. We have managed to turn off the fuel connection and the stove. Lisa and I are coughing and holding tea towels to our faces. The powder is virulent stuff.

Initially I'm so relieved that the tent didn't catch on fire. The consequences would be too awful to contemplate. But now as the powder coats everything inside I realise our slow day waiting for the Ilyushin is no more. The stove is off, which means precious snow cannot be melted, and the tent is also cooling rapidly. At the moment it's the least of our worries. I set to cleaning all the benches and being grateful that my food is all in plastic zip lock bags or in firmly lidded pots. For the rest of the tent, we have to scrub and wash every surface, including all the plates, cups and crockery. We're hampered by our lack of water. Geoff is cleaning the stove which is an incredibly messy affair. The floorboards around the stove quickly become black with soot and dirt, but the powder needs to be cleaned now before anything else becomes contaminated.

Of all the days for something like this to occur it has to be today. I'm furious but there's nowhere to direct my anger. I long for electricity and the accoutrements of the twenty-first century. Only the small things, mind you, like a vacuum cleaner, an electric stove and running hot water. Is that too much to ask? My nostrils are clogged with the powder and an aluminium taste is trickling down my throat. Delicious.

We clean up as best we can and by the middle of the afternoon the stove is working again and we're madly heating water double-time. All of us are sitting around the new table arrangements and feeling morose. Nobody says too much. We're saving our energy for later. I'm absentmindedly chewing biscuit after biscuit and slurping ghastly amounts of the orange drink Tang to rid my mouth of the metallic taste. Mike enters the tent and plonks himself at a table.

'All right you lot, we've got to decide who'll stand where when the plane comes in. Lisa you're with me and I think we'll use Alexa at the threshold of the runway as well.' Mike looks over to me, 'Do you know how to use the mirror?'

'Apart from look in it? No.'

'We'll sort you out, it shouldn't take more than five minutes to get some practice in. Where are they anyway?' Mike directs his question to all of us. There's a general rummaging around in the tent and a box of mirrors is found. I'm puzzled by this conversation. Mirrors? What's next – smoke?

'I don't think we'll use the flares today, the sun's rays will light up the ice pretty clearly without them.' Everyone seems to know his or her role except me. Blair, Charlie and Geoff will stand halfway down the runway with a set of mirrors and a huge battery-charged flashlight. Then the two pilots will jump on a skidoo and shoot down to the end of the runway to guide the Ilyushin back to the fuel cache. Ewan wants to film the spectacle from the best vantage position he can find, which sounds suspiciously like the middle of the runway. Lisa frowns at him. I'm still confused.

'We have to bring the plane in to land and it's easier for the pilot if there is something to guide him in. That's why we're using mirrors, hopefully he'll spot them a few miles from the runway,' Mike patiently explains to me.

'Uh-huh. So what's the threshold of the runway then?'

'The beginning of the runway, right where the plane will hopefully touch down.'

'So we'll be standing off to the side?'

'No. We're standing where the wheels will touch down.'

'Yes, but who's going to be here to put the doilies on the tables?' I lift my eyebrows with my timely query.

My protests are getting me nowhere as I'm already being dragged down to the runway.



Mike, Lisa and I are standing in a huddle. About twenty metres across from us is the fuel for the Ilyushin. The idea is the Ilyushin will land in between that and us. We also have a skidoo parked on a small patch of snow on the ice. We've judiciously parked it here in the event that the wing of the Ilyushin swipes a head or two and someone needs to drag the bodies out of the way.

I realise I'm the ground crew at an international airport. I grumble about the dangers involved but no one pays me the slightest bit of attention. Lisa and I have a few practice runs. I aim my larger mirror at the sun and direct it to Lisa's handheld mirror, which has a clear glass hole in it. I direct the reflection of the sun onto Lisa's face as she peers at me through her hole. When the light hits her mirror she will refract it up to the plane. This method is effective for a distance of about five kilometres. I'm impressed despite myself.

Mike has a VHF radio around his neck. He speaks to Geoff further down the runway to check his light and mirrors are also working. I can see for myself how powerful the mirrors are. Blair and Charlie are directing the light into my eyes and I wince as it bounces off my retina. If the pilot misjudges or misreads the ice and aims the plane a little too far to the left or the right, I can kiss my hostess role goodbye. Someone will be scraping me off the ice and sending me home in a body bag.

Despite my grim thoughts I can't help being excited. I look south and shield my eyes from the glare of the sun on the ice. Antarctica has given us a perfect, almost wind-free day.

The smudged figures of Geoff and his team are a good two kilometres down the runway and I look across to the west to see Ewan walking further south with his camera.

The radio crackles to life.

‘Blue 1, Blue 1 – ILR, ILR how copy?’ Mike raises his eyebrows at me as he depresses the speaker button.

‘This is Blue 1, five out of five. What’s your location?’

‘Ten miles north. One zero miles north. We have no visual as yet.’

‘Mirrors are on stand-by.’ He gestures to us and signals to Geoff. We take our positions.

Suddenly I realise that I have to face away from the incoming plane. The radio is hissing and crackling, I crane my head to look over my shoulder, desperate to catch a glimpse of the jet’s vapour trail. The sky is clear. Lisa and Mike watch the horizon intently. I look at them for clues. Lisa is slowly shaking her head from side to side. She sees something, pauses, no – nothing. Mike is standing off to my side.

‘ILR, ILR – Blue 1, Blue 1 – no visual. I repeat no visual.’ A brief silence ensues. My ears are straining and my back tingles with a rising sensation of vulnerability. I am a sitting target. I should have painted a few circles on my jacket and written ‘aim here’. I daren’t turn around. Lisa needs my reflection.

‘Mike, eleven o’clock from the skidoo.’ Lisa says in a quiet, firm voice. The air is charged with the impending sighting. Mike raises the radio slowly to his mouth.

‘ILR, ILR – Blue 1. Have visual. Can you see us?’

‘Mirrors are working. Can see runway, I repeat, can see runway.’ I have a fixed grin on my face that contradicts my trepidation. Part of me is ecstatic to be standing here but I’m equally capable of losing control of my bowels in absolute fright. The hiss of static and the disembodied voice of the pilot increase the tension. I glance around again and this time I see the unmistakable smear of the vapour trail and the indistinct shape of the aircraft. It must be only a few kilometres from

us and it's coming in fast. I take gulping breaths. The distant, high-pitched whine of the aeroplane reaches my ears and I shut my eyes tightly as if to block the sound.

'I've lost your sun, Alexa – swing a little to the left.' Lisa is trying to catch my erratic mirror reflection.

'It's OK, the pilot has a sighting. It should be all right to drop them.' Mike has moved nearer the skidoo, wise man. I turn around and watch the last few minutes of the jet as it comes into land.

The plane has dropped its wheels. A jet this size doesn't use skis. It tips slightly to and fro as if deciding the best angle for landing. It roars inescapably closer, dropping lower and lower in the sky. All wheels hover expectantly in readiness for landing. It looks like a huge, ungainly bird, its metal wings shuddering in the wind. The scream of the jet is dementing and it only gets closer and more deafening. I can now see the crew in the cockpit. My hands are covering my ears as the engines screech in metal pain. The plane's snout looks like a malevolent beast, ready to scoop me up and swallow me whole.

The wheels thud onto the ice only metres from us. I feel the *WHOOMPF* as it lands and I'm caught in a vortex of hot wind, the strong smell of fuel and ferocious noise. The jet throws itself down the runway while the three of us instinctively duck and lunge for the skidoo as the wind gusts and the sonic boom become too great to stand upright. The air is cracking with static energy and it whooshes over our heads with a thunderous roar.

The tail begins to slide wildly out of control. For a long moment it looks like all my fresh vegetables and the clients will be upended and splattered over the ice. Fortunately the pilot manages to wrestle the slewing plane under control. It comes to a slow stop some three kilometres from where I am standing. It looks like it is gasping for breath after such a dramatic entry. I am jumping up and down in excitement. Mike, bless him, leans over and gives me a hug. He's probably

debating whether to embrace or smack me as I feel I'm on the verge of hysteria.

I leave my mirror near the fuel drums and skid across the ice to make my way towards Ewan. The Ilyushin is still stationary further south but all of us can hear the screech of its engines. Ewan is replaying the footage of the landing and we both peer into his viewfinder. He has captured the landing beautifully. Standing only metres from the jet as it roared by, he managed to film the wing as it sailed above his head. It's stunning footage.

The plane is turning and it lumbers slowly back up the runway with the boys on the skidoo directing it. Blair is driving and Charlie is standing on the seat making a series of complicated hand gestures to the crew. He looks like he's pantomiming a windmill.

I have no idea how many people are inside. I've been told that Alain's team will be self-catering and that I will be feeding approximately fifty Norwegians and Finns. These numbers are manageable, I think. Eight of us gather around the side door of the Ilyushin. We present a motley welcoming crew and now that the plane is here we're all eager to greet the newcomers. The door swings open and the first face we see is Benjamin's. He waves briefly at us and then helps one of the crew drop a metal ladder onto the ice. Lisa steps forward to help everyone out of the plane. I stand behind her and guide them off the slippery ice and onto the snow.

A man appears at the door. He is wearing red Gore-Tex and has a flowing beard and broad features with a receding hairline. He stands at the top of the stairs and calmly proceeds to clamp a Davidoff cigar between his gold-capped teeth. He lights it with a flick of his wrist, takes a few experimental puffs and then methodically climbs down the ladder.

'Who on earth is that?' I ask Mike.

'That would be Jan-Erling Haugland – he heads the Norwegian Polar Institute.'

‘Are you sure it’s not Castro, taking a holiday from the intrigues in Havana?’

Jan-Erling is clearly a figure to be reckoned with. He waves away Lisa’s offer of help and strides grandly over the ice, if such a thing is possible, to the safety of the snow. More figures are clambering down from the plane. Many of them stand awe struck for the briefest of moments at the entrance to the plane before descending. They keep coming and they’re all wearing a uniform of red Gore-Tex and Sorels. Two are women and I give them a special smile as they step onto the ice. They ignore me, they’re reeling from the landing and their surroundings. More and more people are coming out of the plane. The snow is a sea of tall, lanky Norwegians, all dressed in their regulation red Gore-Tex. Everyone mills around the fuel drums and looks quietly about them. Jan-Erling is happily chomping on his cigar and making expansive sweeps of the landscape with his arms. I remember that this is Norwegian territory and these people perhaps feel a sense of proprietary.

Jan-Erling is talking to Mike and I notice Mike pointing me out to him. His voice booms across to me. ‘Alexa! You’re the cook?’ His tone is interrogatory and I feel my spine stiffening.

‘I’m the cook – amongst other things.’

‘I take Earl Grey tea with milk and two sugars. I’ll be up at the tent in about two hours to drink it.’ His English is flawless with the accent falling heavily on the consonants. I smile without revealing my teeth. He can slurp Earl Grey tea until his gold teeth fall out for all I care but he won’t be using me as his personal tea lady. I castigate myself for my uncharitable thoughts but I’ve been here for over a month and I’m not the pushover I may have been when I first arrived. Geoff sees me clench my jaw and winks at me.

Still more people are coming out of the Ilyushin even though the number of people milling around me seems more

than enough to cope with. Eventually the red exodus slows to a trickle and then stops, then Benjamin steps from the plane. He ignores Lisa and myself and heads straight towards Mike. Then the Finns start exiting the plane. They are dressed all in deep navy and like the Norwegians, they huddle in their little group looking about them. Next comes a young man wearing a purple jacket, light cotton trousers and sturdy walking boots. He introduces himself as Stuart and I realise he is our doctor for December. We have had no doctor so far and it's a relief to have one in camp.

A slight figure now appears at the entrance. He spreads his arms wide and yells down to us. 'Hey! Lisa!'

'John Millar! Get on down here.' A man a little taller than I am bounces down the ladder and grabs Lisa in a big squeeze. He laughs jubilantly as he lets her go.

'Can you believe I'm back here again? Man oh man. Nice airport you've got goin'.' He laughs uproariously at this. His happy features alight briefly on mine as he passes me to meet Mike with equal delight. So this is John Millar, Blue 1's new pilot. Behind him lopes a much taller figure with his long hair tied back in a pigtail. He is wearing a denim jacket and jeans – it still amazes me to see the sorts of clothes people decide to bring here. Shane is the mechanic for the plane and looks like he's packed for a weekend away at the seaside. I glare at the two of them, still feeling tender and melancholy about Charlie and Blair leaving us.

Another figure steps onto the ice (when will the deluge stop?). He has a wide, imposing chin and he smiles ecstatically at the scenery before him. This is Alain Hubert. He successfully trekked across Antarctica, a distance of some 3,800 kilometres, with Dixie Dansercoer in the summer season of 1997–98. He's back to lead a team of climbers wishing to summit Holtanna, one of the mountains of the Fenristunga. Members of his team spill out of the plane and some of them begin dancing a celebratory jig on the ice. Their

enthusiasm is wonderful to watch. Lisa and Ewan greet them like long-lost friends. Many of them met one another at the ANI base at Patriot Hills last year.

It's becoming clear to me that the Antarctica community is a small, exclusive group. I feel shy and daunted by all these smiling people around me. Just what am I doing here amongst all these people with their physical ambitions and their scientific work? A little wave of self-pity washes over me – I feel superfluous, like a person that has tagged along without an invitation to a private party. I leave them and wander over to the rear of the plane where the ramp has been dropped onto the ice and the cargo is being unloaded.

The Russians are not the same crew we had. Some of the men are wearing heavy fur hats on their heads. Most of the crew are casually smoking huge, filthy cigarettes. I'm a little appalled at their blasé disdain for this pristine landscape but at the same time their insouciance is irresistible to watch. The cigarettes dangle precariously from their mouths and the ash makes tiny grey imperfections on the ice as it lands. I want to say something but in all honesty I would rather ask one of them for a drag. None of the men speaks English but we smile tiredly at each other. I speculate about what destinations the crew have come from. The plane has a navigating window underneath the cockpit and I know from flying on the Ilyushin in November that these planes do not frequent the more politically stable countries of the world.

When we were waiting for the plane to leave Chile, we were given the passports of the crew for safekeeping. We'd huddled over their identification papers and compared their stamps to ours. These men had travelled to Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Angola, Kosovo, Burma, Cuba... Some of the crew were younger than me, yet looking at their passport shots I wouldn't have believed they'd be a day under forty. I realised that this trip was only another cargo contract for them. We could have asked them to fly to the North Pole to land on unstable sea ice

and they'd have probably given us a shrewd, calculating glance before turning the plane north instead of south.

I remember staring at the loadmaster on our flight across the Atlantic to South Africa. Most of us were sleeping on the floor of the plane and I was busily scribbling in my journal, attempting to put onto paper my chaotic thoughts. I had looked up from my ramblings and glanced down the length of the plane. The loadmaster had been standing at one of the few portholes smoking a cigarette. He was wearing grey overalls and the ubiquitous socks and sandals. Late afternoon sunshine shone through the smoke wreaths onto his broad, Slavic cheekbones. I felt I was spying on a personal moment. He was gazing deeply into the distance with a completely blank expression on his face. I stared at him for a long time, suddenly diverted from my manic musings.

And now as we unload the plane I wish I could ask them more about themselves, I wish I could make a joke in their native language and offer them some of the vodka we have up at the tent. There's no time for such social niceties, the plane has to be refuelled and in the air within eight hours. Who knows where this plane is expected next?

The tail is dropped and we begin the huge task of unloading. I climb aboard up the metal ladder and I am confronted with a mountain of gear. There are sledges, tents, filming equipment, climbing gear and food for the expedition team; the Norwegians and the Finns have their own sledges, mounds of personal luggage and scientific apparatus. I start to hunt for my new oven and the food. I can't see either of these things. I climb back down and ask Geoff to keep an eye out for the new thermoses and rush them up to the tent the minute he sees them. I can't stay and supervise the unloading of the food because I'm needed to direct traffic in the tent. I sprint off back home. Everyone is slowly making their way towards the camp and my job is about to crank into high gear. Jan-Erling calls after me, 'Earl Grey, two sugars!' 'Piss off, Jan-Erling,' I mutter.



If you can't stand the heat

The kitchen is filling up alarmingly. All these gorgeous men and they're all looking to me as if I am the answer to their dreams. I beam beatifically at them, not realising I look like Cruella de Vil and that all they want from me is a hot drink and a snack. I become businesslike and make a general announcement about the tea and coffee and our hot water. I absently register that the tent is still here. It hasn't burnt to the ground, not yet. I begin to unwrap the muffins and take them to the tables for consumption. I can hear the engines of the Twin Otter and the first ten people are already on their way to Troll. I keep my fingers crossed for decent weather in the next twelve hours.

Severin hovers outside the back door. This must feel like dead time to him. He has no desire to make small talk with these new arrivals. He's like me, he's resenting the intrusion and wishes the Ilyushin was delayed for longer. He smiles sadly at me and I want to envelop him in a big hug. It's only now, after all my traitorous thoughts about him, that I can see what a genuinely kind person he is. I slip him an extra muffin and tell him to help himself to whatever he needs.

The tent is full with people slouching on the small chairs and drinking coffee and tea. Mellifluous northern European phrases swim around the tent. I find it strangely soothing and it puts me into a rhythm of slicing, dicing, pouring, stirring, turning, washing and carrying. Jan-Erling steps inside. I elaborately present him with his cup of tea and he lavishes compliments about my muffins. Maybe he's more Rupert the Bear than Fidel the Castro after all. He interrogates me

about my life and job down here. I can't stop and talk but I have the impression we have the measure of each other. He is clearly the man in charge. The Norwegians defer to him and he holds conversations in a voice that carries without any projection on his part. He probably wouldn't take kindly to being questioned on any decision he makes. He stands at the stove and watches my boiling water for me and then instructs one of his people to help me fill up the thermoses that Geoff has found and sent up. He has delegation down to an exact science.

There is no time to even relieve my bladder. I have hardly glanced at the food that is now piling up outside the back door. Most of it won't be looked at until tomorrow. Stuart, our new base doctor, comes in and introduces himself to me. He's an Australian; 'G'day Stuart.' We both laugh. There's no time to chat as I'm in the throes of preparing dinner. I hoist big saucepans of boiling water on and off the stove. I'm working on a domestic oven that is capable of cooking for about ten people at the most. I'm attempting to cook for over fifty people. Mike has now told me that Alain's group won't be self-catering after all. While they're with us they'll be eating food prepared by me. I grimace with exasperation. I needed to know this days ago, not now. It's hardly Mike's fault but I warn him that I've prepared only so much food. He raises his shoulders and leaves the tent. It's up to me how I handle it. I recall his pointed question about quality and quantity, and wonder if I'll rise above it.

The pasta is ready, as is the sauce. I commandeer the services of Geoff to help me dish it out. We announce that dinner is served and everyone begins to line up at the kitchen bench. Geoff and I serve meal after meal and I keep a watchful eye on the supply of the sauce. I take some aside and fill another saucepan. Alain's group won't be eating until midnight but the Norwegians and the Finns are charging through the food with the hunger of ravenous bears. I want to say stop, no

more eating. But this is so contrary to my idea of cooking and hospitality that I can't bring myself to say it. I feel tense and nervy watching the food disappear. This is not how I want it to be, I wanted bountiful amounts of food but I'm talking to Geoff out of the side of my mouth and telling him to go easy with the helpings. Some have been asking for wine but I can't find it in all the supplies out the back so they have to make do with the Tang – my grin grows forced as I repeat myself over and over to our guests.

Benjamin steps into the tent and heads towards the kitchen. I unconsciously brace myself. He looks around, 'I'm really impressed with how you've set the tent up. It looks great.' All of us stand stunned for a brief moment. Geoff and Charlie are doing the dishes and Lisa is tidying away the drying up, but trouble is brewing.

'The Russian crew will be up to eat in about an hour's time if you can have their meals ready for them, Alexa.' Surely he's joking? I thought it was up to Benjamin to make sure that Cape Town airport supplied meals for the Ilyushin's crew.

'I'm sorry, Benjamin, but there's not enough food,' I blurt out. Benjamin stands there and looks at me.

'Why not?'

'We, that is *I* understood you were going to be organising the food for the Russians.'

'Who gave you that idea?' Benjamin is glaring at me down the length of his nose. I realise I'm very tired and growing steadily more belligerent.

'No one told me that I was to be cooking for the Russians. You didn't mention it, neither did Mike because he probably didn't know. I certainly didn't know and I also didn't know that Alain's team were going to be eating with us. As it is I'm already stretched for food. I don't think I have enough for everyone.'

'That's not good enough.' Both of us are furious.

'Well, why on earth didn't someone tell me this before?! Why couldn't I have been given the exact manifest of who

would be coming and how many mouths I'd be feeding? Is that too much to ask?' I hiss the words in an unbalanced half-whisper, still aware that we have clients eating at the tables.

'I'll see what I can come up with but I can't promise you that it will be adequate,' I growl at him. He looks at me for a long second then leaves the tent. I feel shaky and seriously angry. I see-saw between fury and panic. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch for Benjamin to come back into the tent and sack me on the spot for insubordination. Then again, who'd volunteer to take my place? I don't think bawling out the boss was included in my job description. I'm appalled that I don't have enough food to feed everyone. I've never turned people away from a meal. I grind my jaw and start to pull together all the leftovers and anything else that has defrosted to make a chicken casserole for the Russians.

It's about 12.30 in the morning. The tent is slowly emptying. The Norwegians and the Finns have eaten and Alain's team are in here eating the remains of the spaghetti and the apple crumble. The Twin Otter has made two trips to Troll and Charlie and Blair have handed over the plane to John and Shane who will continue to fly until early this morning. The domestic airport is, incredibly, on schedule. The weather has held and many of the Norwegians have been flown to their base.

Charlie walks into the tent and I want to fall to the floor and wrap my arms around his knees and implore him not to leave us. My already fragile psyche doesn't want to cope with saying goodbye to these two men. They've been part of such an adventure that I'm finding it difficult to come to grips with their departure. I've only had a brief chat with John and Shane and they may be the nicest people on the planet but I don't want them here, I want Charlie and Blair to stay. I feel tears welling in my eyes merely thinking about it. Maybe it's a touch of twenty-first century envy. They'll be back in Cape Town in about eight hours or so and they'll have their showers, fall

asleep in darkness, bask in the summer sunshine of South Africa before flying on to Canada for Christmas celebrations.

As happy as Charlie and Blair are to be leaving, they are nervous about flying on the Ilyushin. They don't trust an aeroplane of a failed communist regime to get them off the continent safely and on to South Africa. They'd rather be flying the Twin Otter across the Drake Passage and to Chile than be passengers on the cargo jet. Charlie starts to ask about how I felt when I flew in, then changes his mind. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing and the two of them have more than enough flying experience to know that mistakes can be made.

I have some food ready for the Russians and I ask Lisa to go down to the Ilyushin to tell them it's ready. In the meantime I sit with Charlie and Blair and watch them eat their final meal. Blair takes his final helping of dessert and tells me sincerely he'll miss these treats. I look sadly at him. I'm going to miss his open appreciation of my cooking and his efforts to play the card game five hundred. I've given them an illicit beer each and they drink it in big gulps.

Lisa returns, 'The crew are eating already.'

'What do you mean?'

'They've got hot meals down there.'

'You have got to be joking.' My voice rises in furious amazement. Lisa looks at me with eyebrows raised.

'They're more than happy to eat on the plane. They've got a makeshift oven and there was food supplied from the airport after all.'

'Bloody hell! What about this damn casserole, for chris-sakes?' Lisa looks coolly at me and turns to Charlie and Blair.

'The plane is going to be leaving in about half an hour's time, guys. Are you ready with your stuff?'

We trundle down to the runway. Some of us take skidoos while others walk. I ride shotgun between Charlie and Blair

on a skidoo. The plane looks a little forlorn parked on the ice. Its size is completely swallowed by the surrounding landscape. We all look surreal in our brightly coloured clothes standing amongst the remaining fuel drums. We mingle with the Russians and make hand gestures at them and smile. I expect Stanley Kubrick to step from behind a camera to yell 'cut' and for us to be re-touched by make-up artists. It's an other-worldly scene.

The pilot has turned the engines on to warm the plane and the familiar whine of the machines fills the air around us. I studiously avoid Benjamin and he does the same. He's flying back to Cape Town and he'll be back in January with his brother William, who heads Ends of the Earth. They'll accompany some Antarctic inspection teams and a Spanish expedition team who are intending to climb some of the mountains to the west of Holtanna. I decline to get specific details off Benjamin at this juncture. We need the Southern Ocean between us before we can conduct civil conversations.

Severin is standing off to the side. He looks quietly about him and smiles his sorrowful smile. He lingers on the ice for a long time and refuses to climb the ladder until the last moment. Charlie and Blair are huddled around the wheels of the plane and though they both seem unaware of what they're doing, they're kicking the tyres with the air of two people heading on an uncertain journey. Charlie gazes at the crew as if hoping to mind-read their flight check procedure. None of us wants to make the first move to say goodbye. We stand scuffing our feet and making stupid comments about the weather. But it's time to go. I am exhausted and want to climb into my sleeping bag for some dreamless, deep sleep. I embrace Severin and wish him all the best, and he hugs me tight and pats my cheek. I grin guiltily at him. I hope his homecoming is not an ordeal. I give Blair a big hug and make some bantering comment about his missing out on a

Christmas feast that'll outclass anything he'll eat in Canada. He looks momentarily bereft but tells me he'll have central heating and a hot bath. Damn him.

Benjamin has already climbed aboard which saves me from further awkwardness. Charlie is my final goodbye. I hug him tightly and then let go quickly. I have a horror of suddenly finding myself crying all over his air suit. I'm feeling hollow and drained. The three of them shuffle slowly to the ladder. Everyone is hugging and making last-minute jokes. Mike calls out to Blair and Charlie as they reluctantly climb on board. 'Ask the crew to make sure they run through the emergency procedures for you!' They both grimace at him. The likelihood of that is next to nil. Severin, Charlie and Blair stand at the entrance for as long as the door remains open. Mike, Lisa, Stuart and myself group around the base of the door and call out final messages, trying to project our voices above the roar of the engines. The last face I see before the door closes is Severin's. He is gazing south with a strange longing. He seems to snap back into the present and he looks at us and waves one last time as the door finally closes.

I wait for a while with Stuart as the plane's engines continue to warm up. Almost delicately the plane slowly backs away from the now depleted fuel cache. I wait for the engines to be thrust on to full throttle but we soon realise that the pilot is going to taxi to the southern end of the runway and take off into the northerly headwind. This will take some time and I'm frozen through. It's about three in the morning and I still have to clean up the kitchen. I walk back to the camp, occasionally looking over my shoulder to the plane as it continues to taxi south. Around me are the tents that Lisa and Geoff put up on the chance that we'd have Norwegians in camp with us. The last of them left about half an hour ago and our only guests are Alain's team and the Finns. They are all wrapped up in sleeping bags in their tents. Lisa heads to the supply tent to flight follow on the radio. Mike, Stuart and I go back

to the dining tent. Geoff is there already doing some tidying up. Bless him. I help dry some dishes and check that I have eggs and bacon ready for breakfast, which I realise will be in a few short hours' time.

I stand at the entrance of the tent and watch the plane. It has come to a standstill at the end of the runway but even from this distance and the confines of the tent I can hear that its engines are readying for the take-off. I imagine the four passengers in that cavernous space – Charlie, Blair, Severin and Benjamin sitting on the side benches amongst empty fuel drums and our rubbish from the last month. The rest of the crew will be hunched in the cockpit and the navigation pit. The engines rise undeniably in pitch and fury. Slowly, then gradually gathering momentum, the Ilyushin roars back towards our camp. It booms closer, past the garbage bags, past the fuel cache and its nose finally rises almost parallel to the Orange Palace. The tail lifts and for a moment in time the huge cargo jet is imprinted on my memory flying low over Blue 1. The early morning sun catches the metal of the plane and it shimmers at me in an instant of farewell.

I fall into my tent and I lie fully dressed on the mattress staring unseeingly at the netting. I begin to cry with exhaustion and sadness. Afterwards I lie still, occasionally wiping my eyes and nose with the sleeve of my frozen jacket. My ears are wet with my tears. Just when I think I have my emotions in check, another wave of sobbing starts. I feel idiotic at giving in to this feeling of grief but it completely engulfs me. Soon after I fall into a deep, troubled sleep.



I have my new oven. It's a gleaming, five-ring burner with lots of cooking space. It sits all shiny and beautiful next to my trusty domestic oven at the south-west end of the tent. I polish it unnecessarily like a proud mama bear. The arrival of the oven and fresh food has given me an unexpected surge of energy.

Most of our produce is still laid out on the sledges in tightly bound cardboard boxes outside the weather haven. Slowly and methodically, with my lists clutched in one mittened fist and a serrated knife in the other, I systematically start opening the boxes. Within minutes I'm squealing into my tightly bound scarf as riches after riches are lifted out of boxes and put into piles. A few people come to help me and we grunt and mutter with impatience as we open the boxes before shouting with exultation as each treasure is lifted out.

Outside the back door slabs of Stilton cheese are put beside huge yellow globes of parmesan, camembert, blue cheese, brie, gruyère and Dutch Gouda. Cases of gin, vodka, Kahlua, Grand Marnier and Cointreau are stored inside the kitchen, hidden behind the bags of potatoes. Boxes of eggs are given a rousing ovation, fresh milk is held aloft like a world heavyweight trophy. One box contains packages of tightly wrapped pine nuts, walnuts, pecans, slivered almonds, hazelnuts, peanuts, sesame seeds and almond meal. The bags slither onto the snow. We gawp in amazement at the excessive sight. Another shout and someone else pulls out bottles of red and white wine from the vineyards of Stellenbosch. The camp will shortly be covered in drool if we aren't a little

more restrained. I open a box packed with freshly ground coffee. The smell mushrooms into an invisible cloud under my frozen nose. I inhale quickly before the smoky aroma is lost in the biting air. On another sledge, boxes of tropical fruit are being fondled with the reverence given to newly born babies. Trays of mangoes lie alongside boxes of peaches, nectarines, oranges, pineapples, pears, cherries, apples... it is disconcerting in its glory. This tiny patch of ice on the frozen continent has become fertile ground.

The fresh vegetables are stored immediately in the cook tent. To let them freeze would be a travesty after their long journey. Out of necessity, I leave the milk crates outside the tent. The milk will last us for a month so some of it will have to be frozen. Most of the condiments will be stored in another supply tent that Lisa and I have erected near the weather haven. Bags of pasta, rice and couscous are taken to this tent, along with cans of raspberries and crushed tomatoes.

In the kitchen, underneath one bench, I store boxes of button and shiitake mushrooms, green and red peppers, tomatoes, onions, garlic, ginger and shallots. Sturdier vegetables such as potatoes, sweet potatoes and butternut pumpkins are packed away in Rubbermaids. Leeks, spinach, beans and fresh herbs lie like exotic shrubbery on another bench. A box of lemons and limes, the colour of a Van Gogh still life, sits next to the oven. My list has crosses through most of the supplies. I eyeball chocolate biscuits and scratch them off the list. Pounds of bacon and boxes of whole chickens are dragged to the ice cave, along with sides of beef and legs of lamb. Unbidden, I wonder what Scott and his doomed party would have made of our embarrassing riches. All this food seems strangely obscene from an historical perspective.

It takes me about two days to store the food and write up exhaustive inventories of the new supplies. The powdered milk is relegated to the lowest shelf back in the ice cave and the canned veggies are summarily chucked back in their boxes.

Now the real cooking can begin – again. My customers lean up against the kitchen benches, nursing mugs of fresh coffee laced with whiskey (for warmth) and suggest various dishes they would like to savour. On the dining table the fruit bowl shimmers with fresh mangoes and peaches.

Ends of the Earth have thoughtfully provided much-needed fresh food for the Russians. For some idiotic reason they've also donated a case of vodka. This seems moronic. I try to convince Mike that vodka is the last thing they need, Novolazarevskaya seemingly being a distillery of the stuff. Mike bats my incessant mosquito hum away, he is tired of the cook and her constant chatter.

Now that the food has arrived I can start planning my Christmas meal. I've left it too late to make the Christmas pudding and I rack my brains for something equally as delectable. Geoff has been filling my head with stories of Christmas meals he's been fed in previous years. I am determined to give him a feast that will put to rest the provoking look in his eye. But Christmas is weeks away. We have guests in camp and I turn my attention to them.

Because the Norwegian and Finnish scientists arrived en masse and stayed for only a short time, there was little opportunity to pick out individuals from the general herd. The Norwegians were all flown out of Blue 1 on the initial flights and then the Finns were crammed into the plane and flown to Aboa, their base further west, in the second wave of the airlift. They were all eager to fly to their bases and begin their meticulous experiments. They huddled in their little groups and seemed only to venture out in clumps of their own nationalities. I could step out of the tent and spot who was who almost immediately by the clothes they wore. The Norwegians stood out in their red outfits and they physically dwarfed everyone else in camp by their size. The Finns seemed a lot younger than the Norwegians and would

do everything in pairs; even the business of going to the loo seemed to need two people for the task. They wore deep navy and they resembled chess pieces on the snow as they stood about in the sunshine. They didn't feel the need to introduce themselves to us and in any case we were a busy bunch while they were in town.

Jan-Erling was a definite exception to this rule. I will be seeing him again in a few weeks' time when the inspection teams arrive. The inspection teams will be flying to bases in the area to review the scientific and environmental guidelines that the bases should be following, as set out in the Antarctic Treaty. Jan-Erling is coordinating this effort and he will be here to greet the crowd when they arrive in January. I check my supplies of Earl Grey for form's sake.

Alain Hubert and his expedition team are a different order again. They are thrilled to be here and it shows in their happy natures and their willingness to compliment and help out whenever it is needed. They are a truly international contingent. Ralf is from Germany; René, Daniel and Jacque are from France; Katelijne and Alain Hubert are from Belgium; André is from Switzerland; Ewan and Fabrizzio are from the States although both of them have British citizenship, and Jorge is from Belgium by way of Chile. All of them with the exception of Ewan and Fabrizzio can speak a dozen languages – or so it seems.

Jorge is a cameraman on the expedition. He is a small Chilean with a well-trimmed goatee and a raspy voice. He seems completely unruffled by his surroundings. He was included on the expedition at the last minute and, like me, has never travelled to such a remote location before. His clothes and boots seem too big for him and he shuffles into my kitchen like a despondent clown with special requests for warm milk for his muesli. He looks crestfallen when I point him towards the powdered goop we're using for the moment. He also despairs of the instant coffee that sits on the

tea table. When everyone was here, it was instant or nothing. Jorge caught me out during these frantic hours making an illicit pot of real coffee and he promised not to tell anyone on one condition...

Jorge can speak many languages. Spanish is, naturally, his native language but living in Belgium means he speaks Flemish and French and I've also heard him speaking German to Ralf and to us he speaks English. It's flabbergasting and his language skills make me deeply envious. I speak tolerable Dutch, thanks to my days as an au pair in the Netherlands, and the two of us will yammer on with Katelijne in a mixture of Flemish and Dutch. He schleps about the camp furtively smoking cigarettes as if someone is about to yell at him to stub the thing out.

I like him a lot. I like it when he steps into the tent and someone yells a greeting and he pauses momentarily with a concentrated look, thinking which language he should be speaking in. He and René have every conceivable kind of camera device to use as they film the climbers. One of the cameras looks like a single eye. Jorge demonstrates by attaching it to my apron and it becomes Blue 1's kitchen cam as I go about the riveting business of preparing a soup for lunch.

André is the biggest man here, about the size of a barn door. He is one of the lead climbers. I think he has climbed Everest twice. He sits quietly with his back up against the tent watching the frenetic activity around him with the Zen stillness of someone determined to keep clear of the drama. I don't think Antarctica has made the best impression on him so far. His down jacket melted as he stood by the stove, not realising how close his sleeve was to the metal. It was only when someone noticed an awful stench that he realised what was happening. Melted Gore-Tex in the shape of an arm marks the stove – not an auspicious beginning. He looks ferocious and I can't speak French so I keep out of his way.

Alain Hubert looks like a casting director's idea of an Antarctic explorer. He is a tall man and he walks loosely from

the hips. He strolls around Blue 1 wearing a beanie that he picked up in Resolute, one of the final isolated outposts just south of the North Pole. He is clean-shaven but he loses his smooth looks as he relaxes into camp life. Soon he's looking as ragged as the rest of us. He has the jutting jaw that hints at a strong will but here in camp he seems relaxed and eager to talk. He helps with the drying up and suddenly he comes across as someone a little more complex. Why the act of picking up a tea towel should reveal this I'm not sure, but as he stands there wiping our plastic crockery, many of my assumptions about him shift. I suppose I use the domestic scene of Blue 1 as a measuring stick of personalities and sometimes this device shows surprising results. I had thought he'd ensconce himself away in a tent and issue orders and mandates to all and sundry. Instead he seems to have muted conversations at the dining table with various people before he'll rise and help himself to cups of tea and exchange chat with whoever is at hand. There is a hint of his iron determination when the satellite phones they bring with them don't work. He brooks no excuses from the team and demands that they be fixed before they reach Holtanna.

All of them spend four days at Blue 1 sorting through their food supplies, climbing equipment, tents and radios. André becomes more and more impatient to set off. He gestures to Alain and throws his arm in the direction of the Fenristunga. Alain placates him and gives him another task to attend to. André growls and stomps off.

Finally all the gear has been labelled and repacked. Then the expedition team splits into two groups. On a bright morning, the main party sets off for the Fenristunga, pulling laden sledges behind them. André skis out of camp on his own and is soon a smudge of black on the landscape. The others take a little longer to ski out of camp. Geoff is taking René on the skidoo and the two of them check they have enough fuel to get out to the mountain range. Those of us left behind take

photos of the departing group as they are slowly swallowed by the blue haze glittering above the ice. Katelijne, Ewan, Jorge and Jacque, the French scientist, will accompany all the gear in the plane in a few days' time.

Ewan is probably unaware of it but he's eased my time here considerably. He is a wonderfully generous person who doesn't hesitate to include me in his discussions about the dot-com world in San Francisco, his time with Stanford University and the design of his weather station. It stands directly outside his tent and I've wandered over there many times to watch not a little cross-eyed as he's put it together. It is held in place by four wires that are embedded into the ice.

Ewan talks to me as an equal and assumes I'm an intelligent, capable person. I know this of myself but I've experienced other people making entirely different assumptions about me. I like Ewan enormously for his sensitivity and tact. I keep telling him he should be on the radio. His voice is captivating and I think I could listen to him recite the phone book and still be charmed by the rhythms and cadences of his speech. He never says anything without carefully considering his words.

He has a disarming sense of the ridiculous that offsets his equanimity. We both collapse into fits of the giggles when we talk to Troll on the airwaves. Before the Norwegians descended on us, we had frequent contact with Troll because a doctor who had been wintering there would be flying to Blue 1 to get the Ilyushin flight back to Cape Town. As the Ilyushin flight loomed closer the good doctor would radio us promptly at nine every morning to get the latest information of the flight's arrival date. He would announce himself on the airwaves in a beautifully sonorous voice: 'This is Troll.' He would place great inflection on the 'o' in Troll and Ewan and I would spend the rest of the day imitating this accent. 'This is Troooooooll.' It was childish but it showed in Ewan a streak of zany delight in the minutiae of things.

Occasionally I see him strap a magnet to his crampons and meander off over the ice to a nunatak in the hope of discovering a meteorite. He takes all our good-natured mocking in his stride. He enters the tent with a diffidence that belies his client status. I had imagined him swaggering into the tent and demanding this and that knowing he was perfectly within his rights to do so. He doesn't; instead he offers to cook for me which I happily accept.

This doesn't mean that it always goes to plan. On one occasion when he promised to cook, I took myself off to my tent for a well-earned afternoon nap. I returned to the tent around seven in the evening to find Ewan engrossed in programming the weather station and dinner nowhere in sight.

'I'll get to it, don't you worry about a thing.'

'Yes, but it's almost eight!'

A shrug of the shoulders, 'We can eat at nine.' His self-possession is something I long for.

Blue 1 has settled back into a routine of sorts since the Ilyushin left. Our new flight crew Shane and John are back in camp, having taken the Finns to Aboa and spent some time at SANAE, the South African base, waiting for the weather to clear here. They arrived back freshly showered and bringing fond greetings from SANAE's radio operator Morné and a ton of SANAE meat for the Russians. We'll fly all these goodies to them when we resume our fuel runs.

It's after one in the morning and we're all out at the Twin Otter loading hundreds of kilos of climbing equipment.

Kateljne and Jacque are sitting on one of the sledges. There is a palpable feeling of excitement with these four who are heading off with the bulk of the expedition's gear to join the main party at Holtanna. I have a special feeling for Katelijne who has never done this kind of thing before. Alain Hubert asked her along after meeting her in Brussels where she is

a journalist and radio programme host. Katelijne has two children and a husband back in Belgium who will be following her reports with great interest. She admits to being nervous about the conditions at Holtanna.

Blue 1 has been operational for over a month now and we have the camp running smoothly. Despite my proclivity to being the world's messiest cook, our camp is a convivial, homey environment. It helps that our weather here is paradise. So far there have been no repeat performances of the storm early in the season and on days when there is no wind, we can wander around in T-shirts.

Holtanna is different. The Fenristunga has a distinct weather pattern. It's obvious to the naked eye even from Blue 1. We will have glorious days of sharp, brittle sunshine yet further south, the mountain range will be invisible. It disappears underneath an unearthly swirl of mist, blowing snow and icy wind.

I ask Stuart to take a photo of Ewan and me before the plane leaves. We stand in front of the plane. The sun is directly behind Stuart and it casts his elongated shadow onto the snow.

'Smile.' Ewan and I are standing side by side. I grin at Stuart and spontaneously lean in to Ewan, put my arm around his waist and give him a shy, one-armed hug. He stiffens immediately. I quickly withdraw my arm. I feel awkward and suddenly unsure of myself. I had assumed it would be OK to give him a farewell squeeze but unexpectedly I feel I've overstepped a personal boundary. Ewan moves away and heads back to the plane. I'm thrown off balance by his reaction. I thought we were friends. I follow after him, dragging my heels a little.

'OK! Who's coming on this flight?' John slaps his hands together and rubs them vigorously. He and Shane have spent the better part of a week at SANAE living the high life. He

has a fresh glow about him that I know I must have had when I first arrived.

We gather around the four expeditioners and hug farewell. The plane is stacked to the rafters. I doubt it'll rise off the ground. The expeditioners climb in over rope barrels, food, tents, sledges and Ewan's other weather station that will be set up on one of the mountains. I stand off to the side with Lisa and wave at the indistinct figures as they claim their seats. I am wrapped in a maroon neck warmer, a New Zealand oilskin cap which comes down over my ears and every conceivable piece of cold weather gear I possess. It's freezing at this time of the morning and standing around in this frigid air is torture.

The plane rises laboriously into the air. The cargo adds a visible heaviness and it's a while before the plane reaches altitude. It's a season of farewells.



A walk in the wilderness

Today is truly a Saturday. I pick up on this because until now the days have blurred into some pattern other than the usual weekday/weekend. Some of us refer to the days here as day one, two and so on. But today is definitely Saturday. I wake up sweating and fight my way out of the sleeping bag to lie dazed and panting shallowly on top of it. The camp is strangely quiet. There is no buzz from the Twin Otter that has been doing overtime these past days. It is a windless day and there is no breakfast clatter from the cook tent. Blue 1 is back to staff only.

The last week has been frantic. Our airport staff have been flying people all over the coast and inland and the rest of us have been busy with client liaison. And now we have a brief few weeks of respite before another deluge arrives from South Africa. I am not needed in the kitchen and I wriggle myself deeper into the mattress and reach for a book. I'm lying in my knickers and a singlet and I feel completely relaxed. I stretch my toes and ankles until they crick with relief. Not having to be anywhere or do anything is a novelty but I'm having no trouble adapting. My only wish would be for a delivery of the weekend papers, a plate of poached eggs and cheese on toast with lashings of bacon and a steaming mug of hot, milky coffee. I'm starting to salivate at the prospect but make do with a half-hearted munch on some chocolate that I've found next to my mattress.

I slope across to the cook tent around midday. Stuart is busy digging an igloo and I look on amazed at his vigorous activity on such a slow day. Geoff and Mike are also up. The

radio is back in the main tent and Mike is attempting to get Novo on the airwaves. Victor is not answering and we can only assume the base has had a night of carousing. Mike had been thinking of all of us flying there sometime today for a weekend away. He'll see if the Russians are up for it tomorrow. I slouch in my chair and yawn hugely. I think my jaw is going to unhinge. I am not going to do any cooking today. People can get their own meals and there are also plenty of leftovers. I made cheesecake the other night and it sits on the bench waiting to be devoured.

I decide to stretch my legs. I am going to walk to The Wall nunatak. I go back to my tent and hunt for my Walkman, down jacket, scarf and my camera and then come back into the kitchen and root around for some chocolate bars and a VHF radio. I tell Geoff I should be back in about three to four hours' time and if I'm later I'll hopefully be able to let him know. Outside I grab a ski pole from the emergency gear to use if I accidentally stumble onto a crevasse field.

It's a stunning, unequalled day. The snow creaks as I step on it. It is the sound of purity. I strap the radio around my neck and tuck it into my down jacket. I yell a goodbye to Stuart who is still digging out his igloo. He raises his head briefly to wave distractedly at me before returning to his excavations. I stroll to the outskirts of the camp, past Ewan's weather station and away from civilisation.

I plug the headphones into my ears and listen to Carl Vine's piano concerto, turning the music up loud and convincing myself that my ears can handle the noise. I stroll on, swishing the ski pole in time to the music. This is the first time I've walked alone, away from camp. I'm attempting to convince myself that it's a mere ramble I'm on but the loudness of the music fails to drown out a little voice buzzing in the back of my brain. 'Are you mad – walking about on your own? Don't you think you should have asked someone along with you?' I ignore these thoughts. If I turn around I can still see the camp

and the comforting sight of the Twin Otter parked near my tent. I resolutely turn my back and keep walking east. The music soars to a crescendo, dips into a diminuendo, the piano picks out a fantastically impressive theme that normally stops me in my tracks. But right now I'm a little preoccupied. The music doesn't spur any emotion; the landscape is too much for these sounds. I twiddle the knobs and decrease the volume a little. I am fidgeting and farting about like an old woman and I have unconsciously slowed my pace.

I half-turn towards camp, not wanting to look directly west. I look south, at the mountain ranges of the Fenristunga and the Holvedahl. Then I turn my head a little bit more to the right. I don't see the camp. It has disappeared with an undulation in the landscape. I feel the blood pump in my ears. I turn the music off and quell a febrile instinct to scuttle back to Blue 1, or at least walk back a few metres and reassure myself with the sight of the camp. I feel my brain begin to dart about for a sense of place and order in the landscape. I'm like a fish flickering mindlessly in a tank. I stand still for a long while, attempting to anchor my scampering thoughts and soothe them with gentle waves of rationality. I feel the warmth of the sun on my face and the sting of wind on the tips of my ears. The isolation is frightening but I don't want to give into it.

I look down and the imprint of footsteps in the snow comforts me. This is a route we have walked on before and it settles my clenched stomach a little bit. I turn in the direction of the nunatak and step out again, concentrating on my breathing and the footprints that accompany me. I listen to the *shrik shriek* of my clothes in the gentle wind. The wind is blowing directly into my face and it stings my cheeks and makes my eyes water a little bit. I have a continuously running nose and I sniff as I walk. My sounds keep me grounded.

I can't place a finger on what I'm feeling. It's not the visceral dread that I sometimes experience as I walk through dark parks late at night in Sydney. It's something more illusory than that,

it's a veneration for the setting and my attempts to understand myself in it. I feel a great humility and wonderment for nature's raw strength and beauty which surrounds me. A huge wave of amazement that I am here engulfs me. I take great breaths, like an opera singer about to launch into song. I want to gulp this fierce, brutal wonder into me and remember it when I'm far away.

I keep walking east. Gradually the strip of snow I'm walking on shrinks until it's nothing more than a dribble. I have to cross an icy slope that rises to a ridge. I don't have my crampons with me so I place both my feet solidly on the ice and attempt to glide as best I can over the knobbly surface. I use my ski stock to help me keep my balance. I slide over a section of ice that looks like someone has dunked a huge rock into it. The bubbles of the rock's trajectory from the surface are frozen in suspended animation. The ice over these areas looks precarious and brittle and I try not to walk over them. I climb slowly up the frozen slope.

I am literally standing on a cresting wave. To the south, the wave drops away some thirty metres to a glassy lake at the foot of the nunatak. A sense of vertigo momentarily grips my body and I make gentle swaying motions in the breeze. To the north the slope is not so pronounced but the drop is also not gentle. I hold the ski pole down by the sharp end in the event that I begin to slide out of control off this knife edge. The ridge is some sixty metres in length and I tentatively make my way across it, stopping every once in a while to release my rigid jaw and breathe properly. I occasionally finger the radio and wonder how helpful the VHF would be if I fell down the drop. VHF is only effective if I am in line of sight with the camp. If a mountain obstructs my view of Blue 1, or I take an accidental tumble down a crevasse, my radio will be as helpful as a bikini.

I reach a more stable area on the ridge and stop to look at the nunatak. It rises about 1,500 metres from the ice and the

cliffs are impressive in the sunlight. There are snow petrels nesting in the rock and I can see them swooping and rising in the wind against the mountain. Around the northern end of the nunatak is a huge wind scoop that curves its way around the rock mountain. It looks like the ice has created a special niche for the rock. I watch the snow petrels dive into the wind scoop with the ferocity of pointed missiles. I attempt to keep my eyes on the birds as they plunge down the mountain but their speed is too great. Suddenly they reappear directly in front of me rising up out of the wind scoop on pockets of air, within an arm's distance. They hover about me with intense curiosity. These birds are so beautiful, their whiteness somehow a symbol of this environment's unknowable simplicity. They hover ethereally about my body without any sense of fear in their feathered bodies. Then they rise with a thermal and are swept back up the mountain in a whoosh of feathers and air.

I walk on and the gradient increases. I am trudging up the eastern side of the nunatak and skirting the edge of the wind scoop. The drop to the base of the nunatak is a long, long way down. I am climbing on smooth snow again and it plays tricks with my eyes. The sun shines on it so brightly that even with my glacier glasses it is impossible to tell the gradient and slope. I step blindly along the snow, placing one tentative foot down after the other, always making sure my footing is solid before moving on. Further up the slope Geoff has marked a crevasse with a black flag. I approach it, unconsciously increasing my grip on the ski pole. This is my first encounter with a crevasse and I'm by turns elated and deeply nervous.

The route I am walking is Blue 1's highway. All of us have tramped or skied along here at one point. I have to assume the likelihood of my falling down a crevasse will be remote but I can't rule the possibility out completely. Underneath my feet is a solid ice field that has a depth of about 3,000 metres but I can also see striations on the wind scoop where crevasses have

opened up. The black flag flutters ominously in the wind as I approach. The length of the crevasse runs 90 degrees to the edge of the wind scoop. I walk up to its edge. I can easily leap across the gap, it's only about a metre across. Instead I lie on my stomach and peer into its depths. I can't see the bottom but I think it's about 30 metres or so deep. The walls are crystallised snow and the distance between them is far wider than the distance on the surface. I would suppose in terms of crevasse depth and breadth this one is a baby. Still, it takes no imagination to know that if I fell into this one it would be an almost physical impossibility to climb out.

Deceptively reassuring snow bridges span the crevasse in some places. Instead of making the easy leap across the gap, I tentatively place my weight on a bridge. I stab the snow in front of me with the ski stock. Thwack, *thwack*. Nothing gives and I place my weight fully on the bridge for a long second before rational thought makes me leap off the false floor as if someone has come up from behind and given me an almighty shove. I cackle delightedly. This is idiotic but perversely exhilarating. I stand on the other side of the crevasse, further uphill, and again I lie prostrate on the ice to take another enthralled look. Eventually my body starts to freeze lying on the snow and I stagger upright and continue my uphill plod to the rocky scree on the eastern side of the mountain.

I reach the rocks and jam my ski pole into the snow. I mark its position and then begin the last 200-metre scramble to the summit. The rocks are initially loose and I tread carefully, not wanting to risk sliding down the steep slope. The boulders grow bigger and more stable the closer I get to the top and soon I am standing on the lip of the vast western wall. In front of me lies our ice field. It stretches infinitely west. The sun glints off the ice in a shiny, wet glare. I shield my face and screw up my eyes for a sighting of Blue 1. I swing my eyes down to the base of the nunatak and follow the ridge back along the wind scoop, then the strip of snow that divides the

ice field. Blue 1 is at the end of this strip. I squint and move my head around deliberately, straining my sight for any signs of our village. I stop at some rocks, thinking they might be tents. Eventually I make out the dot of the Twin Otter and the smallest blue smudge that is the dining tent.

We are of no account in this space. It's brought home inescapably as my eyes skitter across the ice attempting to locate human settlement. I start to talk to myself, out of comfort to hear something familiar and to explain to myself how this space makes me feel. I prattle on, completely unselfconscious. No bus tour is coming up behind me with cameras and guides. This mountain is mine; today, tomorrow, forever if I feel like.

The wind picks up and my body has grown cold after the climb. I bundle deeper into my down jacket and scramble back down the rocks. I locate my ski stock and set off back down the mountain. Suddenly my feet slip out from underneath me. I have forgotten the gradient of the slope is steep. For a brief moment I laugh at my gathering momentum. I am sliding on my backside with one leg outstretched in front of me and my other leg bent at the knee, my foot sliding alongside my straightened leg. It's a relaxing way to get down the mountain. Then I begin to realise it's not such a comfortable trajectory after all. I can't seem to stop. I take a firmer grip of the base of my ski stock and attempt to dig it into the snow. I'm going too fast to make anything other than futile stabs at the surface. Christ! I attempt to steer myself away from the lip of the wind scoop. It's certain death if I go over. The drop is at least 100 metres. And I have no desire to slide into the crevasse either. The ground rushes from underneath me. I'm sliding faster and faster and losing more control over my movements. I feel really stupid. I'm amazed that one part of my brain is saying thank goodness no one can see me at the moment while another part is yelling in panic. Stop for heaven's sake!

My body starts to swing around and this is what stops my flight. I'm now angled parallel to the base of the mountain

and I come to a standstill. I lie on my back for a moment and look at the sky, humiliated and angry. I pat myself down and make sure I still have the ski stock in my hand before I reach inside for the radio around my neck. It's still there. I stand up again and tread carefully back to the ridge of the wind scoop. The sound of the wind is loud in my ears.



‘Right then. Who wants to go to Novolazarevskaya for the weekend?’ Mike has made contact with Victor and now seems the best time to take the Russians up on their offer of a weekend away. Everyone except Geoff is going to go. Geoff has decided he will look after Blue 1 while the rest of us head north. I’m not sure if he is staying behind because someone has to or because he’s taking this opportunity to have time to himself.

We will be taking heaps of donated food with us as well.

‘Do we *have* to take all this vodka to Novo?’ I whine to Mike.

‘Yep.’

‘But it makes absolutely no sense. Why would they want *more* vodka?’

‘Damn it, woman, just box the stuff up and get it on the plane.’ I huff out of the tent and look at the dozen bottles and shake my head. I’m not an alcoholic, it’s just that with all our fresh oranges I had been thinking vodka and orange juice with chunks of blue ice might have been a good Christmas drink. We have also run out of tonic water so all the gin that came in on the last flight is sitting idle. It’s a travesty. I sigh and start to load my little sledge with the crate of alcohol.

Later I trundle over to the ice cave dragging the sledge behind me. I climb down into our cellar and start ferreting around for meat that we’re going to give to Novo. Shane and John have returned from SANAE with almost half a tonne of meat that the South Africans are donating to the Russians. The plane is going to be loaded with massive amounts of food

for them. I put together a few boxes of whole chickens, bacon and some legs of lamb. Benjamin has also ordered two extra Styrofoam boxes of steaks for the Russians. I drag the loaded sledge to the plane and come back to the kitchen to load up all the fresh fruit and vegetables we have for them.

'Is there room for passengers or are you going to do this in two trips?' I enquire of John as I hand more parcels up to him.

'Are you mad, Melissa?' He has taken to calling me Melissa because I remind him of someone at First Air.

'Well, there's not a whole lot of room left for the rest of us.'

'How much room do you think you'll take up? The four of you can easily squash in up front there.' He waves a breezy hand towards the cockpit where four seats have been squeezed in amongst all the food.

Shane and John have fitted into Blue 1 with remarkable ease despite my initial glowering resentment. They have ignored my truculent attitude, as well they should. John has spent a season at the ANI base at Patriot Hills and knows Mike and Lisa. He slides into camp life with the ease of an otter splashing in water. Shane is quieter but has his own charm. He is from Newfoundland and has the gentlest accent and manner for such a big guy. Shane is even more naive than I was on arrival. He is genuinely amazed that he doesn't have to cook for himself or dig his own igloo. Everyone likes him. He is unabashedly wide-eyed at the way things operate down here and doesn't hesitate to say so.

I see him holding up a mango and an avocado in the kitchen.

'What are these?' I squint at him and answer slowly.

'That's an avocado in your right hand and in your left is a mango.'

'Yeah? Can you believe it, I'm in Antarctica and I'm going to get my first taste of them?' I find it astounding too but

then again, John and Shane keep threatening to cook a Jigg's dinner and I have no idea what that is. Shane is the first and only person I know who can stand in my kitchen, not pick up a tea towel or offer to grate parmesan cheese and not have it bother me. I get strangely mercurial about who I like in my kitchen. Shane could lie down in the middle of the kitchen floor and have a nap and it wouldn't bother me in the slightest. If anyone else tried that I'd be busting a nerve in my brain with fury.

The six of us amble out to the plane. We're all carrying our emergency gear plus extra clothes for our weekend away. Lisa has managed to cobble together some small gifts for our hosts but I have nothing to give them. I think maybe a CD but what if none of them has a CD player? I rummage through my bag with increasing urgency, trying to think of something that could do as even a communal gift. A Santa's hat – what use would that be? A bandanna – who'd want that? A Jane Austen novel? Nothing is right. I'll have to keep sending chocolate cakes on fuel flights to them. This makes me feel a little better.

We say goodbye to Geoff. He seems relieved to see us all pile into the plane.

'Is everyone ready then?' John turns in his seat and grins at his four passengers. Shane is sitting in the copilot's seat reading through a checklist.

'Who wants the flight emergency procedures?'

'Nup.'

'Of course.'

'Just fly the damn thing.' Everyone is eager to get going.

'Alrightty, if Shane or myself has a heart attack – you guys are cactus,' John punches Shane's arm and laughs. Shane grins but doesn't look up from his list. 'Yeah OK, the exits are there and there,' he gestures to the back of the plane and to a side window, 'to turn off the motor you have to hit this button here,' he points at a red button. 'Any questions?'

‘What’s the in-flight movie?’

‘Mike does Morocco.’

‘Hah bloody hah – you’d be so lucky, my friend.’ Everyone is in manic spirits. For once we’re not off on a backbreaking fuel run, we’re going to pay our first formal social visit to our nearest neighbours and we’re all looking forward to this change of scenery.

The flight takes us about an hour. Novo is on an oasis on the edge of the Indian Ocean. John makes a number of passes over their base, deciding on the best place to land. Novo from the plane is spread over a hectare or two on rocky ground. Five kilometres away from Novo is Maitri, the Indian base, but I’m on the wrong side of the plane to see it. John brings the plane in low over a snow field no bigger than a soccer pitch. He will land at the base instead of the airstrip where our fuel is stored. He does the now familiar manoeuvre and flies the plane over the landing strip twice before the skis kiss the ground and the plane comes to a quick, shuddering stop.

We all climb out and exclaim at the heat. I feel we’ve stepped from the fridge into a pottery kiln. The temperature is around 0° Celsius and I want to be wearing shorts. In the distance we hear someone cranking up the now familiar roar of the tank. John, Shane and Stuart look startled.

‘What the hell is that?’

‘The cavalry charge.’ John squints at Mike through the corner of his eye.

‘What’s he talking about?’ He addresses no one in particular. We’re all helping to unload the plane. The sound of the tank is getting louder. The three men pause every once in a while and look about them, disconcerted. Then the tank appears, bearing down towards us over a rough, rocky road with great potholes of melted snow and slush. The boys stop work completely and gaze in stupefaction. The rest of us carry on, laughing at their reactions. The tank grins malevolently as it rumbles towards us.

Four men climb out of the machine. I recognise three of them; Fyodor the driver, still in his pink sweater and smoking his omnipresent cigarette; Boris and Nikolai the photographer who grins at us, happy to see new faces. The fourth is a man with a beard and no moustache. He looks like a member of the Amish community. He walks up to Mike and grasps his hand. He is Yvgeny, the base commander. He shakes our hands and smiles gently at all of us. He speaks slow, halting English but none of us has any trouble understanding him. We show him the food we have brought with us and ask him if we can load it in the tank. The four men crowd around the food and exclaim over it. They have not expected this and suddenly I realise that the quantity of food may appear to them as an insult; it obviously hasn't been thrown together in a morning. There's enough food here for a lot of people to last many months.

Three of the men are talking in Russian and prodding a parcel or two. Fyodor is calmly dragging on his cigarette and leaning against his tank. He crosses one booted foot over the other and looks at the food with an inscrutable expression. We stand around looking to base commander Yvgeny for a sign.

'Is this for us?'

'Ah... Yes, yes it is. We have too much at Blue 1 and we brought it with us as a gift for having us to stay. SANAE has sent some stuff along too.' Mike plays down the huge pile sitting on the snow and the rest of us smile obligingly. Commander Yvgeny breaks into a big grin.

'Thank you, thank you very much.' He looks at us and smiles. 'And now we will load it into the tank, with your help.' We form a chain from the tank to the plane and ferry box after box to the back of the vehicle. It takes us about half an hour to load the tank. Fyodor climbs into the driver's seat and guns the engine. The rest of us cover our ears and watch as the vehicle's exhaust belches out in great burps of black

smoke. Fyodor drives off with one hand casually steering the beast and the other elbow leaning out of the window, while his cigarette dangles dangerously from his mouth. We follow the rest of the Russians on foot towards Novolazarevskaya.



The base buildings are connected by a series of wooden walkways in various states of disrepair. We're taken to eat lunch in a building that has 'restaurant' written in Russian on its exterior. It's Sunday and it's the cook's day off. Colonel, the doctor, is on kitchen duty. Most of the men have already eaten so the restaurant area is almost empty. We troop inside, marvelling at all the space. The building has a recreation area where a snooker table is set up and smaller tables with chessboards on them. A few men are lounging in the area. They scrutinise us as we walk by. The dining section has about ten tables. We follow Colonel to the kitchen servery and help ourselves to a mixture of cold meats, cabbage and potatoes. The beverage accompanying our meal is a strange concoction that tastes like a mixture of tea and syrup.

Victor has joined us. He explains the routine of Novo and suggests a tour of the base after we finish our meal. I keep glancing covertly at the kitchen. I would love to have a poke about in there. I can only catch a glimpse of the interior but it looks an empty and cold place to work in. Colonel keeps urging us to eat and looks deeply offended when I tell him I can't eat any more. He tut-tuts and walks away shaking his head.

Nikolai, the photographer, arrives waving a video in his hand. Victor and he have a quick, garbled conversation. He wants to show us a video of a day at the runway helping us load the fuel barrels. He turns on the television. I feel an incredible sense of culture shock. It has only been over a month since I was living in modern luxury but looking at the television

and gazing at the fridge in the corner of the dining room is giving me head spins.

The video resolves into clarity and it's a close-up of Lisa sitting on a fuel barrel looking a little bemused. There is no sound and she makes a motion with her hand at the camera as if to wave it away. It briefly moves off to the left and captures Charlie and Blair refuelling the plane. It then segues straight back to Lisa. The film is a series of montages of her. Nikolai shrugs without looking the least bit sorry.

Novolazarevskaya is like being on Mars. The base is built on rocks. The only snow is where the plane is parked. There is a jumble of buildings and a vast amount of what looks like accumulated spare parts. There are abandoned vehicles of all descriptions, some of them lovingly painted like our tank. One truck, a beautifully rusted red, is covered in love hearts and flowers.

We pick our way over this Soviet detritus. The Russians use it as a one-stop wrecker's shop for fixing their array of pre-loved army vehicles. Despite the unsightliness of all the refuse lying around, I'm impressed at the men's ability to improvise using the materials that are to hand. We may live in tents and have no electricity at Blue 1 but we are able to order in almost anything (within reason) and we don't give budget a moment's thought. Here, everything is used again and again. Then when its primary use is exhausted, someone will tinker with a bit of it and modify it for something else. Our western sensibilities look at the mess around us and think, what about the effect on the environment? But the Russians can argue that our recycling is simply a question of geography. Are we any greener because all our waste is shipped to South Africa? It's a maze of differing values.

We shuffle into the living quarters and are introduced to some more of the men on the base. Most of the men share rooms, sometimes four to a room. They group outside their

doors and shyly invite us in to look around. I hang back, strangely reluctant to intrude into their worlds. They look at us with shining eyes and an expression I can't quite understand. It's a look of hopefulness and melancholy. I find it hard to look fully into their eyes. Instead, I concentrate on the set-up of their quarters. In every room we visit, there are tomatoes and cucumbers growing in precious boxes of soil against every spare window. These plants seem to me to encapsulate a longing for home. The men have no idea when they'll get off the continent. Some have gone out to the barrier where a supply ship is being unloaded. But when we ask when they'll be returning to Russia, no one knows. They shrug and raise their shoulders in a gesture that tells of unending bureaucratic manipulation and their resigned acceptance of it.

All the walls have pin-ups of Russian women in poses of strange sexual innocence. In most of these pictures the women are wearing bikinis and their faces are carefully made up in a style that went out of fashion in the early 1980s. I don't see anything truly graphic but then again the men may have stashed the hard stuff away from Lisa and me. The two of us are ambivalent about these pictures, it's entirely understandable why these images are on their walls.

Their beds are made with starched cotton sheets and woollen blankets. There are no down sleeping bags, rucksacks, walking boots, hand-held GPS systems or polar fleece jackets to be found. The men wander around in carpet slippers or pad around in socks. They wear tatty cotton sweaters or shirts over cotton vests. The building has the air of a tidy boarding house in Kamchatka.

Sasha, one of the Russians who can speak a little bit of English, takes over the tour and shows us his underground seismological cave. We descend a series of stairs until we're inside a protected chamber with a suspended weight in the middle of the room. Sasha is wearing a pungent scent that makes me gag. I feel

awful that I can't show him sufficient interest but the smell is distracting me and making me dizzy.

It's been a long while since my olfactory senses were given a workout and I'm wondering if they have become acutely developed since their enforced hiatus. I'm relieved when we're back above ground and I can gulp fresh air.

Our next stop is Victor's building. He lives and works here with more senior members of the base. We step into the main room and are confronted with a room full of equipment that has the authentic feel of the Cold War and would look perfect in an espionage film from the 1960s. The equipment is all grey metal with tags underneath the knobs in Cyrillic script. Large globes flash red and a vast array of switches and connectors are arranged over bulky sloping consoles. Unbelievably, this whole roomful of equipment only does half the job of our HF radio, which is the size of a couple of laptops balanced on top of one another.

Victor shows us another room where the speakers of the radio are located. Again the room is a throwback to the Cold War. This time there are large speakers on the console and some headphones are resting on the desk in front of it. Victor has his cucumbers and tomatoes growing on a north-facing windowsill. A tall grey metal shelving unit holds all manner of electrical leads, wires, headphones, along with boxes and boxes of vinyl records. A gramophone sits on a table underneath the windowsill.

Victor glances around at his work area. 'For me to change radio frequencies, I do this.' He rises out of his chair. 'I get up and I walk from here,' we all trail in his wake, 'and move to... here.' We're now standing in the bigger room. 'I reach across and move this dial,' with his wrist he carefully turns a big knob, 'and I can find Blue 1's frequency. It's a bit of a walk, hey?'

All of us are a little stunned. It seems insane that they have no modern communication equipment. Surely the budget

can stretch to an HF radio that would fit on a corner of the table that holds Victor's gramophone? It's the most bizarre idea to imagine Victor having to walk about fifteen metres to an entirely different electrical system simply to change frequencies. Some of us ask Victor to explain the procedure again, not willing to believe that it can be authentic. John and Shane are shaking their heads in disbelief. Victor shrugs at us. I am getting used to this nonchalant gesture of their reality.

Victor shows us to his room. He sleeps on his own but his bed is no bigger than anyone else's. He shyly shows us a photo of a blonde girl with plaits, who looks about fourteen years of age.

'This is my daughter.'

'When was the last time you saw her?' Lisa takes the photo from Victor's outstretched hand. The rest of us crowd around her and peer over her shoulder.

'Not of two years... not for about two years.' Lisa gives the photo back to Victor and he smiles at us sadly. His room also has pictures of women in bikinis. I find this disconcerting. It seems so contrary to me as I look at him standing in his room wearing slippers, tracksuit pants and a sweater. His beard is still neatly trimmed and his pale blue eyes look at us with calm authority. I am annoyed at my surprise. This man can't have sexual fantasies?

'Would you like to call Australia?' I stare at Victor.

'You'd let me call Australia – from here?'

'Sure, why not? Will someone be home in Australia?'

'I don't care if I wake the dead, we'll find someone home.' Victor leads me to the 'phone room'. It's an office with a 1987 calendar on the wall and an officious-looking desk with a bakelite phone sitting to the side. Suddenly it rings. Victor picks it up and barks into it. I leave the room to give him some privacy. I can't believe I'm going to be allowed to phone home. I have never imagined that the prospect of a phone call can make me feel so elated. Already I am thinking about what I

should say. Should I sound casual? Should I screech down the line and try to tell whoever takes the call what I've been up to in one long-winded sentence? What if I begin to blub like a baby? Victor's conversation goes on far longer than I'm hoping for. I sidle back to the main radio room where everyone is still exclaiming over the equipment.

'How's Mum?'

'I haven't called, Victor's on the phone. Sounds like he's talking to the head of the KGB. Maybe they're doing a security check on me.'

'You won't be leaving the base. They'll have you off to the gulag before you can blink.'

'I thought Blue 1 was the gulag.' John and I exchange smirks. Victor enters the room and he seems distracted. He doesn't ask me back to the phone room and I don't have the nerve to ask him.

We troop out of the building and head back to the restaurant. Victor asks for our patience as they prepare our beds for the night. Mike insists that we will sleep in tents by the plane. I glance at him incredulously. Has the man lost his mind? I know not to say anything but I secretly cheer Victor on as he pooh-poohs this idea with shocked disdain.

'No one is sleeping in a tent. What nonsense is this, you are our guests and we will not have it to see you in a tent. Pah!' He waves his hand and looks at Mike with horror. I skip back to the plane with the others to bring our gear back to the base.

On our return Victor leads us back to his building and ceremoniously shows us our quarters. We have each been given separate rooms and it's immediately obvious that members of the base have given up their rooms for us. Lisa is assigned Victor's room and Mike is put in Yvgeny's room. I'm given a spare room so I don't feel so guilty but Mike and Lisa are protesting strongly with Victor. He is brushing aside their objections like someone swiping at irritating mosquitoes. He is not to be budged. Mike and Lisa know when they're beaten

and they graciously concede to his hospitality. Our rooms have beds, with mattresses, sheets and blankets, not sleeping bags. I'm entranced and bounce experimentally on my bed. As far as beds go it's nothing you wouldn't find in any youth hostel but the novelty is wonderful. I stand up and look out the window. Skuas are hovering over a building and the view cannot begin to compare with the geographical splendour of Blue 1 but it has an intrigue all of its own.

Boris and Nikolai join us. They are meteorologists. They want to show us their weather building where they launch weather balloons. Again, we all file out of Victor's building and troop behind Victor and Boris to a strange-looking wooden tower to the north of the base. I feel like an inspection party but I'm not sure what I should be inspecting. Nikolai and Boris are leading us up a wooden walkway. I can't understand a word they are saying but their tone of voice and gestures are vivid enough to know they're bickering about something. They remind me of a married couple who are happiest having altercations with each other. I see Nikolai stop and bend over at the waist. He is laughing at something Boris has said. He rises and slaps him on the back and continues chuckling as they walk to the weather building. Boris hacks and spits over the walk rail. He follows behind Nikolai, lighting a cigarette as he walks.

We enter the building and find ourselves in a chamber containing two huge canvas sacks that seem to be filled with some kind of gas. I stop by one of them and reach over to touch the bag.

'Don't get too close to that! I think it's pure hydrogen,' Mike exclaims. This tells me nothing.

'What could happen?'

'Usually when you go into one of these buildings everyone is decked out in full Hazchem gear. At least that's what I've seen on other bases down here. Only certified people are

allowed near this stuff. If you create any form of static, you, along with the rest of us, will be toast.'

'What about Boris's cigarette?'

'Don't ask me to understand how they work here. I'm just warning you about the stuff in that bag.' Mike's tone is forthright and I don't question him further. Instead I tiptoe away from the canvas sack as if it might suddenly jump out and bite me on the rear. Boris is still taking happy drags on his cigarette and doesn't seem the least bit concerned about blowing us all to kingdom come. None of us thinks to tell him to stub the damn thing out.

Nikolai and Boris bound ahead of us and lead us up some stairs and out onto the platform where they release the weather balloons. From this higher vantage point Novolazarevskaya has the air of a struggling mining town. The buildings are shabby and run-down. The walkways between buildings are splitting and rotting. Some of the buildings rest on metal stilts that are rusting under the summer sun. There's a sense of melancholy about the place. A few people are ambling between buildings; there's nowhere to hurry to. I look down at this scene and try to imagine being posted here, not even knowing when I'd be getting home. We have heard that there is a ship in Cape Town that supposedly will be sailing to Novolazarevskaya. The problem is money. The ship is stranded in Cape Town because the Russian government can't pay for its passage on to Antarctica. This seems the most quixotic government project imaginable.

I'm shaken out of my reverie. Nikolai has his camera in his hand and wants to take more photos of the foreigners. We group around the rail of the balcony and smile into his lens. We're looking far worse than our hosts are. My hair is beyond frightening and I'm wearing Gore-Tex overtrousers that I've worn every day since I arrived on the continent. At least it's warm enough to wear a woollen T-shirt so my armpits are getting a little bit of an airing. I suddenly feel wistful for my

cocktail dresses, my silk underwear and my daily showers. I remember briefly my regular trips to the Korean baths in Kings Cross and the massages the women would give me. I am thinking they'd do brisk business if they decided to open a franchise down here.



‘Would you two like to take a sauna?’ Victor addresses Lisa and myself with a shy smile. I gape at him in amazement. I think he must be reading my mind, or he’s being a perfect gentleman by offering us a sauna instead of telling us directly that we look like hell.

‘I would *love* a sauna. Lead me to it.’ I pause and look at Victor, ‘Are you really serious?’

‘Of course. We may be in Antarctica but we are civilised people. We have a sauna in the diesel building. I suggest you go and get towels and then I’ll show you where it is.’ Lisa and I need no more prompting. We race back to our guest rooms. I rip open my rucksack and start flinging everything out in my hurry to find a towel and other toiletries. I’m terrified that Victor will get another strange phone call and forget about his offer. I skid out the door and down the corridor. Lisa and Victor are standing in his radio room. He hands Lisa a jar.

‘Be careful with this. It is fresh mint water. That’s what those leaves are. It’s the last of my supply so make sure you don’t spill it. You wait for the sauna to heat to at least 110 degrees and then you throw some of this water on the coals. It’s a wonderful smell. It’s heaven, truly. I promise you.’

‘But you’ll have none left.’ Lisa hands back the jar to him. I murmur in agreement. Victor thrusts it back at Lisa, she presents it back to him. He starts to look impatient at our polite entreaties.

‘Please. You are my guests. The sauna is not a sauna unless you throw scented water on the coals. I insist you take it.’

‘What about your supply?’

'I'll grow more.' Victor gestures at his tomato plants at the window. All of us know the growing season is not going to last for much longer. But it's rude to keep arguing in this fashion. We gratefully accept this wonderful luxury. I involuntarily shiver with anticipation.

We enter the diesel room and cover our ears. The relentless roar of the generator engines is like a pounding drum. A man stripped to the waist is standing at a control panel, idly twisting his blond moustache. As Victor walks past him, he looks up briefly with an absent nod then stops short as he sees us tramping along behind Victor. He shakes his head as if a little unsure at what he's looking at as we disappear from view.

Victor takes us through to a dressing area, or an undressing area in this case. He indicates that we should change here. We drop our towels and then follow him through into another room, where tables made of marble slabs line the walls. In one corner is a pile of large, chipped metal bowls. Above the bowls is a sink with a crude tap system. It is essentially two hoses protruding from the wall. One hose is green and the other is red.

'The green is cold and the red is hot – yes?' We nod our heads. 'The sauna is in here,' says Victor as he opens a door next to the sink. We peer over his shoulder into a wood-lined room with two tiered benches. 'The switch is here,' he flicks a dial, 'so use this to work the best temperature.'

'What are the branches for?' I indicate a pile of branches with dying leaves that are leaning against the wall.

'Ah yes. They're birch branches. Use them to brush your skin. It is good for the circulation.' At this he nods politely to us and leaves the room.

Lisa and I look at each other in silence for a moment. 'Yee-haaaa!' we screech. The two of us dash back into the changing room and start throwing off our clothes. We can't seem to get out of them fast enough. I'm hopping on one foot, trying to grapple with the laces of one boot. I sit down for easier

movement and continue to tangle with the blasted shoes. The laces are too tight. I yelp in frustration. Finally they're loose. I rip off my boots and stand, taking off my T-shirt. I feel so decadent standing with bare feet on the cement floor. I rip the Velcro down the length of my overpants and struggle with the zippers underneath the Velcro.

'Jesus, God and shit. These damn clothes can't come off fast enough,' I pant. Suddenly I remember I have my camera.

'Hey, hang on a sec. Let me get a shot of you undressing, I have to have documentation of this historic event.' Lisa strikes a provocative pose, looking over her shoulder at me and flashing her backside. We shriek and cackle like witches about to cast some major spells. I quickly decide taking pictures is a waste of time. I want to have the sensational feeling of water sluicing over my body.

We peer down at our naked selves. I am amazed at the amount of dead skin that has fallen off me. I am standing in a pool of skin flakes.

'You look like you have leprosy, maybe a toe or something will drop off as well.' Lisa is looking at my bodily waste with scientific interest. I wail at the spectacle I must present to the world. My leg hairs are so long I could plait them. I leave the changing room and follow Lisa into the ante-room where the bowls and the taps are. We fill up our bowls and pause briefly to look at the lovely, hot water as if it's liquid gold before dumping the entire contents over our bodies.

It is heaven in Antarctica. No one else could be as content as I am at this moment. I scrub my body with a big lump of soap. I reach for some birch branches and start to slap my body with the leaves. The room resembles a murdered forest. We hop into the sauna. It's hot and it feels strange to experience such enveloping heat after hugging the stove at Blue 1 for the spluttering, half-hearted warmth it throws out. I lie flat on my back with one leg dangling over the side and an arm covering my eyes. I'm on the lower bench and it's almost

unbearably hot. My mind drifts in the heat and I can imagine I'm sunbaking on the beach near where I live.

Lisa throws the mint water onto the coals. They hiss and spit with fury. The sauna immediately fills with the scent of fresh mint. I sit up and gulp in the wonderfully clean and refreshing aroma.

Lisa and I spend a long, pleasurable afternoon, washing ourselves and succumbing to the luxurious delights of bathing that would not be possible at Blue 1. At Blue 1 we hoard thermos flasks and then retreat to our tents with a lousy plastic bowl. Once inside it's an excruciating exercise to wash yourself without wetting the mattress or the sleeping bag or the mess of clothes lying about. It's easier not to bother. On rare occasions I have waited until everyone has gone to bed before stripping naked and squashing myself into a washing bowl to clean myself by the stove. It's a hurried affair because I don't want the rest of the camp to be subjected to my nudity if they were to return to the cook tent. Here we can take our time, we can stand up, and we can get our *whole* bodies wet instead of bits at a time. We don't have to venture out of doors, dig the snow, carry it back inside, throw it into the smelter, wait an hour or two before it melts and then only being able to have enough for a lousy face wash. We're basking in this extravagance with voluptuous ecstasy.

When all the washing and steaming become too much for me, I loll on the marble slabs and idly wonder where they have travelled from to end up here in Antarctica. I look around the wash room with all the leaves scattered over the floor and the dead branches lying wasted against the wall. It has to be the most bizarre place to be having a sauna. We are deep in the bowels of the diesel building and we can feel the heat of the machines and the dull throb of the engines. Our room gives us no indication that we're on a continent with no vegetation and the sight of the birch branches disorients me considerably.

After a while we begin to wonder what the time is. There are no windows to tell us how late in the day it is. We want to enjoy this amazing opportunity but at the same time we don't want to upset our hosts by being antisocial and using up their water supply for the month of December. We reluctantly coax each other out of heaven and into the dressing room. The heat and the water have pickled both of us. The tips of my fingers and my toes are wrinkled like fleshy prunes and the pores on my face feel cleansed and hot. For once my toes are free of sock lint and the awful fetor of yeast that makes me think I could cultivate cheese. We slowly towel ourselves dry and reluctantly drag on our clean clothes, indisposed to leave this haven.

My dress for the dinner tonight is hardly traffic-stopping. My only concession to the occasion is a clean woollen jumper and fresh long johns. I am still wearing my over-pants and I look at them with mild distaste. I have a brief daydream about sashaying into the restaurant wearing a cocktail dress, high heels and diamond earrings. I immediately let go of such a fantasy. I may look like the back of a bus but these blokes haven't seen females for some considerable time. I think my clean top could be too much even for me at this point.

We leave our sauna and emerge blinking into the early evening sunshine. A small crowd of carefully nonchalant men are standing casually around the entrance to the building. They straighten up as we step outside. Some of them clear their throats and move their heads in tight circles around their necks. Others smile bashfully at us. We walk past them grinning as we take the stairs but we don't stop and chat.

We step inside the restaurant building. Mike, John, Shane and Stuart are there already sipping beer with other members of the base. Shane is playing pool with some of them. Base commander Yvgeny sees us arrive and comes over to show us in more detail the layout of the building. He is a solicitous

man with a gentle manner. His English is careful and he stops often to search for the correct word to say. He gives the impression of quiet strength and resolve. I think nothing less would be needed from him, living under the spartan conditions at Novolazarevskaya. He reminds me of photos I've seen of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. His features are more youthful than the famous author's and his appearance hints at intellectual vigour and learning.

I ask him if I could see more of the kitchen. He looks closely at me before telling me that the cook is busy preparing the meal so perhaps another time. I readily agree. I have no intention of disrupting the cook at his job, particularly when the evening meal is about to be served. Instead I duck inside the dining area on my own in the hope of ingratiating myself with the cook with offers of help. I figure sign language will get me through if neither of us can understand the other. I approach the hatch and look in.

A man is busy rushing from one pot to another. He is small and clean-shaven. He has a heavy brow that is furrowed as he watches his vegetables draining into the sink. A cigarette dribbles ash onto the floor. He realises he is being observed and turns to look towards the hatch. I smile a greeting. He returns it with a long stare. I drop my hand that is outstretched in introduction. He looks angry and in no mood to have a commiserating gossip while I lend a hand with the spuds. I slink away, feeling embarrassed at my presumption. I return to the games room, unhappy with my lack of success with the one person I really wanted to bond with while here.

I accept a glass of champagne from Victor.

'What's the cook's name?'

'Misha. He is a criminal from Moscow.' I glance back towards the kitchen as Victor says this. 'He is here because this is an alternative to prison back in Russia. You should be a bit careful of him. He is no good.' Victor is shaking his head as he speaks.

‘Did the legal system send him here?’

‘The legal system?’ Victor looks at me as if I’ve mouthed a swear word. ‘He has run away from a bad situation but none of us really knows what that situation was. He is a strange one.’ Misha’s story seems infinitely more tantalising than mine but I’m now a little unsure how I’ll uncover it.

‘Ladies, ladies, ladies – allow me to show you to your table. Please.’ It’s the ever-smiling Nikolai, still with a camera around his neck and looking spruced and full of bonhomie. Lisa and I simper at him as if he were our date to the prom and we take each of his arms and allow him to lead us to the dining area. The tables are straining under bottles of wine, champagne, vodka and Coke. Nikolai sits Lisa and me at a table set for two. I see that our table has no vodka bottle. Instead we have two bottles of champagne along with the wine for our dining pleasure.

‘How are your drinking legs?’ I ask Lisa, eyeing the alcohol in front of us.

‘Gird your loins, girl. This is going to be some night.’ We take our seats and everyone else seats themselves at all the other tables. No one seems to want to sit with the ladies. I suddenly feel like an untouchable.

‘Is Nikolai deserting his hot babes for the evening? Where is that man?’ Lisa and I look around for him and see him sitting at a table with Shane, who is looking pink and cheery.

‘Oi – Nikolai!’ Lisa yells to him. So much for the genteel ladies in their midst. Nikolai looks over and raises a glass to us. Maybe vodka is more of an inducement for him than the fine company of sophisticated and entertaining women. Lisa motions him over. He joins us, crouching in between our chairs.

‘You’re not joining us then? We thought you were our chaperone.’ Nikolai smiles uncomprehendingly. I attempt in my schoolgirl German to invite him to sit with us but at a nearby table Yvgeny is clearing his throat and standing to read from a prepared speech. I motion to Nikolai not to worry.

'I am wanting to thank our guests coming to us this weekend.' Yvgeny looks over the top of his reading glasses at the assembled gathering. 'Please understand that the English I speak is not good but I try to say what I have in my head.' He pauses and shuffles his notes. 'They are most welcome here at Novolazarevskaya and I hope we are hosting you properly.'

I think to our afternoon of pleasure and lean towards Lisa. 'I'm coming back every other day for the sauna alone.' Lisa smiles quickly at me before turning her attention back to Yvgeny.

'We want to thank personally the nations of England, Canada, Australia, Wales and South Africa for their great gift to us. It is a heart-warming and,' Yvgeny looks up again and clears his throat, 'it will be remembered for a long time this kindness and generosity. This was not expected but is much greatly appreciated and esteemed. We here raise our glasses to our guests and we say thank you for this courtesy to us.' Yvgeny raises his glass and salutes us by drinking his toast in one gulp. I sit straighter in my chair with my glass in my hand. I feel diminished and wholly unworthy of his sincere and heartfelt words. I slowly let out a long-held breath.

Yvgeny repeats his speech in Russian and the men all nod and drink to the guests as well. None of us was expecting these words from Yvgeny. They reveal a strain and difficulty that we are oblivious to back at our tented camp. We may complain about our current austere lifestyle but all of us know a different life to what we see here. I whinge insufferably when we run out of fresh milk. I become disgruntled when my supply of fresh eggs is eaten and I'm forced to use our 'hundred year' eggs as I've christened the frozen ones. I sometimes contemplate throwing a tantrum when Lisa makes a dig at the vegetarian meals I serve her. Suddenly it's all so trite and unforgivable after hearing Yvgeny speak. I think of my stoushes with Benjamin and laugh grimly to myself. I think of the ship waiting in Cape Town. What do I know of anything?

I have a brief moment where I wish for something other than my cloistered, indulged life. I feel like a privileged tourist and it's a feeling that makes me queasy. I'm angry too because my thoughts are completely irrational. I'm only cut out for the life I know. Tossing my job in and blowing off to Antarctica might give me the illusion of breaking out and breaking free of the shackles of life back in Sydney but I already know the answer to the question I'm asking myself. Given the choice, I'd have my *cloistered, indulged life* every time. My little fantasy about boldly going where no sane woman has gone before is comprehensively busted in a shabby dining room, sitting with a roomful of people who know much more than me about hardship and struggle. I believed my sojourn in Antarctica would straighten my backbone and allow me a second chance at shaping my life. Right at this moment I'm as riddled with inadequacies as I was in Sydney. Why had I believed that Antarctica would change that?

I bring to Antarctica my twenty-first century baggage of muddled hang-ups. On its white, hard surface I throw my life at it and expect it to make a logical pattern for me to understand. Instead it absorbs my fears, my wonder and its whiteness remains blank and impervious.

I sink a little lower into my chair, I feel depressed and pathetic. Around me everyone is happily swilling vodka, talking and laughing with each other. I twiddle my glass between my fingers. I look up as John shouts with laughter across the table. Men who don't understand a word of English are laughing with him. John can't speak Russian, drunk or sober. The people around the table are sitting well back in their chairs. Some of them fold their arms above ample bellies and hold their glasses in a firm fist. Others are chuckling into their necks. John sits in the middle of it all waving his arms around and sculling vodka. None of them is concerned about the language barrier, everyone is enjoying the revelry.

John raises his glass to me and winks. I grin in spite of my morbid mood.

Food is placed in front of us. I note they are serving the fresh peppers we gave them. The base hasn't seen a fresh veggie in an eon and they're serving them to us. I turn in my chair, hoping for another glimpse of the cook. He is busier than ever. I stand up to go to the kitchen but I'm firmly told to sit. I am not to lift a finger. Yvgeny clinks his glass again and stands up.

'I would like to toast the lovely ladies.' He motions for everyone to stand. Lisa and I stay seated, feeling self-conscious.

'To the ladies.'

'You'll have to say something,' Lisa whispers to me.

'Not me, no way.'

'Me neither.'

'Someone has to respond. You do it, you're older.'

'No bloody way, you're the wordsmith, you do it.' We hiss back and forward and still maintain our smiles at the assembled men.

'Oh for fuck's sake,' I say. I push my chair back and raise my glass. 'And to all the handsome gents,' I declare. Glasses chink and more alcohol is swallowed. This is going to be some night. I look around for water to slake my thirst along with the alcohol. I beckon Nikolai over then decide I'm acting like a pampered brat. I am treating him like a glorified waiter and anyway, it's impossible to stay sober with our table flooded with alcohol and everyone else high on the hog.

'Cheers, Lis. This could get ugly I think.' I chink glasses with my dining partner and pour champagne down my throat. The noise level rises. I eat my meal and drink glass after glass. Nikolai has joined us and the three of us talk in a casserole of Russian, English and German. We understand one another perfectly.

'How come we don't have vodka on our table, Nikolai?' He looks from Lisa to me and back to Lisa again. Maybe Russian women don't drink the stuff.

'I love vodka, aren't we allowed any?' I coax him. I wonder if I've overstepped a cultural boundary by requesting a bottle but I want to taste the authentic stuff. Thankfully the vodka we brought with us is nowhere in sight. Instead Nikolai places a bottle of the genuine Russian article in front of us. I messily pour a glass for myself and for Lisa. 'Here comes trouble,' I say as I raise the glass to my lips.

I have lost count of the number of drinks I've had. The sober me is scandalised at my drunken behaviour.

'Do you know, I think I can sing a Russian drinking song.' I'm addressing no one in particular. I stare around me in a slightly cross-eyed fashion. 'Does anyone want to hear it?' By now we have moved around the dining hall and I'm sitting at a long table with people sitting around in small groups. The armoured tank driver, Fyodor, is sitting opposite me, impassively nursing what looks like a jam jar of vodka.

'Sure, give us a song then.' John is egging me on.

'Don't mind if I do.' I stand up on slightly swaying legs and hold an almost empty glass in my hand. I peer into it. 'Wouldn't mind a top up before I begin...' I leer at the faces around me. My glass is summarily filled. 'Here goes then. Give me a moment while I remember the words.' I hum the tune under my breath just to make sure I haven't forgotten the general gist of it. Mike is sitting at the end of the table and I think he's looking vaguely pained at the sight of the cook about to make a spectacle of herself. He's probably thinking I'm fast living up to the cliché of a pissed Aussie. Well, tough. I take a breath and bellow forth.

'Sto lat, sto lat, niech zyje, zyje nam.

Sto lat, sto lat, niech zyje, zyje nam.

Jeszcze raz, jeszcze raz

Niech zyje, zyje nam!

Niech zyje nam!'

I pause and take a big breath for the final 'na zdrowia!' I drain my glass and fall heavily back into my chair, looking

glassily about me with a foolish grin. Across the table Fyodor has come alive and is saying something in Russian. Suddenly he stretches across the table and with a big, meaty paw, lifts me clear out of my chair. He hoists me back over the table and dumps me next to him with the dexterity of a moving crane. He places a heavy arm over my shoulder and fills my glass to the brim. We toast one another and I stay wrapped under his arm.

I attempt to focus on Stuart who is sitting opposite me. He swims in and out of view. I keep opening and shutting my eyelids in an attempt to balance myself a little. Instead of taking great gulps of my drink I take dainty sips but Fyodor looks aggrieved and insists I keep up. Rolling my eyes is not enough to quell my burbling stomach. I stop drinking altogether and smile weakly at faces about me. I feel I'm about to lose my balance even though I'm firmly seated and my feet appear to be on solid ground. I stagger upright and make my way to the bathroom off the dining hall. As I pass Mike I glimpse his face turning towards me.

I make it to the bathroom and retch miserably into the upturned garbage bin that is the toilet. I feel so, so ill. I rest my head on the side of the loo, oblivious to its filth and wait for my stomach to subside. I throw up more of the dinner. My forehead is wet with sweat and my mouth is full of bile and the stench of the contents of my stomach. Someone is knocking on the door.

'Alexa – Alexa...? Are you OK?'

'I'm fine, no worries,' I croak. Lisa is outside sounding concerned.

'I'll be out in a minute. I'm just... I'm just having a pee,' I say knowing I'm not fooling anyone. 'Give me a moment, I'll be out soon.' I heave to my knees and perch on the edge of the loo and place my head in the palms of my hands. I take deep calming breaths and wipe dribble from my mouth, feeling a complete wreck. I stand up and rinse my mouth out with

water, gargling again and again and hoping I won't disgrace myself further.

I take a better look around the bathroom. It's a truly revolting sight. The sink is stained a waxy yellow and has strange smudges around it. The floor looks like it hasn't seen a mop in a decade and the stench from the toilet is unbearable. None of the toilets has a flushing device and the accumulated smell of god knows what assaults my senses. But what makes my stomach retch in disgust are the pictures on the bathroom door. It's hard-core porn. Pictures of women in degrading poses are pasted all over the door. This is the cook's bathroom and suddenly I have no desire to swap recipes or ask him his secret ingredient for stroganoff. I stumble out of the bathroom.

I make my re-entry to the dining room as unobtrusive as possible and slink over to sit next to Mike like a chastened child. Fyodor beckons me back next to him but I shake my head like a shy schoolgirl.

'I feel revolting. I will never drink again.'

'That's what they all say.'

'No. It's true. I feel as if I've been turned inside out.'

'Happens to the best of us, dearie.'

'And I think it's still happening to me,' I say. I stumble to my feet and instead of heading back to the bathroom I make my way outside. I can feel the familiar rumble in my bowels and I'm desperate to get some fresh air. I meet Stuart on my way out and he follows me. I must look as green as I feel. I sit on the top step. Stuart places a comforting arm around my shoulders as I lean over my knees.

'Save the chunkiest bits for me.' It's Shane standing above me. He gives me a reassuring pat on my back. I moan and another wave of nausea rises and I empty my stomach again. I am truly miserable. I need to get to bed.

'Someone take me home. I want to lie down and never get up again,' I mumble.

In the end Lisa leads me to my room, guiding me gently over the rough path to our quarters. I manage to clean my teeth and wash my face. I stagger back to my room and drag a rubbish bin over to the bed. Fully dressed, I lie gratefully on the blankets and murmur my thanks. Lisa disappears but not before taking some incriminating photos of me leaning over the bin. I protest weakly but can do nothing about it. The next few hours are spent hurling up the insides of my stomach and falling into coma-like dozes. It is a most miserable night.



I wake up the next morning and for a long moment I lie staring at the ceiling feeling hopelessly confused. Where the hell am I? Where is my tent, what is a wall doing next to my ear, why can't I hear the wind? I swivel my eyeballs around the room, not moving a muscle in the rest of my body. Eventually I arch my neck and stare blindly out of the window, concentrating hard on a smudge on the glass, willing my mind to come to life. I run my tongue along the length of my gums and slowly, like the fluttering of a bird's wing, some images form in my mind. They're not happy recollections and in no time I have my arm over my eyes and I've curled my body into a fetal position. Oh lord, what was I thinking? I lie in this position for a while and torture myself with the events of the night before. At least, with those that I can recall.

After a while I sit up and stretch my legs. I have a raging thirst that could suck a dam dry. Hesitantly I touch my head and flex my eyes in their sockets. I stand up and wait for the familiar wave of nausea to return. Strangely, apart from a shaky sense of balance, I feel remarkably well. I turn the handle of my door and cautiously stick my head out into the hallway. I don't want to meet anyone just yet. I have to marshal an expression of casual lassitude first.

I tiptoe to the bathroom and drink glass after glass of water. Furtively I return to my room and get dressed, then I take up a position on the edge of the bed. I have no idea what the time is and I can't hear anything from the other rooms. I hope to God I'm not the last one up and they're all waiting for me to put in a public appearance in the dining room, the scene of my

most recent transgressions. I strain my ears. There are voices coming from Victor's radio room. I step into the hallway and go and stand hesitantly at the door. Mike is sitting on a foldout chair, deep in conversation with Victor.

'Morning,' I croak.

'Ah. Good morning, Alexa.' Victor smiles beatifically at me. He is looking chirpy and dapper. Mike looks up at me with an unreadable expression. Shit, I think. Did I overstep the mark last night and he's going to send me back to Cape Town on the next Ilyushin flight?

'Good morning, Mike.' I've never been so polite and ingratiating in my life.

'How are you?'

'Oh fine. Fine... Really.' Mike raises a disbelieving eyebrow. But it's true. I feel fresh and clean. It amazes me that I'm not a physical wreck but I feel wonderful. The best I've felt in a long while. Victor confirms this for me.

'You look ten years younger. You have a bloom in your face.' He pats me gently on the cheek.

'It seems vodka agrees with me after all,' I say.

'Is that so?' Mike says sceptically. 'Your problem is you have to learn to drink more like a woman and not like a man.'

'Oh I don't think it's necessary to put it in such facile terms,' I say. 'I think it's more a case of not drinking like a Russian.' I make a moue at him and help myself to a cup of tea.

After I'd left the gathering last night in my regrettable state, the boys had retired to the sauna where they made even more mess than Lisa and I had. All in all, everyone seems to have left their inhibitions back at Blue 1. Mike might have had the most dignity of all of us but someone had to play father. Lisa and Shane join us and we drink cups of tea while listening to Victor explain how he learnt English by reading the classics of English literature. I'm amazed at how colloquial his speech is, considering Shakespeare was his main tutor.

There are seven of us wandering across the oasis in an easterly direction. Three stride out ahead, talking seriously and occasionally turning back to yell out for the rest to keep up. We four tag along, moving at the pace of a glacier heading to the sea. We stop by melting pools of ice, bending down to splash our faces with the water and our whingeing sometimes reaches those in front. We stragglers are feeling delicate and even the sound of our feet on the rocks makes us wince in pain.

My earlier bout of vitality was knocked out the moment I stepped into the sunshine. My head is now pounding and my eyeballs seem to have nails driven through them. I squint at the scenery behind my glasses, feeling about as alive as the dead seal near Blue 1. John and Stuart look about as good as I feel. Shane and I meander on comparing horror stories from the night before while Stuart slumps by the side of a lake and looks like he'll never rise again. John straggles behind all of us. He spies an Adélie penguin and goes off on a detour in an attempt to chat the animal up. Shane and I stop and watch his progress.

'Here penguin, penguin. Here penguin, come to John.'

'It's not a household pet. You're probably scaring the animal half to death.' We watch the proceedings as John approaches the penguin in a stealthy half-crouch. The penguin squawks as he gets closer, and flaps its rubbery flippers at him in what looks like a gesture more of annoyance than fear.

'What's it saying then, John – know your alcohol limit?'

'Actually it's telling me never to drink with Australians because they don't know when to stop.'

The penguin grows bored and turns its back on us after a final flap of its wings and a honk over its shoulder. Off in the distance we can hear Mike yelling for us to keep up.

'Yes, Dad. Keep your knickers on, we're coming!' John shouts back. We continue tramping over the rocks with tormented effort. It's hot and we all take off our jackets and tie them around our waists or wrap them around our heads

to ward off the heat of the sun. Shane starts to tell us about his first trip to Montreal and how he got lost on the corner of Walk and Don't walk. We all fall over each other, thinking it's the funniest thing we've heard all year. We reach Lisa, Sasha and Mike, who regard us in rueful disgust and all seven of us continue on towards Maitri.

The Indian base of Maitri is about five kilometres west of Novo. The two bases occasionally visit one another but I have the impression it's at an official level rather than out of genuine friendship. Victor tells us that they sometimes trade equipment for food. Sasha also tells us that sometimes they swap videos with the Indians. I struggle to imagine what kinds of films they would have in their respective collections and whether Indian films have Russian subtitles and vice versa.

After an hour or so we come across a dirt road. John steps out and sticks his thumb out in the classic hitchhiker's pose.

'You'll be waiting for some time, sport. The bus comes once a day and you've missed it.'

'I'm an eternal optimist. You lot carry on, I'll see you there.' He pauses and then whines to Mike, 'How much further, Dad? My brain is about to leak out of my ears.' Mike has had enough of mothering his rebellious tribe and keeps on walking. Soon we see the outskirts of Maitri. It's nestled on the edge of a lake. A lake that's unfrozen. We stand at the water's edge and skip stones across its surface. In any other situation the water would have felt completely frigid but with the heat of the sun, we dabble our hands in it and discuss who should take a dip.

The main building of the base has a huge glass wall that faces us. It looks almost like a greenhouse and as we come closer we see a profusion of plants growing inside. We round the building to the front of the base. There are stairs leading up to the entrance and this side of the building has a series of tiny square windows on two levels. We had radioed ahead to let the Indians know we were coming, and there is a welcome party on the stairs.

We look like a bunch of hobos. There is really no other word for us. We straggle up to the stairs and try to rearrange our expressions and dress to look a little more official. There are handshakes all around and we repeat our names to a crowd of about twenty people. Some of them are wearing turbans and traditional Indian dress with their polar boots. In comparison we look like we've come from the town dump. I'm appalled at the sight we must present to these people. I hope they won't think us disrespectful by our dress. Inside more people are waiting in the corridor. Amongst this group is a woman. She gravitates towards Lisa and me immediately. Her name is Dr Vilku and she is the first Indian woman to winter over at Maitri. She is very happy to see Lisa and myself. She stays close as we're ushered into a room with low tables and elaborately carved sofas that are covered in thick cushions. Two long tables run the length of the room and a huge television standing in a corner dominates the decor.

Everyone sits down. I sigh contentedly as I sink into a sofa. I could happily rest my head on someone's lap and have a snooze. Instead we all sit up straight and talk with Dr Vilku and Dr Chaturvedi who is the base leader. He introduces us to a steady stream of people who have heard about the visitors. Everyone is so polite and attentive. I feel nervous. We are offered tea and biscuits and we juggle our mugs while munching the food. We let Mike do the talking and in the meantime I take surreptitious glances at the giant television screen. The sound is low but the colour and the images are mesmerising. I am watching what looks like Indian MTV and the screen is full of young couples in poses of love and affection. The action is filmed through heavily misted lenses. I stare at the pictures and drift off to the sounds of the sitar, cymbals and ululating voices. I am sitting deep into the sofa and my feet almost don't reach the ground.

An extraordinarily good-looking man sits down next to me and I involuntarily jerk as if I've been caught drooling in

my sleep. I drag my gaze from the television and stare into a pair of gorgeous brown eyes, fringed with thick lashes. For a moment I think I'm in the video I've been watching. I give myself a mental shake and introduce myself.

'Hello. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, madam. My name is Vikram.'

'Hello Vikram. How do you do?' I sound like Penelope Keith. Vikram has been posted here with the Indian army and he is part of the logistical team at Maitri. He is wonderfully solicitous towards me but I really don't need to be called madam at this juncture in my life. John overhears us talking and he raises one eyebrow at me. I judiciously ignore him.

Dr Vilku gestures to me and stands up with Lisa.

'Would you like to see my quarters?'

'Of course.' I rise and immediately feel light-headed and dizzy. I stand still for a moment to regain my composure. It seems there'll be a tour of the base in a while but for the moment the women will go with the women and the men will stay and have men chat. Lisa and I are politely ushered from the room and we meekly follow Dr Vilku. I get the distinct impression women are an extreme novelty here. It's a different feeling than I had at Novolazarevskaya. The men there were unashamedly eager to meet us and although they treated us like hothouse flowers it didn't make me feel uncomfortable. We joked and talked with them and (even though some of us behaved with an appalling lack of poise and grace) we felt relaxed and at ease. I detect a different atmosphere here.

Dr Vilku's room is about two-and-a-half by three metres. It contains a bed, a small desk and a chest of drawers. Lisa and I perch on the bed and Dr Vilku sits on a chair. For a moment the three of us are not quite sure what to say to one another. I long to lay my head on the pillow and spend the morning sleeping off my hangover but there'll be none of that.

'How long have you been in Antarctica?' Lisa enquires politely.

‘It will be a year in January.’ Dr Vilku laughs shyly at us.

‘Do you enjoy it here?’

‘Oh of course. It’s a wonderful opportunity for me to work here.’ There is a long pause. Again Lisa and I glance around the room.

‘Did you paint these pictures?’ On the walls are many paintings on canvas. Some depict the lake, others are of penguins and skuas.

‘This is what I do in my spare time, I like to paint and walk around the area. Do you know when I arrived here I was twenty pounds overweight?’ This non sequitur gives me the giggles. The doctor laughs with me. It seems to break the ice between the three of us and the conversation eases into less formal topics.

Dr Vilku insists we call her by her first name of Kanwal. Lisa and I grill her about being the only woman on the base. We both sense a loneliness in her. She reaches out and touches us often and insists on plying us with treats she has scattered around her room. The two of us sit on her bed and suck on lollies and chew yogurt bars.

‘It is difficult sometimes to be here on my own. Arun, Dr Chaturvedi, is very good to me but a lot of the other men resent my presence here. They think I’m breaking into their exclusive club. It’s worse when they want to watch their porn films.’

‘Their porn films?’ I’m astounded. Lisa doesn’t seem so shocked.

‘They can’t play them when I’m in the common room so they make comments about me. I spend a lot of time sitting in here, doing my painting. I find that part of living on the base very difficult to accept. Some of the men feel it’s their right to watch these films down here. My presence has upset this balance.’ Kanwal laughs at my expression. I am sitting upright on the bed with my eyebrows wrinkled in consternation. ‘Not everyone is like this but sometimes I get depressed and upset,

feeling that I am somehow to blame. It's not easy being the only woman here and a woman with a profession.' Kanwal pats my arm reassuringly. I'm not sure what I'm more appalled about, my naivety or Kanwal's predicament. I try to imagine being isolated with twenty or so men who hustle me out of my lounge room, every opportunity they get, to watch reruns of *Debbie Does Dallas*. I don't think my reaction would be to retire to my room and paint landscapes. A voice inside my head asks me what exactly would I do instead? I honestly don't know. I don't know if I could be as dignified as Kanwal.

I haven't lived in a culture where women are still battling to be educated and those who are have to play the rules set by men. My mind swirls thinking of the men at Blue 1 barring female entry to the cook tent because they want to watch the latest football matches and swill beer. I doubt whether they even contemplate such venal activities. Well, maybe they do, but they'd know that Lisa and I would be launching scathing attacks at such behaviour. I take a closer look around Kanwal's small room. It's five-star in comparison to my quarters but to be sequestered away in here? No way. I would go mad.

There is a knock on the door. Our tour is about to commence. Outside, the sun shines mercilessly against my delicate retinas. I plonk my goggles over my eyes and trudge along behind. Out the front of the base is a series of small wooden buildings, reminiscent of a Swedish holiday village. These are the labs for the various scientific experiments that are being carried out. We are ushered around the labs like a royal entourage. Someone is following our every move with a video camera. I only realise this when I'm standing in a corner, propping myself up between two posts. I am half-hidden by Shane and I take the opportunity to throw my head back and yawn until my jaw feels like it will swing loose. I stretch my neck a little further until I hear it crick and after a final yawn I drop my head back into place. I look directly into a red recording light of a camera. A man has settled the lens on me

and dispassionately records the interior of my mouth. Hardly pornographic, I think uncharitably to myself.

After the second hut I begin to feel bored. Not only bored but cranky and whiny. If my mother were here, I'd be clinging to her skirts and demanding to be put to bed. People are asking me what I do. I cook, I tell them, too cantankerous to embellish further. It irks me more when they nod their heads sagely and subtly direct all scientific chat towards the boys. I can hardly blame them, I'm trying desperately to hide my lassitude but I'm conspicuous by my bad manners, let alone by my gender. After exiting the third building, I take a hurried count of the remaining huts. There's about six or seven. I don't think I can bear it. I contemplate telling Kanwal of a wasting disease that takes hold about this time of the morning that requires my retiring to her comfortable bed. I'm too cowardly to say anything so I plod along with the others but it heartens me to see John struggling to maintain his composure as well.

We spend a long morning exploring every last cranny of the base. At least Vikram takes us on one part of the tour. I get to gaze contentedly at his gorgeous features. He insists on addressing Lisa as 'madam', no matter how often he is told that her name is Lisa. 'Madam, that would be a very interesting question,' or, 'Madam, I am not knowing that answer.' Lisa forgives him his oversight. I think it's his eyes of melting chocolate that help. It's difficult to decide whether he deliberately uses the term or if it's out of courtesy. Later on, when we're shepherded back into the common room, I notice he is the only Indian male who sits next to Lisa or me. The rest stand or sit at least a sofa away and gaze at us with curiosity. It's unnerving to be scrutinised in this fashion.

We have a wonderful lunch of Indian cuisine: mouth-wateringly delicious curries, with saffron rice and poppadoms. The table seems to sway as our plates are piled again and again with food. Kanwal and Dr Chaturvedi serve us and people

gather around our table to watch us eat. I am feeling slightly better, probably because I am eating a delicious meal and not having to look attentive as people explain scientific facts and figures over my befuddled head. I relax and take big slurps of Coke from my glass.

Until this weekend I have not been exposed to the science of Antarctica. Instead I've been immersed in the absurdities of the continent. I have been the domestic queen in an environment that would please Lewis Carroll.

I have a kitchen with all the modern conveniences but no electricity. I have an ocean of ice without running water. I have a freezer the approximate size of the United States with no maintenance. The only science I'm involved in is experimenting with the pot roast and how long that takes to cook in temperatures below zero. (A damn sight better than any roast I attempted to cook in Sydney.) This weekend exposes me to the other Antarctica but even so, I am concentrating more on the idiosyncrasies of science instead of the actual research. The Russians only gave us a brief tour of their experiments but I was more enthralled by their imperturbability to the obvious dangers that were evident in their work. Images of Nikolai and Boris bickering over their weather balloons and Boris's cigarette ash dribbling onto the hydrogen come to mind. No doubt safety authorities in the West would frown upon their work practices, but the Russians have a refreshing lack of ego or pomposity about what they are doing. They seem unfazed by their lack of budget or their outdated equipment. They have a workmanlike attitude to science: they roll up their sleeves and make do with what is available on the base. If that means modifying their equipment with bits from the town dump, then so be it.

In comparison the Indians are far more serious about their work. I am impressed with their dedication and their obvious pride in contributing to the science of Antarctica, but they don't grip my imagination like the Russians.

After lunch we are ushered once again to the sofas. This time I'm a little more alert. I try to hide my burping from eating too much curry. Vikram sits next to me and starts writing out greeting cards for all of us with his name and e-mail address. The video camera is still trained on us as we chat to Vikram and Kanwal. Mike makes a nod towards the door and we rise. It takes us some time to say our goodbyes because someone produces a camera and asks for a photo. He hesitantly gestures that he wishes to sit between Lisa and myself. This seems to open a floodgate and soon everyone rushes away to fetch his camera. Again and again different men come and sit next to us and I begin to feel like a wax dummy. No one speaks to us. They each take their turn to face the camera, wait for the flash and then quickly stand up and retreat. Lisa and I start to talk to each other out of the sides of our mouths, we make jokes about our group of paparazzi but I feel awkward and a little dazed by the attention.

The television is still on and attractive couples intertwine to the music. Kanwal sits next to me and holds my hand. I say goodbye to her last. We grip each other's hands and then hug tightly. Damn that blasted television.

We walk away from Maitri, past the greenhouse and beyond the lake. Our weekend away is drawing to a close. Our pace is hurried and no one lags behind. Lisa and I discuss Kanwal's position on the base and both of us look ruefully on the posse walking in front of us. We may bicker about coffee-making duties at Blue 1 but Maitri gave us a glimpse into a more insidious and entrenched framework of discrimination. I leave feeling a deep respect and regard for Kanwal.

Novolazarevskaya's jumble of tatty buildings and auto-wrecker ambience almost feels like home. We clamber up a rocky hill and over rotting pipes that are spewing heaven knows what into the earth but I can't summon up righteous indignation over this blemish. We are greeted with warm smiles from Victor and he and Mike head off to the radio

room to talk with Geoff about the weather back at Blue 1. I go and pack my rucksack and attempt to clean up the mess of the night before. It's time to head back home.

Yvgeny presents us with Russian polar medals and to each of us he hands his card with the address of the polar institute in Russia.

'Please, if you are in Russia you must visit us. We will remember you and will welcome our fellow Antarctic citizens.' I look at the St Petersburg address on the card and make a promise to myself to one day look him up on his home turf. Other members of the base give us some of their freshly grown tomatoes and cucumbers. I thank them, feeling an ache grow in my throat. The Russians' generosity and their happy acceptance of this motley band of interlopers humble me. My conscience attempts to chastise my drunken behaviour of last night – but I beat it back into submission. It was a night that won't ever be repeated and I had no intention of sitting in a corner and behaving myself when everyone else was determined to celebrate our neighbourly visit.

Lisa and I opt to hitch a lift in the tank. John will fly to the airstrip where the fuel cache is located and we will meet the plane there. We throw our gear into the rear of the Twin Otter. Victor is invited to fly with them. We follow Fyodor to the tank. Nikolai, Boris and Colonel, the doctor, accompany us. Lisa and I share the front passenger seat. Fyodor climbs in behind the wheel and revs the engine. The noise is deafening and I wish I'd brought earplugs. He lights up a fat cigarette and nonchalantly flicks the match outside. We lurch forward and the suddenness of the movement flings my head back and it cracks onto the metal bar dividing the front of the tank from the passengers in the back. Tears spring to my eyes with the sudden pain. I turn my head to the right and gaze through my tears at Novolazarevskaya as it disappears behind us. The noise of the vehicle prohibits conversation and I watch the ice and the snow as we lumber by. There are no windows and

the wind is in my face, burning my nose and my ears. I can smell the diesel and if I turn my head I can see the exhaust belching up into the sky. It is like watching purple dye staining crystalline water.

At last we rumble over a rise and the plane is waiting about two kilometres in front of us. Fyodor cranks a gear change and rests an elbow into the biting cold. His sleeves are rolled up and his blond hair stands up in uneven spikes. He looks like he has just rolled off the couch after a postprandial nap and is now on his way to pick up the kids from soccer practice. I remember his strength as he reached across the table and hoisted me onto the seat next to him. Goodbye Fyodor, maybe the night's revelries were a fleeting diversion from the harsh conditions on the base. For me, it was a night I'll remember always. I gaze at him in mute gratitude. He looks over and squints at me through his cigarette smoke. He probably can't wait to see the back of us. At least he won't have to give over any more precious sauna time to these vapid, smelly westerners.

John decides to take us home in two shifts. Lisa and Shane wait behind while Mike and I climb aboard and wedge ourselves in between the fuel supplies. We barrel down the runway and lift into a strong northerly wind. John banks the plane southward and I look down, my eyes following the tank as it retreats back down the divide. Even from this height I can see its burping exhaust and the distinctive pink of Fyodor's sleeve.



I swing on a chair, holding the radio mouthpiece. Ewan has checked in for the daily schedule and I leap to the radio when I hear it splutter to life. I'm missing his good humour.

'How's my weather station?' he asks me.

'Still standing. I polish the solar panels every morning before breakfast.'

'That's what I like to hear.'

'What's happening at camp Holtanna?'

'René and André have built an igloo. It's going to be the ablutions block *and* the deli.'

'What? – over.'

'We're storing our cheese and meat in the igloo as well – if you can imagine it.'

'Hmm, sounds altogether too delicious.'

'No kid. Are you missing me?'

I smile. Lisa overhears and raises an eyebrow.

'I miss your cooking. We're desperate for another curry.'

Lisa clutches her throat and sticks her tongue out.

'You're the cook, you whip one up yourself.'

'Say *cook* again.' He has inflected the word with his Scottish brogue. Mike is standing behind me. He leans into the mouthpiece, 'So what's news, Ewan? Any major upsets, mischief, scandal we should be told?' I rise from my seat and let Mike sit down. I don't like the conversation being a strictly business-only theme. I'd prefer to natter to Ewan about gossipy matters but Mike has more serious things to discuss than my chatter. I walk back to the kitchen thinking about making another soufflé.

I stand propped against the doorway of the kitchen, wearing ski goggles. In between vigorous bouts of beating egg whites I gaze at the mountains of the Fenristunga while I catch my breath. I have tried to cajole others into helping me beat the whites but their limp wrists are an affront. They make mincing circles in the mixture and then complain about the lack of progress. I give energetic demonstrations, beating the whites in a strong, circular rhythm but my students become whiny at the strength that's needed to create the soft peaks. In disgust, I take over the task.

I chop up a couple of fresh mangoes and marinate them in Cointreau for an hour, then make a roux of butter, almond meal and sugar before folding some of the egg whites into the mixture. I bung the egg yolks in with the mango and fold the rest of the egg whites into the mango mixture, surreptitiously slurping down a slice of the mango. The taste of the fresh fruit and alcohol is delicious. I carefully fold the rest of the egg white mixture into the mangoes. The soufflé dish is generously lined with butter, sugar and almond meal. I run my thumb around the side of the dish and put it into the oven. I slam the door shut with my knee, dust my hands and feel smug. Soufflé in Antarctica – not bad, not bad.

Today is warm. It feels not just Antarctic warm but Australian summer mild. In reality it's about 0° Celsius. Geoff wanders into the tent in his shorts and sneakers. He grabs a VHF radio, slings it over his shoulder and with a cheerio he heads off for his daily shuffle down the runway or to the nunatak or to wherever his running feet lead him. I wave a distracted hand in farewell as he exits the eastern door.

I am making pastry shells for mince pies and I crumble butter onto flour and start rubbing and rolling the mixture. 'Shit. I don't know what I'm going to cook you lot for Christmas dessert.' I look plaintively at John who is standing at the bench.

‘Oh I’ll have the Christmas pudding with lashings of custard and whiskey,’ John informs me.

‘There’s not enough time to make it.’ John looks at me in disbelief.

‘You have *days*. Don’t you have packet mix or something?’

‘Packet mix?! Do I look like a cook who uses packet mix? Don’t answer that question,’ I add quickly. ‘I *never* use packet mix. And certainly not for Christmas.’ I judiciously pound more butter and sugar into the flour. Every so often John dips his hand into the pastry mix to have a nibble.

‘Hell. Don’t ask me. Damn, this pastry is good stuff. When is the first batch coming out of the oven?’

‘Soon, soon.’ I’m distracted and I wipe my hands down my front, smearing the apron with pastry bits. I rub my eyes and scowl at John in concentration.

‘You need a beer.’

‘I need a Bex and a good lie down but you help yourself, I’m going out to ask Shane if he’s got any ideas.’

John and Shane would be doing fuel runs but the weather at Novo is not good for flying so John is cooling his heels with me. Shane is outside, draped over a skidoo, sunbaking. John and I drag some chairs outside and plonk them in the wind scoop by the back door, along with our sound system – two speakers and a portable CD player. Our sophisticated piece of hi-fi has been on the blink and John tinkers with it. He gives it a few sharp thwacks, cusses for good measure and miraculously the thing starts to whine out a few mournful ballads from Neil Young and Van Morrison. The hi-fi has the clarity of someone humming over a public-address system – it’s not brilliant but it’ll do.

‘Cerveza, Shane?’ He opens his eyes and raises his fists in a victory clench to the sky.

‘I never say no to a drink.’ The three of us relax in the warm sunshine. John is in track pants and a cotton T-shirt, I’m in fleece pants and a woollen T-shirt. We lift our faces to the sky

and take contented slurps of our beers. We are three human heliotropes on a continent where no plant life flourishes.

‘So, Alexa. How come you’re not married?’ I bask in their attention and try not to sound coy. ‘No one has asked me, boys.’ ‘I find that strange, I mean you cook, you drink beer, you fart. What more can a man want?’ John is sagely nodding his head in agreement with Shane. I feel like a pricked balloon.

‘Well, when it’s put in those terms I have a hard time figuring it out myself.’ The boys have the temerity to laugh.

The music from the speakers sounds tinny and contained in our little wind scoop but it is perfect for the setting. I have my feet up on a chair and I shield my face from the sun with my big ski goggles. I slap sunscreen onto my arms and stretch them out to be tanned for a truly Austral Christmas.

‘Next time I’m bringing my swimsuit. This weather is ridiculous for Antarctica. The brochure said nothing about sunstroke down here.’ The three of us reminisce about our weekend at Novo. John regales us with tales of flying single-engine planes around the North of Canada with his dog as his mascot. A true raconteur, he continues on with yarns about near-miss landings in Ecuador and clashes with military types – it sounds all very García Márquez. Every so often he tips his head back and roars with laughter at his own witticisms. His merriment is infectious and Shane and I cackle along with him.

I duck inside and emerge with my camera to snap pictures of Shane on the skidoo. He’s lounging on it with the posture of lying on a couch in his living room. His feet are propped on the steering bars and he’s stretched out fully on the long seat. One arm cradles his head while the other grips his beer. It’s a weirdly domestic scene. To the south, the Fenristunga is wreathed in storm clouds and to the north is a bank of low-lying fog. We are suspended in a bright, shining stream of molten light.

Geoff pants into view. For a moment I feel guilty lolling around with my beer, then I think, stuff it, it's the holiday season and my contract does say I have a mandatory day off per week. I calculate I have averaged about two days off a month so I stamp out this ridiculous feeling of guilt. Geoff chugs up to us and plops himself into a seat. He is all pink and sweaty from his jog. He stretches his neck and gasps into the air. I stand up and take a snap of Geoff in his running gear. No one will believe me back home unless I produce photographic evidence of this Antarctic phenomenon known as Geoff Somers.

Christmas Day itself is overcast. I wake up and lie still for some moments. There is no sun beating on the northern side of the tent. I bury deeper in my bag and take a whiff of its musty interior. It doesn't smell too bad. I air my sleeping sheet and sleeping bag once a week and nothing cleans them out more effectively than a day flapping in the katabatics. Last night I opened a Christmas parcel my mother gave me before I left Australia. I now have a supply of salted Dutch licorice and another book to read. I stick my hand in the bag of licorice and munch on some of it. I chew thoughtfully and wonder about what I should wear on this festive occasion. Today is cause for a bit of an effort. After having a half-hearted rummage through my clothes, I decide on a bright red woollen jumper my aunt knitted for me a few years ago, teamed with my only other pair of Gore-Tex trousers. They are black and haven't been worn until today so I feel suitably festive and clean. I crawl out of the tent and meander over to the weather haven.

Nothing has really been planned for the day, except the menu. I had finally come up with an inspired choice for dessert: cassata. It sits in the ice cave in a springform tin. I am chuffed at my idea of eating ice cream in Antarctica. It seems the most obvious choice. The day has a certain subversive quality to it. Someone suggests a champagne breakfast and

soon we're all sitting around guzzling Russian champagne and munching on mince pies and toast. Geoff declines the champagne and makes coffee instead. I ask if I can call Australia.

'Sure,' says Mike. 'But you'll get no privacy because we're all going to listen in.'

'I want to see tears. Give Mum my love, tell her you're not bad for a cook.' John settles into his chair and smiles cherubically at me. Phoning from a tent in Antarctica is bizarre enough for me to suddenly have an enormous attack of homesickness and blubber helplessly down the line. I certainly hope I won't – I will also be paying for the call and it's an unreal US\$20.00 a minute. Spending half a week's wages on blubbing is hardly worth the money.

The call is answered on the first ring. The line hisses and crackles in a gratifying manner.

'Mum! Hello, Merry Christmas!'

'Alexa, darling heart. Can you hear me?'

'Yes, can you hear me?'

'No, hang on a minute and I'll pick up the other extension.'

I don't believe it, I'm being put on hold.

'Is this better?' The line sizzles and spits like a barbecued chop. 'What's the weather like there?'

'Actually it's overcast.'

'Well of course it is, you're in Antarctica.'

'Yes, but sometimes it's not all that cold, I mean...' Now is not the time to give detailed climatic reports. 'Anyway, never mind the weather. What's happening in Oz?'

'Oh the usual. We're about to have Christmas dinner and your father's opening up about the third case of wine. Do you want to have a word? Hang on.' Again there is a pause while Dad picks up the other phone.

'Hello Miss! Merry Christmas. How's the weather?'

'Icy. Listen, can I talk to Sam?' Sam is my three-year-old nephew.

‘Sure but one of your sisters wants to say something.’

The phone call takes forever. Once I talk to one sibling I want to talk to all of them. My aunt and uncle are also there so they have a moment to chat as well. I hang up and feel a little bereft. It’s impossible to say anything of interest. If I did I’d never get off the phone. I pick up my glass of champagne and take a gulp. The bubbles fizz happily in my nostrils and I think about how much money was spent saying nothing much at all. To hell with it, it’s Christmas after all.

Someone suggests we take a morning constitutional on the skidoos to the seal. We tie a sledge to one of the skidoos and people climb aboard, draping themselves elegantly over the wooden frame. We sputter westward. It’s a bit of an anticlimax when we arrive. We prod the creature, someone takes a few photos as we stand around discussing the finer points of its rotting fur while Mike wanders off for a territorial piss. The cold is making my fillings ache. The novelty of our Christmas jaunt is wearing off. We all want to be back in the tent exchanging gifts and enjoying the Christmas food and drink.

The gift-exchanging is an absolute treat. All the presents are placed in a sack. Names are drawn out of a hat and once the line-up is established, the person who is first takes a present from the sack and opens it. The second person does the same but if they prefer the gift the first person opened, they swap. This sets the scene for much merriment and bargaining. All our presents are playful offerings. Some are the far side of tasteless, others are practical and still others are whimsical and poignant. My offering is a present a friend gave me before I left Sydney. It’s a pair of body gloves for the shower and an eye mask with tastefully embroidered eyelashes on it. They’re a shocking pink colour and add to the jollity of the occasion. Mike opens my gift and they’re immediately passed around for everyone to try on.

John’s contribution is a beer can holder. It’s moulded into the shape of a gorgeous woman. She’s wearing not much at

all and her breasts are popping out of her tight-fitting shirt. Lisa and I smirk at her eye-popping attributes while the boys grasp her caressingly around her middle. It's a truly hideous piece of tat but the boys love her, with perhaps the exception of Geoff who looks a bit pained. Lisa and I have no intentions of bidding for her. I have my eye on a roll of slide film, Mike's contribution, but then Geoff opens up Shane's present. He has put a lot of thought into his gift and I realise it's the one I want. He has designed a certificate stating that the person who receives it will be the official maintenance engineer for the Twin Otter. The certificate also includes a befitting First Air cap. I have to have it.

Stuart has written a Christmas poem about the residents of Blue 1. He reads it out aloud and we all howl with derision in the parts where he mentions our personal idiosyncrasies. We pin it above the loo in the Orange Palace. It's probably still there, fixed to the plywood wall and packed away in a crate.

The present-swapping takes up most of the morning. It's Geoff who comes up with the most innovative gifts. They include a miniature garden, complete with soil and seedlings and a teeny tiny rake. A game of Russian roulette is another of his presents. It has chocolates instead of bullets and the idea is to spin the wheel and eat the chocolate that turns up in front of you. One of the chocolates conceals a fiery hot chilli pepper. We play it later in the day and it's me that chomps into it. My mouth is on fire for the next two days.

We're all grouped around the table, presents spread everywhere and most of us nicely soused with booze. We tack bits of Cellotape to our foreheads and play a round of Celebrity Head. We're all wearing paper crowns from crackers we found in the ice cave and we resemble a bunch of halfwits. Mike swings back in his chair and takes a slug of champagne. 'Time for some exercise.'

'What kind?' John moves his wrist from the table to his mouth. 'Beer drinking exercise?'

'I was thinking something a little more energetic – how about we pile onto the skidoos and head round the back of the eastern nunataks for a bit of a ski? Who's up for it?' We ponder the thought of leaving the snug tent and setting out for a long drive on the skidoos to the proposed ski field. It will be a good hour's ride. We're all a little snoozy and dopey and it takes a while for enthusiasm to build.

'I don't have any skis,' I reason.

'You can strap on the ones from the emergency gear. They should fit.'

'But I don't have any ski boots for the bindings,' I snivel.

'You don't need any, they are a special binding for any kind of boot.' I am not coming up with any decent excuses so I decide to tag along. The only skiing I've been doing at Blue 1 is a sporadic slide down the runway and back. I think what Mike is proposing is a little more strenuous but I dutifully go out to the emergency gear and ferret around for the skis in question. We pile onto the skidoo again, lash a sledge to it and head off, this time towards the east. Geoff stays behind to babysit the stove. It has started to rumble again and it's not worth all of us going on a little jolly to return to the burning cinders of the dining tent.

I sit on the sledge and hang on to the rope that has been used to tie down our skis. Lisa is driving and Mike is sitting behind her. Sitting on the sledge with me are John, Shane and Stuart. We don't talk much because the noise of the skidoo and the biting wind make for an uncomfortable ride.

The sledge is big enough for all of us to sit with our legs stretched out but I am huddled into a tight ball, my arms gripping my knees and my head buried between my knees and my chest. The wind is like a laser beam. It slices through us without pity. I surreptitiously flex my fingers inside my double gloves. They are numb and stiff. My feet so far are relatively warm. Lisa jolts over some sastrugi and I nearly go flying. I change my posture and stretch out my legs and grip

the rope to give me greater balance at the expense of keeping warm. I turn my face away from the wind and watch Blue 1 appear and disappear as we rise and sink with the landscape. We clatter across the runway and Lisa points the skidoo south-east. We're heading to the south of The Wall. We're going to drive by two more nunataks and then head up behind a third where we think there is a decent snow slope for a ski. We clack across the ice, a moving palette of colour on a canvas of blue and white.

After much stopping and looking at the terrain behind the nunataks, we decide to strap on our skis at the southeastern end of one of them. Stretched out to the north is a huge field, I would guess about 30 square kilometres of ice, snow, crevasses and massive wind scoops that surround the nunataks. Lisa parks the skidoo a little to the left of one such scoop and we can see snow petrels flying in and out of it, soaring across the rock face and occasionally stopping at one of their nests. I scramble off the sledge and hurry to strap on my skis. I need to do something active smartly otherwise I fear I'll turn into an icicle. My hands are frozen and I have lost all feeling in my toes. My cold extremities make it difficult to strap on the skis and I curse and whinge as the bindings keep falling away in my gloved hands.

'Jesus H. Christ. Whose idiotic idea was this anyway? I can't get this blasted strap to go into the hole.' '... said the actress to the bishop,' adds Shane. He is following the skiers on the skidoo and he is watching me with a big grin on his face.

'Right. Here goes.' I think I have things sorted and I stand up to adjust my ski goggles and secure the ski stock straps around my wrists.

'Where's the frigging snow?!' I realise our snow field is far more ice than snow. The only decent patches are up close to the wind scoop and the drop is at least 400 metres to the base of the nunatak. I have no intention of skiing that close to the edge. Merely thinking about it makes my heart thump strongly with fear.

‘Oh geez. There’s nothing for it I suppose. Wish me luck.’ I turn and give a cheery wave to Shane and push off. The wind sings in my ears and brings the blood rushing to my frozen cheeks. My eyes leak like a faucet even with the protection of my ski goggles. For the first 300 metres or so I manage to find lovely crisp snow. Ahead of me Lisa is doing tight, taut telemark turns on her cross-country skis. Mike is skating on his skis and John is using similar skis to the ones I’ve got; his style is a little more workmanlike. Both of us are wearing our normal boots and they feel clunky and heavy in the ski bindings. I can hear Shane behind me rattling along on the skidoo. I turn and wave to him and immediately lose my balance and land flat on my backside. I struggle upright.

Lisa is off to the left of me, right on the lip of the wind scoop. I marvel at her confidence as she leans casually on her stocks and looks into the void. I want to take a look as well but I take my skis off before edging to the extremity of the scoop. It’s almost subterranean and at the bottom the drop curves to the ground, giving me the peculiar impression of standing atop a frozen tidal wave. It’s an eerie sensation.

I look further north. Everyone else has skied on and I’m the last to get moving. I lope back to my skis and sit on the snow to strap them back on. I really don’t feel like skiing. I want to explore this landscape slowly, not rattle along feeling unbalanced on these stupid skis. It gets worse because there’s not much snow between me and the nearest nunatak which is a good mile away. I step gingerly onto the ice and immediately begin to pick up momentum. There is nowhere to grip and my skis have no edges to speak of. I am careening out of control. I flap my arms uselessly, as if the very air might give me something to grip on to, then crash heavily on my side and slide for a bit on the ice. I lie for a moment on the dimpled ice and look up at the clouds. I hear the skidoo’s engine

putt-putting back my way and Shane's head slides into view, blocking out the feeble sun.

'Are you OK?'

'Couldn't be better,' I say, continuing to lie flat on my back. 'Could you give me a hand?' Shane hauls me to my feet and looks me over.

'You lot are mad.'

I look further down the ice field to the now pinprick figures of Lisa, Mike and John. I sit back on the ice and fumble with the ski bindings that are bordering on dangerous. It seems every time I get any rhythm happening, the bindings loosen around my boots and suddenly I'm sliding out of control with a bodgie ski only just strapped to my foot. I stand up again and this time push off carefully, navigating to the thin strips of snow that sporadically dot this vast field. I eventually make it to the others who are waiting for me behind The Wall. I have fallen a number of times and by the time I reach John I'm tired and irritable. Observing the set expression on my face, John wisely declines to comment on my style.

I make the decision to toss my skis onto the sledge and sit behind Shane on the skidoo. I snuggle into his back and suddenly the most appalling wave of homesickness hits me. Maybe it's because I'm cradled by Shane's comforting back, maybe my bruises hurt more than I care to admit, maybe it's because I have to go back to the tent and single-handedly make Christmas dinner for the boys and Lisa, maybe it's a reaction to our excursion out here in the inhuman beauty of Dronning Maud Land. Whatever it is, I'm floored with sadness and nostalgia for a hot Aussie celebration with my family. I start to cry and I bury my face into Shane's back and try to contain my muffled sobs. Thankfully, Shane is busy negotiating the skidoo up a steep incline on the western face of The Wall so I'm hoping he thinks my shaking is the vibration of the machine. He comes to a stop and by then I have my emotions sufficiently in check.

We arrive back at Blue 1 and I jump off the sledge while it's still sliding to a stop. It's after seven in the evening and I haven't begun to prepare Lisa's soufflé. Geoff, bless him, has been spending the afternoon making mayonnaise. I'd tried earlier in the week and the results had tasted like fresh vomit. He offers me a taste and it's a vast improvement on my efforts. Sometimes I'm a little appalled at Geoff's deft touch in the kitchen. He shows me up in the most rudimentary skills that any cook should possess. He bakes bread and makes egg-based sauces better than I can. I start separating my eggs and begin whipping the whites like a whirling dervish. The ham has been roasting for a while and it's even possible to inhale a whiff of roasting meat basting in a mixture of sherry and brown sugar. It's heaven.

Christmas ends quietly. I swallow mouthfuls of cassata and take small sips of my whiskey. A Christmas nightcap before bedtime.



Irise early on New Year's Eve. Only Geoff and Mike are up and the three of us sit around the table in companionable silence. Mike is intending to fly to the barrier with Shane and John. He wants to take a look at where the supply ships dock for Maitri and Novolazarevskaya. This is also where the fuel for the planes at Blue 1 is unloaded. I resist the urge to ask to come along. I have more than enough to keep me busy. January is the busiest month for us. In two days' time, some of the Norwegians from Troll will be flown back here to wait for the arrival of the Ilyushin. Four of the Alain Hubert expeditioners, including Ewan, will also be returning to Blue 1: Ralf, Jorge and Daniel will fly back to Cape Town on the Ilyushin and Ewan needs to contact his company in the States to inform them that he won't be returning home for another month. He also needs to collect some equipment that he left at Blue 1. Ewan will be flown back to Holtanna after the inspection teams leave.

The Ilyushin is expected around 13 January. While we wait for the plane, our population will be approximately twenty-five people and when the plane arrives, the camp will swell to about seventy people. The majority will be members of Antarctic inspection teams. They will be touring the surrounding bases to monitor environmental programs on the bases. If the weather holds they will be here for only forty-eight hours before flying back to South Africa.

But today Blue 1 is quiet and still. It's an empyrean sky with no cloud cover to speak of. I am leaning back on my chair with my arms behind my head, idly listening to Mike tell Geoff

where the boys will be flying. Geoff is nodding distractedly, his attention is elsewhere. He has an eyeglass balanced on his chest and he's peering through it as he does his cross-stitch. It's another incongruous sight that I am becoming used to with Geoff. He holds the material at arm's-length and inserts his needle with calm precision. The pattern is of his own design and his skill is impressive. Antarctica gives us time; for cross-stitch, for novel-reading, for navel-gazing, for reflection. It's a matchless luxury. I am toiling through *War and Peace*. I am reading it with relish and satisfaction. Tolstoy is so dense and encompassing that Antarctica's blankness is the perfect place to immerse myself in such Russian intrigue. I also have a great affinity for all things Russian at the moment so now is the obvious time to drown myself in Tolstoy and his perspective on Russian society. I've pinned a rough character tree on my tent wall to help me through the maze of names and places.

The book sits stolidly in front of me, abandoned for the moment while I cock half an ear to Mike's conversation.

'Do you want to come on this trip?' Mike asks me.

'You bet,' I breathe. All good intentions of sequestering myself away in the kitchen are given the kybosh. The chance to fly around Antarctica takes precedence above all else. Lisa steps into the tent, still rubbing sleep out of her eyes. She plods towards the kitchen and grumbles about the lack of Special K. Already our supplies from the December flight are dwindling and I am now in the process of creating another list of food for January. Tonic tops the list. The gin that came in December has been languishing in a box at the entrance of the tent.

'Morning, Lisa. How did you sleep?' Lisa grunts at Geoff and plops herself down with a mug of tea and her cereal.

'Have you seen Shane or John?' Mike asks Lisa.

'Nup.' Lisa is not in a talking frame of mind.

'Can someone scare me up a couple of pilots?' Mike asks no one in particular.

‘Probably had a late night,’ I say helpfully. At this point John stumbles into the tent wiping sleep out of his eyes.

‘Ah hah. Here we go. Are you two right to fly to the barrier today or is this going to be a little beyond our capabilities?’ John looks witheringly at Mike. Both of them know John likes nothing better than flying his plane. If he’s not flying he starts to pace around the camp like a caged dog and becomes almost unbearable with his impatience. There have been days where the weather at Novo has been too bad to do fuel runs and the weather at Blue 1 has been tropical. These particular days are enough to drive him rabid with frustration.

Shane steps into the tent carrying his toothbrush and other cleaning accoutrements. He walks through the tent, wishing everyone a good morning and then disappears back outside via the other entrance. We follow his trail quizzically and then shrug our shoulders. Occasionally we notice other people’s behaviour and consider it bizarre, forgetting that none of us is in any sense normal.

‘If you guys can be ready in an hour –? I don’t want to get back too late. It’s New Year’s Eve after all and there is some celebrating to do.’ Mike stands and puts on his hat and sunglasses in preparation for a wazz on the ice.

‘Yeah and John’s promised to make pizza so I have to be back to make the dough,’ I state.

‘Are you going as well?’ Lisa looks up from her Special K with a frown. This is a delicate matter. Jollies in the Twin Otter are naturally coveted affairs and we each subconsciously tally up the number we do or don’t get. Mike allots us our trips and his job is probably made easier because we are not a big camp and there are many trips to Novo that we’ve all gone on. But this trip is a little different. We’ll be flying out to the barrier and possibly on to the open ocean. This flight is a scouting excursion and in a sense I’ve already been on one when we flew out to pick up Severin. Still, today it was the luck of the draw; I happened to be the first one out of

the sleeping bag so I got the trip. I have no intention of being generous and offering the trip to Lisa. If anyone should be going with the boys it probably should be Stuart but he sleeps and sleeps. Some days we rarely see him before lunch. I am quietly jubilant at my good fortune and scuttle out of the tent before I hear more grumblings.

We take off and head north-west. The route John takes flies directly over the oasis where Novo and Maitri lie. We can make out the buildings of both bases and some tiny figures standing around in the bright sunshine. I wonder if Kanwal is down there somewhere enjoying her solitary walks around the lake. It's difficult to raise Maitri on the radio so we have had no contact with her since we met.

I look out of the small window and gaze at the landscape. I am desperate to see at least some form of animal life. John drops in altitude and ahead I can see what looks like four huge slugs lying on the snow. We are inland from open water but the slugs are Weddell seals. They have dug a channel through the ice and four of them lie next to it, sunbaking in the sunshine. I squeal with delight but no one can hear me over the engines. Also below us are vehicles, abandoned ice huts and big round containers that look like they hold chemicals of some description. There are countless vehicle tracks in the snow. This must be where the supply ships dock for Novolazarevskaya and Maitri. I want John to land the plane close to the seals. He must have seen them as well because he skids the plane to a stop near the ice drop where the seals lie. We scramble out, happy as kids let loose on a school excursion. Shane and I make a mad dash towards the seals. Mike calls out to us to watch ourselves at the edge of the ice cliff. I can see what he means. As we jog closer to the drop, large cracks appear in the snow. We slow our pace down to a walk and begin to stamp heavily on snow beyond the cracks. When it doesn't give we continue to walk further, stopping every so often

to jump up and down to test the snow. We are able to walk up to the drop and see the seals at close quarters.

One of them lies with its snout immersed in the water of the channel. It reminds me of someone with a raging hangover who needs a constant supply of water to slake their thirst. The others lie on their backs and lazily wave a flipper in the air every once in a while. It's a delightful sight, redolent of a lazy Sunday afternoon after a big lunch. The seals even let off contented belches in the manner of having eaten too much roast lamb. They pay little attention to the interlopers although one of the seals raises its head to look at us through a jaundiced eye. We shout hello and wish it a happy New Year. In response the seal waves a distracted flipper in our direction and rolls over to fall back asleep, not before farting loudly and sighing dramatically. Delighted, we stay and watch these beautiful, slothful beasts.

Out here on the barrier it's warm – warmer than Blue 1 – and all of us start to shed our big jackets. We tie them around our waists and lope around the ice shelf wanting to explore as much of this space as we can. We're standing on far more unstable ice but we sense no immediate danger. It's the height of summer and although this area could be prone to ocean movement, it seems relatively safe to wander around, peering over ice cliffs and trying to glimpse the ocean or a penguin colony or two. It's a magical day, this last day of the year. I think about the past months and I still find it faintly ludicrous that I'm standing in Antarctica on an ice shelf, as if strolling around this impenetrable continent is something I do all the time, like going to the beach. Is this the lure for adventurers? The quest to feel at home in places that are shrouded in legend and mystery? Or is it a sense of exclusivity? I can't help but feel happily smug that few people will see what I have seen. Antarctica makes me selfish. The Antarctic Treaty may state that the land belongs to no one, but for me

it seems only human to look around and lay an infinitesimal claim of possession.

It's the middle of the day and we're under the wing of the Twin Otter taking shelter from the fierce sun. I sit on one of the fixed skis and shade my eyes from the white glare and rub sunscreen liberally onto my arms.

'Who brought their swimmers?' I ask as I lay out some snacks for us. I have an assortment of biscuits, chocolate and Tang. I nibble on a square of chocolate.

'Not me. Where's lunch?' John is looking into the interior of the plane as if miraculously a team of liveried waiters are going to step down and set up tables and chairs, lay out the family candelabras, silver cutlery and linen napkins and begin pouring vintage Bollinger. Considering our surreal surroundings, it's not difficult to imagine such a scene.

'Lunch is here, my little lamb chop.' I gesture at the modest spread.

'That's it?' A note, or rather a trumpeting, of petulance is apparent in his tone. I sigh to myself. I have days when I wish I was something other than the cook. Something other than the harried, snarling beast I can sometimes become when I'm preparing meals. And this day in particular I have no wish to be called on to perform domestic chores. This is a day off and I don't want to be running around after the boys, fretting about their stomachs. I look to Shane and Mike, who are eating biscuits, for a little support but the two of them are equally fretful that there won't be much more to follow after we've wolfed down my simple repast.

'Aren't you the cook?' Mike asks me. They are having a dig at me but today I seem to be particularly sensitive to hidden messages, whether they mean them or not. I want to snap back that I'm something more than a cook but I know that this kind of discussion is going to get me nowhere.

'If any of you would care to read my contract it entitles me to a day off *a week*. I think I might have to report the three

of you for workplace discrimination.’ Everyone guffaws at this. No one in their right mind signs up for a job at Blue 1 and believes that the contract will be followed to the letter – conditions are so unpredictable.

We sprawl out under the wing and chomp on our food. Shane opens the nose of the plane and has a tinker with something inside. I pick up my camera and wander round to face the plane head-on. I call it Snoopy because when I look down its snout it bears a remarkable resemblance to the cartoon character. I have become enormously sentimental about this plane. It’s practically the first thing I see in the morning and the last before I retire for the night. I’ve sat in the cockpit, I’ve been squashed in the back with fuel drums, I’ve hung out its windows as we’ve flown over the continent, I’ve heaved barrels out of it, used it as a fast food courier for the Russians, it has been our taxi for social excursions, I’ve had countless conversations with it when I’ve been flight following from Blue 1... and we could be losing our Snoopy sooner than expected. Lisa’s husband Maxo will be flying to Blue 1 in a few days’ time in a DC-3 to take over Snoopy’s job.

The DC-3, a recent purchase for Ends of the Earth, had been leased by the National Science Foundation for the beginning of the summer season. The DC-3 had been based at McMurdo. The contract has finished and the plane is now expected here any day. We don’t need two planes and it’s cheaper for Ends of the Earth to use their own plane. I find this distressing to think about. This inclination I have to become maudlin over people coming and going is wearing. I wish I had a little more backbone to accept that Antarctica is never about permanence but just like with Charlie and Blair, the thought of losing Shane and John *and* the plane is intolerable.

‘I think we should at least fly out to the ocean and take a look.’ John and Mike are in a huddle, discussing the route

home. I amble back to the side door and screw the lens cap back onto my camera, surreptitiously crossing my fingers, willing Mike to agree with John's flight plan. We all know that a detour over the open ocean is nothing more than a sightseeing trip but we're so close it seems completely unacceptable not to at least catch a glimpse of it.

'It'll hardly eat into the fuel, the ocean's just there.' John points north in a dismissive gesture as if we could hear waves crashing onto a beach. I busy myself with tidying up our food scraps and putting them back in the plane.

'Yeah, why not,' Mike agrees. I whoop with relief. I've never been happier to have been the first person out of bed.

Once again we pile into the plane and ready ourselves for take-off. I sit with my head pressed up against the Plexiglass, looking down. Mike and I can make out colonies of penguins and they seem to be flinging themselves on their stomachs and sliding over the ice. Are they attempting to get away from the sound of the plane or are they oblivious to our presence and simply revelling in their freedom out here in this vast nothingness? It's hard to tell, we are that little bit too high. Weddell seals look like groups of giant leeches sucking the juices out of the icebergs that jut out of the frozen sea. Everywhere I look there are penguins and seals dotting the ground in dark smudges and I know we must be almost over the ocean.

And then there it is. The line of white ice ends abruptly and suddenly the ocean, a dull grey, stretches out to the horizon. Tabular icebergs sit imperturbably in the water. The light is subdued and it gives the ocean a sombre, menacing aspect. There are no waves to upset the surface of the sea but I can make out troughs in the water as it bumps up against the icebergs. I look and look. And then I look away, only to look back again. I want to imprint this image on my mind forever and I'm terrified I'll forget all the nuances of this unearthly scene. I put my camera down and cup my chin in my hands and continue to stare from my little window. The plane flits

across the ocean's surface like a skimming stone and the sea unfurls below me until John turns the plane southward to refuel at Novolazarevskaya before we fly back home.

At the runway we are greeted by Vadim, Mikhail, Vassily and Oleg. We crowd around and shake hands and backslap one another. Mikhail is wearing a pair of welding goggles as eye protection and he grins delightedly at us. They lead us back to the green hut by the runway. They have dug a pit in the snow and are feeding a fire from chunks of wood they have liberated from the hut. A camp fire in Antarctica.

We sit around on rough planks of wood drinking billy tea. Vadim is our translator and we direct our curious questions about everyone through him. Vadim is the famous breadmaker at Novo and he is one of the younger members of the base. He has a bearded face and a wide happy smile. He carelessly throws broken planks of wood onto the fire and slops tea into our mugs.

'Mikhail is a champion tractor driver in Siberia – three times running,' Vadim explains. Mikhail nods his goggled face in calm acceptance of our applause.

'Is this your first trip to Novolazarevskaya?' Mike asks him. Vadim translates and Mikhail holds up three fingers.

'Do you like it here?'

'He loves it. It's a great place to escape from his wife,' Vadim informs us. Mikhail nods sagely as if Antarctica is his favourite fishing spot. We look at him incredulously. It seems an extreme form of evasion. Mikhail grins happily and raises his mug in silent salute. To his absent wife perhaps, or to Antarctica, who's to say?

We leave after loading the plane with fuel and stomping down sastrugi that rise in irregular patterns across the runway. I am crammed up the front of the hold and Mike sits at the back, humming tunelessly to himself. The year 2000 is over.

DESSERT



Ewan, Jorge, Daniel and Ralf return from the Holtanna expedition early on 2 January. It's around three in the morning and I am deep in slumber. I don't hear the engine of the Twin Otter when it comes in to land with the returning expeditioners. A surprise sits in the kitchen when I rise. On one of the benches is a huge hunk of gruyère cheese and slabs and slabs of Belgian chocolate. I gape at the food, momentarily confused. Where on earth have such riches come from? Then I remember that four of the Holtanna mob arrived last night. I lift the cheese to my nose and inhale its rich scent. I don't understand how they can spare such amazing food but I am touched that they have thought of us and sent us a gift for the New Year.

The door is yanked open and Ewan steps into the tent. Seeing Ewan is unexpectedly uplifting. Since he'd gone to join Alain and the team, we'd often had radio scheds and it is lovely to see his happy face again. We greet each other with a spontaneous hug and eagerly talk about the experiences we've had since we last saw each other. I am bursting with stories about the Russians and my first Christmas on the ice. Ewan laughs with disbelief at my extravagant tales and stands with his arms folded across his chest, leaning his weight on one foot. He is dressed in jeans and although I am now quite used to the eccentricities of fashion here, I am still taken aback at Ewan's attire. Suddenly I can see him as he must look like in San Francisco. He has lost weight and his jeans hang loosely around his hips.

Later I tramp out to John's tent. He has poked his head out and is leaning on his elbows in his sleeping bag, yawning hugely.

'How was the flight?' I yell as I walk closer.

'Spectacular but boy am I zonked.' He wipes a hand over his sleep-encrusted eyes. I plonk myself on the snow and sit cross-legged beside him. Blue 1 looks different to a few weeks ago. Lisa and the boys have been erecting small weather havens for the arriving inspection teams. There are four new tents standing around the camp. One has been erected behind the dining tent and is now used as the radio room and food storage. The other three are lined up in front of me and John. They are all equipped with plywood floors, bunk beds and mattresses. I daren't go in and look too closely. The thought of a tent with a real bed and plenty of headroom so close to my humble dwelling is too much for me.

The inspection teams are an assorted bunch of scientists from countries with bases in Antarctica. Ends of the Earth is hoping to make an impression on them for future business so we're pulling out all the stops. Geoff remains unimpressed with the level of service we're attempting to provide. He mutters darkly about this being Antarctica and not a 'bloody seaside resort'. I see his point but the scientists are not here to have an Antarctic experience. They have a job to do and I'm sure they would all rather be staying in five-star luxury on a base instead of our frontier camp. The only reason they are to stay here is because we have the airport and temporary accommodation must be provided in case the weather sets in and they can't be flown on to the bases that they will be inspecting.

There is a sense that Blue 1 is changing irrevocably. We have a precious twenty-four hours before the Twin Otter begins flights to Troll to pick up around twenty Norwegians who will wait here for the Ilyushin to fly them back to Cape Town. A feeling of business and purpose once again settles

over Blue 1 like a fine fog. It's faintly depressing and it makes me irascible. January is the last full month down here. It's too early to think about our departure but I am conscious that my other life will be resumed in a handful of weeks. I push this thought away; fortunately there is too much to do right now to become mawkish about returning to Australia.

The DC-3, Ends of the Earth's replacement for the Twin Otter, has also arrived and Lisa is ecstatic to be reunited with Maxo. They retire to their tent and we don't see them for a day. David is Maxo's copilot. He is a dour American and I think he is in shock at the lack of amenities at Blue 1 after the comforts and luxury of the US base at McMurdo. I see him standing outside looking bemused. He glances to the left and right as if hoping more substantial living quarters will emerge from the mist. He looks around sixty years of age and I feel momentarily sorry for him as he shuffles from his tent to the cook tent. He hasn't said much and keeps to himself.

The Norwegians have arrived and the sudden influx of people has not been as traumatic as I'd anticipated. Ralf, Jorge, Daniel and Ewan distract me. Jorge and I chatter happily to each other in Dutch while he rummages around the kitchen for fresh milk. I furtively pour him a bowl from our fast disappearing supply. I know I'm acting with extreme favouritism but the four from Holtanna are special people. Ralf is still wearing the outfit he had on when he stepped off the Ilyushin. He has a perpetual grin on his face. Daniel is the quietest of the four but he has impeccable French manners and is effusive in his praise for my sticky toffee pudding. He and Ralf generally wash and dry the dishes and they chat happily to me in English and make joking asides about the Norwegians in French.

It's a complicated community here. People arrange themselves according to personalities and experiences. We consider the Holtanna team part of the family and invite them to join us in gossipy discussions in the radio tent. We cram in there

when the cook tent becomes too crowded and we need to rant and rave in some neutral territory.

Ralf mistrusts the Norwegians. To him they represent a bureaucratic Antarctica and he grimaces as he watches them sitting around playing cards. There is a real difference between the Holtanna expeditioners and the Norwegians. It's obvious even from the clothes they wear. My four wander around engaging in camp life with a sense of humour and camaraderie whereas the Norwegians stick to their own like a colony of emperor penguins. They also choose not to involve themselves in camp life. I don't think they do this deliberately. I think maybe they feel they're entitled to be looked after. Unfortunately their attitude alienates them from 'the workers'. I spend a lot of time in the kitchen doing a lot of food preparation for the coming days. Gone are the days of meandering out to a nunatak on an endless afternoon. As is my wont, the kitchen becomes cluttered with all my dishes and occasionally my swear words. I attempt to keep my clatterings to a reasonable level but it occurs to me that not once do any of my Norwegian friends offer to dry or wash the odd dish or even pour me a cup of tea. I know I occasionally look like a demented crone but I can't be that scary.

The Norwegians seem jaded somehow, as if Antarctica is simply another laboratory to work in; and a highly inconvenient location at that. They sporadically slide up to the tea and coffee table and ask inane questions about what's cooking.

Ralf placates my frustration with mugs of coffee laced with generous slugs of Irish whiskey. How can I not help but have allegiances to some people and not to others?

Ewan is our only birthday boy while we're on the ice and it's the perfect excuse for a celebration before the Ilyushin arrives. The day of his birthday is overcast and cold. I have acclimatised to the new rhythm of Blue 1 – I think. I still

wince when the dining tent fills with people but I find I rise earlier to join Geoff for some quiet time before the working day begins.

Ewan steps into the tent and people gather around to wish him many happy returns. For some reason that I don't quite understand I wish him a happy birthday using Mike's tall back as a buffer between us. I feel strangely shy and don't think I should hug him.

The day is busy but enjoyable. People gather in the dining tent for card games or reading. After the midday meal, many of them retire to their tents to catch up on some sleep. I set about making two big Mississippi mud cakes as the birthday cake. Shane comes in the back door after doing some minor repairs on the plane and asks me, 'What are you building?' In reply I hand him the wooden spoon and the bowl to lick.

We hardly see Ewan all day. He is rewriting code for the weather station and mulling over how best to tell his boss that he won't be returning to the office for another month. He steps into the eastern end of the tent and makes his way distractedly down to the kitchen end before disappearing out the back to the radio tent. We all offer him encouragement as he goes. He smiles absently at us.

The cakes come out of the oven, looking rich, dark and delicious. I turn them onto racks to cool and melt a few slabs of the dark Belgian chocolate with fresh cream for icing. It's warm in the dining tent. Under my apron I'm down to my T-shirt – with so many people in here it's impossible to be cold. I pause for a coffee and slouch against one of the benches. John is fashioning a piping bag so I can write a birthday greeting in icing on the cake. Jan-Erling stands next to the stove mixing himself his Earl Grey tea and quizzes me on my marital status. I tell him I'm single and he starts making elaborate plans for me to travel to Spitsbergen to meet his sons. Not likely, buddy boy, I think to myself, but then again... I've never seen myself in

the role of a prized heifer but I have made such a hatchet job of my love life to date that maybe the director of the Norwegian Polar Institute can do a better job.



‘... Happy Birthday to you!’ A group of us gather around the stove singing loudly to Ewan who stands smiling in our midst. We wave sparklers and sing off-key but with genuine feeling. It is a truly festive atmosphere tonight. We all know it’s our last chance for some revelry before the Ilyushin arrives. William Willis will be on this flight with Benjamin and none of us is too thrilled at the prospect of the big kahuna hovering at our elbows. The party ebbs and flows in and out of the kitchen. Several people are clustered around the stove, others sit at the tables in small groups, holding dixie cups of wine. I am seated at one of the tables with Ewan’s laptop in front of me. I am writing a piece for his website and this is one of the few chances I’ll get to complete it.

‘Hey Alexa, do we have any vodka?’ John leans over the bench and yells over the noise to me.

‘I think so, have a look outside the back door. What are you mixing?’

‘White Russians,’ John shouts as he heads outside. I shake my head and continue tapping into the computer. Opposite me, Shane is grumbling about Antarctic flying conditions. He sits with his arms folded over his chest like a wise Buddha. Behind me Ralf is deep in conversation with a Norwegian journalist who has accompanied the Polar Institute on this trip. She is telling him about a bird colony about 160 kilometres west from here. Ralf is listening intently to her and refuses to meet my eye as I turn to look at him.

‘Here. Try this.’ John puts a cup in front of me.

‘Is this one of your White Russians?’ I ask as I take a sip.

'Yup. What do you think?'

'Mmmm. That's yummy. I'll be telling William Willis what a talented boy you are.'

Ewan sits next to me and asks to read what I've written so far. I angle the computer screen towards him and swirl the alcohol around in my cup, watching his expression as he reads my words. I have written three articles already for his website and he has taken on the role of my editor. Jorge sits opposite me and smiles indulgently at the two of us as we peer seriously at the computer. He has a camera in his hands and he takes a few pictures of the festivities around him.

Ewan chuckles at something I've written and I immediately want to know what amuses him. He shakes his head, refusing to pander to my ego. I have sensed his regard during the course of the day but refused to acknowledge it. He had stepped into the tent earlier in the evening with a big grin crinkling his eyes.

'I've got an extra month,' he informed the crowd of people in the kitchen. Everyone cheered lustily for him and clapped him good-naturedly on the back. He accepted their thanks while looking straight at me with a cryptic expression.

Now he sits next to me and I sense nothing more than friendship. He asks that a sentence here and there be expanded and tells me he'll send it to his website via satellite tomorrow.

'And what is my fee? I don't come cheap you realise.'

'Don't you worry. Yours is coming out of the sky.'

'That's not good enough. If I am being syndicated on web sites around the globe I demand payment.'

'You'll get yours – trust me.'

'In this lifetime or the next?'

'Maybe the next, who am I to say?' Ewan smiles at me and stands up to refill his cup. I go and stand in the kitchen where John is slowly falling under the spell of his potent cocktail-mixing skills. He grins at me and waggles an empty bottle of vodka under my nose.

'Where are the rest of the supplies? I know you've stashed them somewhere, tell Uncle Johnnie or there'll be tears.'

'Or vomit,' I tell him with the tight-lipped sobriety of one who has recently suffered the effects of too much alcohol consumption. My last encounter with vodka is like a freshly perforated blister and I'm determined to keep my head about me tonight.

'Aw come on, Alexa. I'm leaving you in a week's time. Who's to say if I'll ever return to these parts again?' John is entirely shameless in his bid to keep mixing drinks for himself and his happy coterie of party animals who lounge merrily in the kitchen with him. I direct him back out to the radio tent where I've stashed a box of alcohol.

'Would you like to get it for me, darlin'?' John looks at my expression and decides maybe it's best if he found it himself. I follow him out of the tent.

'Don't be too obvious about where I've hidden the grog. At this rate there'll be none left.'

Back inside the noise level drowns out the clacking of the tent as it jerks irregularly in the wind. Occasionally the stove belches as if ready to breathe fire and the chimney rattles with a cautionary note. It's easy to forget that we're camping in the coldest desert in the world. The shudder of metal makes me a little apprehensive. I can't forget the storm we experienced at the beginning of the season and sometimes when the tent shudders in the wind I jerk suddenly with the memory of its inhuman ferocity. It's still crappy weather outside but a band of sky can be glimpsed in the south-east.

People are stretching and slowly leaving the tent in dribs and drabs. Geoff has retired long ago but it was reassuring to see him enjoying the festivities during the earlier hours. Now that the camp is busy, Geoff keeps more than ever to a rigid timetable that gives him minimal contact with the clients.

I've had my moments with Geoff when I've wished he could relax his prejudices about camp living. My gripe

with Geoff is the inordinate interest he seems to take in my washing habits. Once a fortnight – OK, sometimes once a week – I drag a tub of snow into the kitchen, melt it down in the smelter and heat it to a temperature that will dissolve laundry suds. I then chuck all my filthy clothes, from underwear to polar fleece pants, in a big plastic bucket and give them all a good soaking. Inevitably during this rather drawn-out ritual, Geoff will be in the tent and without fail he'll make an aside about this particular habit of mine. Lately his scrutiny has begun to piss me off intensely. To placate my seething fury, I drag myself away from camp and storm down the runway, gesticulating and cursing as I go.

Initially I am shocked at the strength of my anger and I try to put it into perspective. It doesn't take an Einsteinian brain to realise that Antarctica may be a dream destination but it exacts a toll in the physical and mental strain it places on people. Where else do people live in confined spaces for months at a time with no real opportunity for escape? Outer space perhaps, or in jail, but not many other places on earth. I attempt a little psychoanalysis and tell myself that my washing my clothes is for Geoff a metaphor of a way of life that he can't relate to. Not down here where men are men, and women who want to be part of this world should suffer stoically. My theory is probably complete bollocks of course but I have to tell myself something.

It's past midnight and the sun emerges from the clouds. It's sitting low in the south-west and fingers of intense light spotlight the nunataks to the east. The landscape glows with a merciless beauty and those of us left in the tent troop outside to gaze dumbstruck at the view. The Fenristunga shimmers ethereally in the distance and Ulvetanna seems to float on the ice like an unearthly mirage.

As I am preparing to leave the dining tent, Ewan hands me his MP3 player.

'What is this for?' I ask dubiously.

'I've downloaded some tunes I think you might like,' Ewan tells me. He presses a few buttons on the small machine and the screen says: *Alexa's mornings, Alexa's nights.*

'If you play *Alexa's nights* it should help you sleep, and...'

'What if I have no trouble sleeping?' I ask, butting in rudely. Ewan looks startled.

'Well, I just thought you'd like to listen to some different music to the CDs you play in the kitchen.' I feel momentarily contrite. This is a sweet gesture of Ewan's, but now Jorge has sidled up to us and stands behind Ewan raising his eyebrows in a suggestive fashion. I feel uncomfortable being singled out in this manner. Ewan chooses to ignore Jorge's expressive face.

'I'd like to thank you for arranging a really special birthday. I had a great time.' He hands me the machine and I take it from him a little reluctantly.

'Thanks. OK. Sleep well, everyone.' I include in my farewells the last party stragglers who are still crowded around Ewan's laptop looking at his images. They barely look up as I leave. Outside I kick the snow as I walk over to my tent. What's happening here?

Inside my tent I yank off my boots and lie back on my mattress. Tomorrow I'll have to move my tent. There is an uncomfortable ice scoop that has formed around and underneath the tent. The mattress dips into it and lately I've been waking up with a sore back. I've been too lazy to move it until now but as I lie staring up at the webbing I have to squirm to find a comfortable position. I press the palms of my hands into my eye sockets. I sit up, undress and quickly wriggle into the sleeping bag before reaching for the MP3 player and gingerly placing the headphones over my ears. I push 'play' and quiet, crisp notes like shiny pennies fill my head and swirl through my tired brain. The sounds assuage my troubled mind and I drift off.



Confessions in the ice cave

I wake early next morning. Early enough to steal a few precious moments of quiet contemplation before I have to be in the dining tent to prepare breakfast. When I step inside, Stuart and Geoff are hunched over their breakfast cereals, both reading books. I mumble hello and walk to the kitchen with the MP3 player clutched in my hand. The tent is a mess. One table in particular is littered with empty wine casks, depleted bottles of whiskey and empty beer cans. Ewan's laptop sits forlornly in the middle of it all. I dump the empties in the rubbish and collect the half-full bottles and spirit them away from interested eyes. When we were a small group, our habits were far more relaxed and free. Now I need to be a little more ordered and controlled about who and what comes in and out of the kitchen. My camera case rests on one of the benches and I take it to the shelves at the eastern end of the tent. A business card falls out of the top. I pick it up. On the back is a handwritten note from Ewan.

'Give me something to do, I can't keep sleeping the whole time I'm down here!' Stuart has no patients, thank God, and he needs a project. The igloo that he built before Christmas has ceased to be a fixation for him.

'Build us a couch, a lounge room or something. I'm going to need somewhere to collapse with all these people surrounding me.'

'Right on,' he says, his mind ticking over with this next challenge. Stuart is a meticulous person, with a fastidious disposition. But he has a quirkiness about him that saves him from being a fatuous bore. I like him a lot. The day we flew to

the barrier he leapt into the kitchen and gave it such a scrub-down he could have performed surgery on the benches. On my return I was equal parts thankful and appalled at his efforts. I am the first to admit that my cleaning skills are notoriously lacking and to see the kitchen in such a gleaming state made me feel guilty.

I spend the morning in the kitchen, my mind taken up with menus and cooking the lunch and dinner. Most people are sleeping in after last night's festivities and the tent is relatively relaxed. Mike tramps in from the radio tent every so often to make himself countless mugs of tea. We gossip and chatter but all the while I have half an ear tuned for the sound of Ewan's voice. I want to thank him for the music he gave me.

He ambles in around midday. He walks straight up to me and wishes me a good morning. I smile happily at him and tell him I'm delighted with his tunes and does he have more?

'Sure.' He pours himself a tea. 'Can I ask a favour of you? I need a photo for the article you wrote. I thought I could take a couple of snaps of you in the ice cave.'

'Okey-dokey. Just let me finish preparing this salad.'

I trot happily beside him to the freezer. The two of us climb down into the cave and I turn to look at him. 'Where do you want me?' Strangely, I immediately wish I could rephrase that statement. He and I are surrounded by frozen meat, poultry and dairy produce. Ewan has me standing up against some Rubbermaids full of frozen beef. I grin a little self-consciously as I face the camera. 'Why do you specifically want photos of me in the ice cave?'

'It's your natural habitat, isn't it?' he says with a happy grin. I smile ruefully at him. There is an awkward silence that I am suddenly frantic to fill. We start talking in unison but it's Ewan's words that bring me up short.

'I want to kiss you to thank you for a great birthday celebration last night.' I gaze at him, strangely hypnotised as he reaches for me. Ewan leans in and touches his lips to mine.

I think I'm about to have a panic attack. I am enfolded in an embrace in the ice cave. Ewan's arms are around my waist and he rests his chin on the top of my head. I feel furious and vulnerable. My anger is directed at myself. Suddenly I feel like a provincial milkmaid who has lost her wits. Last night Jorge kept giving me winks and nudges whenever Ewan engaged me in conversation but I thought little of it, I was too wrapped up with the festivities. Now I don't know what to do.

Suddenly Blue 1 holds a complication I had not anticipated.

The minute he releases me I leap back and sit down on the bottom stair of the cave. My mind is void. There is nothing in it, no laughing comment to defuse the awkwardness that I suddenly feel, no sophisticated banter that I can latch on to, to extract me from this tense situation. But Ewan looks relaxed, as if he'd like to spend the rest of the day down here.

'I probably should defrost some of that bacon,' I say as I gesture to a box behind him.

'Pardon?'

'Some of the meat down here is at least three years old, if not older. I wonder how healthy that can be?' I am blurting out the first thing that comes into my head. Ewan looks perplexed. He smiles at me and I bare my teeth in reply. I look up to the entrance and John happens to be walking by.

'John!' I shrill up to him. He initially can't see me and he looks about him, wondering where the voice has come from.

'Down here. I'm in the ice cave.' He smiles and ambles over.

'What are you doing down there?' He peers down at me.

'I'm just talking to Ewan and wondering what I should cook for dinner. Any ideas?'

'Pizza!'

'You think?' I have no idea what I'm saying or why. I stand up and brush my hands down the front of my apron. 'OK

then, I guess I'll go and get lunch organised.' I turn to Ewan and smile stupidly at him and race out of the cave.

Back in the kitchen I feel like someone should be drop-kicking me around the tent. So it's not every day that someone makes a pass at me but do I have to create a three-act melodrama out of it? I try to laugh it off but I can't deny that Ewan's embrace has completely floored me. Suddenly I am grateful for my fussy Norwegians and their little demands. I bustle anxiously about the tent and try to lose myself in a long conversation with Jan-Erling, who is offering me cooking positions up in the Arctic. I tell him I'll think about it.

After lunch I step cautiously outside the tent, on the lookout for Ewan. I don't see him standing on the snow and assume he is in his tent. I shoot across to the radio tent, crash inside and close the door.

'Hello there.' Ewan is sitting on the chair in front of the radio equipment.

'What are you doing here?' I yell in fright. He shrugs his shoulders. He is wearing his Gore-Tex jacket. It's cold in here, there is no heater. I stand over him feeling gauche. I want the old Ewan back, not this person who has other ideas about me. It's not up to him to decide what I should be down here, that's for me to work out. I resent this vulnerability that I unexpectedly feel. And I'm furious with Ewan – furious at his presumption and his encroachment into personal territory. I feel I need to retire to a room with the blinds drawn and a Freudian analyst by my side. Instead I stand looking down at him with my arms folded across my chest.

'Can you come closer?' While I stare aghast at him he encircles my waist with his arms and looks up at me. I extract myself and wonder why all sense of self-preservation seems to have deserted me.

'No, Ewan, you're not to hug me or kiss me or do anything like that.' I pause and think how else I can best state my feelings. 'You're a married man.' He looks steadily at me,

well aware of this. But I continue to preach at him with a self-righteousness that makes me feel queasy.

‘Ewan. Nothing is going to happen. I don’t care what your feelings are for me. I don’t return them and you’d be wrong to think I did. I didn’t come here to have illicit flings with married men. My God. What are you thinking? People here know your wife from last year, they are personal friends of yours and you want to fool around with the cook?’ My voice hiccups in indignation. Jane Austen couldn’t have put it better. Instead of retreating from the drawing room and returning to my boudoir for the smelling salts, I slump to the ground and hug my knees. I listen to myself and think what an insufferable moraliser I am.

‘I am not here to have a relationship.’ I hear myself say this and I wonder if I’m not being a teeny tiny bit dishonest with myself. To override these thoughts I tell Ewan the story of my atrocious love life and inwardly wince as I blurt out half-truths and other strange tales. Ewan listens intently. Eventually even I grow tired of my story and shut up.

‘All I want is affection from you. Nothing else.’

‘Well that covers a lot of ground, don’t you think? What kind of affection; physical, emotional? Anyway, I don’t want to discuss it. I am not going to have a torrid fling with you. I don’t want to.’ I can’t be much more emphatic or discourteous than that. But I attempt to soften my words, ‘I like you, Ewan, please don’t ruin my last month down here with this kind of thing. It’ll do my head in.’ There’s not much left to say and I rise to my feet and exit – stage right.

I am truly unsettled at Ewan’s revelations and I need to talk to someone about it. Without thinking I seek out Lisa and tell her what has happened. Strangely, as I blurt out the events of the morning, I feel like I’m betraying Ewan. And as I tell Lisa the tale, I am deeply conscious that she is the last person I should be saying anything to. I realise that I should really

keep it all to myself because I'm involving people who know each other from previous years.

But it's too late now.

I am sitting next to Ralf on the couch in the outdoor lounge suite. Stuart has surpassed himself. In the backyard, at the western end of the tent, is a natural wind scoop that has been fashioned by the weather. Stuart has carved a couch into one of the wind slopes. The couch comes complete with armrests and is upholstered in cardboard with scribbled flowers drawn on it. He has also fashioned a television from cardboard and a discarded power cord, with two bamboo poles as antennas. The TV sits on an ice table. Ralf holds another bit of cardboard which is the remote. He pretends to channel surf and moans at all the ads for penguin steaks. I want to watch the soaps but he's trying to find the ice hockey. We bicker contentedly, enjoying this make-believe world.

Not to be outdone by the resident doctor, Daniel is in the front yard at the eastern end of the dining tent, energetically sawing chunks of snow. With Lisa and Stuart's help, he carves three-dimensional letters that say *Blue 1*. This activity takes up the best part of the morning. Everyone stands around offering expert advice.

'Don't cut the snow like that, use shorter strokes. Does the cook know you're using her bread knife?'

'She won't mind.'

'Do you care to bet on that?'

'Lift the chunks out using the sledge, that way it won't break up.'

'Is there an "e" in blue?'

'Only in English and French.'

'Who's for a beer then?' It feels like I'm back at Chakola. It's a hot day down here and we loll about on the ice. Some of us have dragged chairs out of the tent and are sitting in straggly semicircles with feet resting on empty chairs, reading month-

old papers and favourite books. Lunch today is hamburgers and I set up a buffet table inside so people can help themselves before taking their lunch outside. The Ilyushin is expected to fly in tomorrow and we're all doing our best to ignore the fact the camp will once again become something we resent. It's so easy to create a clique here and despite our gripes about each other, we have decided to accept and acknowledge our inherent differences. I don't think many of us are prepared to have this fragile balance jeopardised. Unfortunately we have little choice.

When I walk to my tent at the end of the day, the Blue 1 sculpture stands firm and fixed on the ice, its letters casting a lengthy shadow in the low-lying sun. I have avoided Ewan for most of the day. Blue 1 is my home and now I feel like I have to scuttle about the place like a cockroach in peril of being thwacked by someone's shoe. I hate it.

I wriggle into my tent with my usual aplomb and the sight of its nylon walls with ice crusting at the foot of my mattress and a pile of filthy clothes lying frozen on the ground fills me with a desperate sense of instability. What on earth am I doing here anyway? I feel my hitherto sense of adventure has been a chimera. A sort of ice glint on the snow. I intensely reject Ewan's feelings for me. I am shocked by the strength of my distaste for the situation and I am so angry with Ewan that I want to crawl back out of my tent and kick his weather station off its perch. Instead I lie face down on my mattress and shriek into my sleeping bag. I stuff bits of it into my mouth so I can wail without waking up the rest of the camp. Who the *hell* does Ewan think he is? His brain has been scorched by the food, quite obviously. And I am not handling the situation with my customary wit and charm. Whatever happened to fobbing him off with a cool, calculating stare and a killer put-down line? I groan afresh whilst gagging slightly on a feather from the sleeping bag. I sit up and wipe indignant

spittle from my mouth. Jesus Christ Almighty, what a fine mess we have here.

An incredulous and mortified voice tells me I am giving paranoia a bad name. It tells me to relax, is it necessary to create an international incident about someone being attracted to me? Isn't it supposed to buoy one's spirits and skyrocket the old self-confidence? I wish I could feel like this. I wish I could say OK, get your gear off, sunshine – it's damn cold here so we might as well make the most of it. I am so angry at myself that I can't respond in this manner. Whatever happened to a bit of self-serving sex? It's obviously what he wants, and just think of the kudos I could have back home. I long to be able to shrug it off as if this were an everyday occurrence but instead I run crying to the nearest female to help me sort out the mess. How truly tragic I have become.

Unfortunately I have no time to sit myself down and calm my frazzled feathers. Ewan's timing is as imperfect as his revelations. The Ilyushin arrives tomorrow and Blue 1 is going to be inundated with people.

Maybe that won't be such a bad thing after all.



I stand outside the cook tent to watch the Ilyushin coming in to land, a wooden spoon shielding my eyes from the sun. I look to the north for the smear of the jet's vapour trail and I spot it long before the whine of the engines reaches me. Everyone else has gone down to the threshold to watch the spectacle of the incoming jet and I have the immeasurable relief of precious moments of peace. I absentmindedly lick the wooden spoon. This time round I have prepared so much food I could probably ask our Russian neighbours to join us.

The radio is on and the crackle of the pilot talking to Mike is audible. I love the hiss and sputter of disembodied voices over the airwaves. The engines are now roaring louder and louder in the air and I look at the plane's hulking wings juddering and angling the plane for its clumsy landing on the ice.

I am apprehensive about the human cargo the plane will disgorge from its hold. I will be cooking for around seventy people over the next few days and it's not a job I relish at this point. I know I have prepped and sorted and arranged and cooked and done almost everything to make my life manic instead of outrageously insane but once again I feel hollow at the thought of saying farewell to my friends. The special moments I have with Ralf and Daniel and even the reluctant camaraderie we have established with the Norwegians will be no more. There won't be the time to serve up a meal and then go and join that noisy throng at one of the tables. There won't be the time to sit across from Ralf and have meaningful discussions about each other's body odours while downing a

few dixie cups of port. I think of the night of Ewan's birthday and wish fervently for the return of such happy moments.

I hear the boom of the jet as it drops onto the ice. I can't believe I've stayed away from this aerial display but moments of quiet are more precious to me right now. It's early evening and I want to have people fed and out of the tent at a reasonable hour so I can be sure the kitchen will be ready for tomorrow's breakfast onslaught. I know it's an impossibility that my plan will run to time but a girl can dream.

I have seen Ewan once since my flounce from the radio tent. The next day he didn't show up for breakfast or his daily gallon of coffee. The mother hen in me keeps tabs on my brood and I need to reassure myself that he's not fading away. I brace my nerves with lungfuls of icy air and stalk over to his tent. It's like old times but my stomach clenches with agitation.

'Hello.' He looks up, startled, and then a grin of pleasure lights his face.

'Hi yourself.'

'Yeah. I just want to tell you that lunch is being served.'

'Have you given any thought to what I said yesterday?'

'Jesus, Ewan. Don't start that again. Do you want lunch or not?' I am Shrew of the Antarctic.

'Yes I do.' He holds something out to me.

'What's that?'

'It's a message. Please don't open it until I fly back to Holtanna.'

'What does it say?' I have my hands behind my back and won't touch the piece of paper.

'It's for you to read.'

'What if I don't want it?' I am rocking on my heels and I look down at Ewan with great displeasure.

'Just take it – do what you want with it but can you please put it in your pocket?' I grab the offending message and hastily shove it in my jumper pocket before spinning on my heel and clumping back to the cook tent. I keep touching my jumper

thinking I'll fling it in the bin but my curiosity won't let me indulge in such extravagant gestures.

To my great surprise I take Ewan's message to my tent and place it carefully in my bag. I don't really know what I want to do with it or even if I have the nerve to read it but something in me won't be parted from it. It's a piece of my story and to destroy it seems profane.

John stands at the back of the tent holding a beer and propping his frame up against the door. I am opening oven doors, spinning from one bench top to the other, reaching for serving spoons, grabbing a knife and hastily chopping fresh parsley (a rare delicacy), stirring the sauce and keeping an eye on the pasta. The tent is heaving. The inspection teams from Japan, Norway, South Africa, England and Australia are here. All of them have spent far more time in Antarctica than I have and I feel doubly nervous as I dish out my fare. They thank me profusely for my efforts and take an interest in how I ended up in a tent cooking for a cast of thousands. I could regale them for hours but there's no time to talk. The crew of the Ilyushin will be up for the third sitting of dinner and it's almost midnight. My regulars had eaten before the plane landed and many of them have hidden themselves away. Ralf and Daniel are not to be seen and Shane and John are kicking their heels outside my back door, unwilling to join the throng. In a quiet moment I go and join them on my outdoor couch. We nurse cans of beer and listen a little numbly to the commotion inside and slump further into the couch. John stands guard at the back entrance, ready to let me know if my presence is needed.

'Jesus Christ! Saddam Hussein just walked in the door.' John gestures towards the entrance. The Russians have come up from the runway and are shedding their jackets and hats at the eastern end of the tent. As a group they approach the kitchen and I grip my soup ladle tightly. I do believe I am about to serve

the Iraqi despot a bowl of soup. The man bears an uncanny resemblance to the Middle Eastern dictator. I smile toothily at him to indicate no hard feelings and he stares at me with tired eyes. They all look as exhausted as I feel and I tell them where the coffee and tea are and gesture to the boxed wine that they can drink. Their English is sketchy. My friend Saddam eats his meal slowly, looking around him every so often.

It's now well past midnight and there is no chance that I'll be in bed much before four in the morning. I have been bracing myself for the days ahead and there will be no time to feel tired and run-down. I have to shove my exhaustion in a box and kick it to the back of my brain. True rest will only come when the Ilyushin flies back to Cape Town.

Benjamin, William and Mike have been holed up in the radio tent talking business. I made a point of taking them their meals earlier on in the evening. I stepped into the radio tent and elaborately laid out their fare and obsequiously asked them if they'd prefer wine or beer with their food. Mike raised his eyebrows at my Park Avenue hostess act. Benjamin has been remarkably cheery, at least for the first few hours that he's been here. He surprises me as I'm sorting through our new delivery of food. Most of it sits on sledges just outside although some of it has been stored in the radio tent behind a partition.

'Are you happy with the delivery?' I have my back to the voice but I recognise its muted tone. I face Benjamin and give him a close-lipped smile. Every time I see him I have all the best intentions in the world to be a good girl.

'I think so. I haven't done a full inventory but it's looking pretty good so far. How is Cape Town?'

'Bloody hot. I'm running around like a blue-arsed fly but that's OK.' We both look about us as if we've only just noticed our surroundings.

'I suppose I'd better get back to the cooking – I've got plenty of mouths to feed.'

'Yep. Well I think most of the stuff is there – except the tonic, couldn't get it for love or money.' I look at him aghast.

'No tonic?' All of us had given Benjamin money in December to buy extra bottles of gin with firm instructions to bring back more tonic on the January flight. 'There'll be a riot,' Benjamin shrugs. My heart sinks at the news. We're desperate for our G&Ts. Our regular card games just aren't the same without them. It's become a ritual at Blue 1. Whoever mixes the G&Ts has to also traipse out to the virgin ice and chip away with an ice axe and fill a bowl full of ice shards. The gin is poured over great chunks of it with thick slices of lemon and tonic. Our Antarctic G&Ts are hands down the best I've tasted. The ice pops and spits from air bubbles being released. It's like putting an ear to a seashell. Some of the air has been trapped in the ice for centuries. Throwing it in our drinks seems almost sacrilegious.

I walk back into the tent and see Mike standing there with yet another mug of tea. He is talking to William.

I am a little leery of our boss. We haven't got off to the best of starts.

'Hello. I'm Alexa.'

'Great. Hi. Listen, can you get me a cup of coffee – two sugars. Don't give me any of the fake saccharine stuff either.' I smile ingratiatingly at him.

'Would you like that to go?' I can't help myself. 'Sure. Thanks, darling.' *Darling!* This is not good. I close my eyes and tell myself he's only here for a few days. I open them and Ewan is standing in front of me.

'Have you eaten?' I ask him accusingly. Despite my pact with myself to be cool and aloof with him I can't help taking an interest in his wellbeing. Out of all of the people at Blue 1, he has been here from the beginning and it's impossible to keep up my indignation. I bustle about and prepare a plate and pour him a glass of wine.

'Come and join me.'

'No thank you. I have to clean up here and then I'm going to bed.'

'But I want to talk to you.'

'You get ten points for persistence, Ewan, you really do.'

'Can't we just talk?'

'We're talking now.'

He looks at me with a reproachful expression and moves away. I watch his retreating back and annoy a fingernail between my teeth. Where has all the happiness gone?

The next morning is indiscriminate chaos. I get about an hour and a half of sleep before professional panic gets the better of me. At half past five I thrash out of my sleeping bag and reach with some apprehension for my clothes. I can hear voices and noises from the cook tent and nothing can keep me in bed knowing that there may be people who want an early breakfast. I lurch out of the tent and stumble over to the kitchen. Inside, at least twenty people are milling around the tea and coffee and sitting at the tables. Geoff, God bless him, is elbow-deep in washing suds and chatting quietly to Jan-Erling. The weather, to my unease, is not brilliant. If things go to plan the DC-3, the Twin Otter and a helicopter from SANAE will begin flying the inspection teams to the various bases in the area. However, cloud cover is fairly heavy and everyone keeps commenting on the poor visibility outside. How am I going to cope if we're all stuck here for weeks on end? I ignore my disquiet and tie my apron around my waist.

I have defrosted a mountain of bacon and I start to open up the packets and lay the meat out in preparation for the big fry-up. Everyone begins to hover around the kitchen bench, eager to be fed and kept warm. I don't talk too much; if I get caught up in a conversation I lose my bearings. Right now I need to feel in control; if I let my concentration slip for even a millisecond I will be doomed. I have asked Stuart to help out with breakfast but I told him to come in around seven

in the morning. I hadn't planned on finding a starving mob lined up so early.

I am berating myself at my forgetfulness. Surely by now I should have realised that cold equates to hunger. The mob is not prepared to wait until seven for their bacon and eggs. They want it now. To give them credit, they are not yet tearing me limb from limb but when I tentatively ask them if it's OK to start cooking about an hour from now, a chorus of protest erupts. I hastily hold up my hands in a placatory gesture and turn on the stovetops to start frying.

It all goes disastrously wrong. I place two big frying pans on the stove and pour oil in the egg pan and then turn away and begin laying out cereals and mixing powdered milk into a big pot. I become immersed in whisking the lumps out of the powdered milk and only remember that the stovetops are on when the oil starts spattering. Squeaking with surprise I turn back to the pans, turn the oiled pan off and lay bacon in the pan without the oil. The bacon immediately starts to spit and sizzle. I watch it distractedly and then realise I don't know where the tongs are, so I scramble madly in the washing-up bowls while listening to the bacon start to burn. Naturally the tongs are in their usual storage space but it doesn't occur to me to look there. In the end I grab a fork and clumsily turn the bacon in this fashion. The meat is starting to shrivel and I can't leave it in the pan for too much longer. I dump the contents in a baking dish and put it in the oven. The oven is not on, the eggs haven't been cooked, the bread takes an age to toast and I can't locate the grill for the bread to stand on. And I have an audience that is starting to look horrified at this public display of incompetence. Oh dear lord.

I turn the stovetops off and wipe my sweaty palms down my apron. The domestics have overwhelmed me.

'Would anyone like to help out?' I ask the circle of spectators with quiet humiliation. Everyone leaps into action. The head of the Japanese Polar Institute takes charge and issues

orders in bursts of Japanese to his team. He stands me in front of the bacon pan, hands me the tongs, lights the oven for me and then turns back to the others to give them their duties. For the next hour I stand meekly at my station, fry bacon and smile gratefully at my fairy godfather. By the time Stuart arrives, we have the cooking down to a fine art. To my great relief, neither Benjamin nor William is present to witness the cook roping their precious clientele into cooking their own breakfasts.

The morning progresses with a river of people barging in and out of the tent. The pilots are sitting around a satellite weather chart that Mike has on his laptop, scrutinising the image of heavy cloud to the east of us. The weather at Blue 1 has cleared but no one is confident that conditions are good enough elsewhere. I quietly slip out of the tent to have a five-second breather on the loo.

The smell from the plastic bucket that I'm sitting on is overpowering. The 'bathroom' hasn't seen this much traffic since it was erected and the overuse is beginning to tell in the stench. There is an extra bucket for the women to pee in. This is all well and good but it still has to be emptied after one's ablutions. The women are not supposed to pee in the shit bag because there is a greater chance of the bag breaking en route back to South Africa if there is too much liquid in it. I must confess to at first occasionally having a little pee in the bag but before too long, guilt gets the better of me. I keep thinking about the consequences for some poor sucker on the plane or back in Cape Town and I resign myself to the to-ing and fro-ing that having a pee entails.

'Where's the cook? Hey! Who's seen the cook?' I prick up my ears at the bellow from the cook tent. I am mid-pee and I have a month-old copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald* perched on my knees. I really don't want to get off the loo. It's a still day and his voice travels easily over the camp.

‘What’s her name anyway?’ I roll my eyes and grimace at my reflection in the mirror.

‘Alexa,’ I mouth for his benefit.

‘Alexa! Where are you? The Russians want breakfast.’ I look cross-eyed at myself. I can hear someone telling him that they think they saw me go to the bathroom. My cover has been blown. I rise from my seat, reluctant to go back to the main tent. William is still yelling out my name.

‘I’m here and I’m coming,’ I whisper to myself. ‘And you can stop bellowing like a bull at a gate.’

In the kitchen William is sharing a joke with the Russians. He sees me and stops smiling. His expression tells me he thinks I’ve been ensconced on the loo for the better part of a morning.

‘Look. These guys want breakfast and don’t just give them cereal and that porridge pap. They want the works – bacon and eggs, toast, coffee, juice... don’t ya, fellas?’

I doubt whether the Ilyushin crew understood too much of that but his message to me is clear. I turn back to the stove and bang a few pans for good measure.

It’s almost 10.30 in the morning. Lunch has to be organised and now I’m instructed to turn around and keep cooking breakfast. I long to give myself up to the madness of camp life and admit that one person cannot in all fairness cook for 70 people and expect things to run like clockwork but my stubborn streak shifts into gear and I’m determined to prove to William that I can do this job with the graciousness and calm of a seasoned diplomat.

My Russians are a demanding lot. It seems I’m to babysit them through their breakfast. They want me to hover over them with a coffeepot in one hand and the salt and pepper shakers in the other. The minute I turn my back and retreat to the kitchen to prepare lunch they whistle me back over with more requests for eggs and bacon. My feathers are becoming extremely ruffled.

I have been hoping that William will travel with the inspection teams but it seems this is not to be. I do my best to become as inconspicuous as possible. This means taking up my post in the kitchen, even if it is to perch on the Rubbermaid that holds the potatoes with a book in my hand. At least I'll be *in situ* if my presence is needed.

I gingerly open up Ewan's note. It's a small bit of paper wrapped around his business card. I look at the front of the card. It's a picture of Ewan standing in a vast ice field with an antenna and weather station at his feet. I stare at his image for a while, reluctant to turn the card over.

Antarctica can be a very cold place. But human warmth can go a long way.

What is that supposed to mean? This short message is not quite what I had anticipated. Strangely I feel deflated and sad. My initial reaction of horror at Ewan's feelings has changed. I have the time now to turn my scrutiny towards myself. In one sense I am aghast at the way I treated Ewan.

He left yesterday on the DC-3. He came into the kitchen, gave me a hug despite my protestations and then revved down to the runway on a skidoo. I stayed inside and refused to step out to wave him off.

The mayhem from the last few days has ceased. It's like watching a movie segue abruptly from one scene to the next – without the soundtrack. The Ilyushin flew out at around eight in the evening. I was almost hallucinating from exhaustion. To our great relief, the inspection teams were able to get to most of the bases without spending weeks waiting for better weather conditions. A benevolent god is undoubtedly smiling on our little camp.

Once again Blue 1's population has changed. Stuart has left us. His replacement is another Australian doctor. Rob is about twenty-five years of age with a fresh guileless face that speaks of a country upbringing. He has the easygoing 'no worries

mate' manner that makes me strangely homesick. Like Stuart he is not being paid a standard wage but his delight at finding himself in Antarctica seems to be compensation enough. For me, after two months of some truly head-butting moments, I'm beginning to feel that Ends of the Earth have an absolute bargain on their hands.

The new mechanic for the DC-3 is an affable Florida native called Terry. Terry makes me smile. He loped off the Ilyushin in jeans, a bulky zippered vest and a diverting turn of phrase.

'I was told there would be an Eskimo behind every tree,' he says in his southern drawl, looking perplexed at his surroundings. 'You know, I didn't know I'd be goin' to Antarctica until four days ago. My girlfriend still doesn't believe it. Best to take some pictures to prove me right hey?' Terry hung back from the seething throng when he arrived but slowly over the hours, Blue 1's charm has weaned him out of his reserve. Rob and he have struck up a friendship. The two of them spent time in various bars around Cape Town while waiting to fly here.

Ralf, Jorge and Daniel left last night on the Ilyushin. My triumvirate was the last onto the plane. Ralf is off to organise an expedition to climb Shishapangma in Pakistan, Daniel is returning to Chamonix and Jorge to Brussels to edit the film he made of the Holtanna expedition.

I spend an hour standing at the threshold of the runway with the three of them waiting for the plane to refuel. They are bittersweet moments for me. The trio have given me a lot of happiness and laughter with their goofiness and charm. I stand chatting and grinning with them, desperately trying to hide my melancholy and wanting these precious moments to last. At one point Jorge beckons me away for a last talk. 'You know there's someone up there in the mountains who cares for you very much,' he tells me. I regard him with squinted eyes.

'He spoke to you about me?' Jorge nods and puts an arm around my shoulders.

'Be careful with him.'

'But I feel so awkward about it.' Jorge just shrugs his shoulders in a noncommittal manner. Then he smiles and pinches my cheek.

'You look me up in Brussels?'

'Of course. I want a copy of the film you're making. Just promise me I'm not going to be in it. Gore-Tex pants and a plastic apron are a gross misrepresentation of my best attributes.' We laugh. I'm wearing exactly those items. Before Stuart left he spent half a day decorating my apron with images of Blue 1. My once pristine apron now has images of planes, the dead seal, mountain ranges, a skidoo, champagne and vodka bottles and playing cards. Ralf found me a sticker from Compaq so Blue 1 now has an official sponsor. The ink from Stuart's pen has run and the images are starting to smudge.

The Ilyushin pulls away from the fuel drums, its now familiar high-pitched screech making speech and thought impossible. Those of us remaining are grouped to the west of the empty drums. As the pilot turns the jet with its nose pointing into the headwind, the force of the jet plume lifts the empty drums and blasts them northward, back towards the camp. We watch as they arch and flip in the air, then roll over the ice. We will have to anchor them and weight them down with snow. It would be too easy for them to be blown across the continent if a storm were to brew. We trudge over to the drums, ignoring the jet, and start rolling them into large groups for extra protection. We are too busy to watch the jet thunder down the runway. I kick the drums with frustration and tiredness. I stub my toe and resist the urge to fling myself onto the snow and howl with a nameless frustration. The sonic boom echoes over our heads. The next time the Ilyushin leaves, I will be a passenger in its vast cavern.



The last of First Air

‘It makes us look bad, Alexa. We have clients and it’s unprofessional not to have yourself organised.’

I pause, unwilling to believe what I’ve just heard. ‘Excuse me?’

‘We’ve been waiting here for about half an hour for dessert and you’ve been gasbagging on the radio.’ Right, that’s it, I think to myself. Lisa is a formidable woman and I don’t think I’ve met anyone who quite speaks her mind in the manner that she does but I’ve had enough. This comment can’t be allowed to go unnoticed. My forefinger points at her chest.

‘You want to call me unprofessional? Would you like to elaborate on that?’ I don’t realise how ready I am for this. I don’t raise my voice but I’m not going to do the polite thing and let her comment ride. I am ready for a showdown. ‘If you look at the bench in front of you, you will notice a Mississippi mud cake, *freshly whipped cream*,’ whipping cream in Antarctica drives me nuts, ‘... and a raspberry coulis waiting for someone to dish it out. Are you telling me you’re beyond serving up your own dessert?’ The two Finnish scientists, who indeed are our clients, look slightly bemused at the sight of us. Their grasp of English might not be perfect but they twig that we’re not having a civilised chat. I am beyond caring. ‘Be careful who you call unprofessional around here.’ I give a final jab of my finger. Lisa walks away. I take a deep breath, still smarting from her undeserved comment.

I dish out the dessert, smiling professionally at my customers. They smirk conciliatorily at me. John gives me a wink and raises his thumbs. I give him a thousand-yard stare.

Suddenly Lisa is standing in front of me.

'I apologise, that was not appropriate.' I nod sharply. She has chutzpah, that girl. I would have sooner thrown myself off a nunatak than admitted any wrongdoing. I feel mentally exhausted after our altercation, and rather than seeking other company I schlep out to my tent, pull my headphones on and hope that Bach's *Goldberg Variations* can settle my shredded nerves.

It is inevitable that we will sometimes turn on each other in the same way that a dog will take a well-timed nip at the cat. Geoff and Lisa in particular are sometimes at a loose end. In previous years they were guides for ANI at Patriot Hills. Mike tells me that Patriot Hills is a busy, busy camp. There are at least fifteen staff members there at all times as well as expeditioners and tourists. There's hardly time to fart with all the comings and goings. Blue 1 is a mausoleum in comparison. Geoff and Lisa don't have any groups to guide and initially it creates a quiet, well-run camp. However, boredom sets in and it takes an inventive mind to keep focused on the big picture rather than on one another's idiosyncrasies. What were at first appealing eccentricities quickly become matters of great frustration in the camp.

I can be playing cards with a group of people and the sight of someone holding their cards in a certain manner is enough to make me want to throw my coffee over them. This irrationality is a scary thing. The feelings come from nowhere and can just as suddenly disappear or they can fester for days like a strange malaise. My grudges are monstrous down here – monstrous and inexplicable.

Lisa loathes my habit of chatting to myself. In return I want to ram all my knives into her back – down to their handles. We have a minimum of options to remove ourselves from the fray. We take ourselves to our tents to read or play music or we can wander out of camp – either south down the runway or east towards the nearest nunatak. But if the weather is

crappy we're confined to the camp. It is the greatest irony: claustrophobia in Antarctica.

Ewan has daily radio schedules with Blue 1 and I am the one who talks with him. I flap out of the tent after cooking dinner to be in the radio tent at 8 p.m. for his call. He tries to cajole and entice me into conversation but I am monosyllabic. I refuse to shape my voice into a warm stream of static chatter. Instead I am rude and terse. Ewan talks quietly about some of the tensions at the base camp and sometimes asks me to talk with him at other times of the day to help conduct a field trial of his hand-held VHF radio.

Strangely, I am happy to comply with these technical requests. Perhaps I feel guilty about my behaviour. I am uncommonly impressed with his patience. Anyone else would have said to hell with it and asked to talk to someone else. I admit I do my best to hand over my daily talks to the others but no one else is interested. The schedule is late in the day and most just want to go to bed.

I troop out to find some virgin ice with the ice axe, remembering to wear my goggles. At times I've nearly been blinded by flying ice shards as I've vigorously thwacked the ice for the cocktail hour. I've heard stories about Chilean generals demanding that pilots bring back chunks of blue ice to Santiago for their Scotch and sodas. This obscene extravagance gives me goose bumps. We may not be as extravagant as the Chileans but Lisa's husband Maxo has made a trip in the DC-3 to the German base of Neumayer with explicit instructions from the rest of us to bring back tonic. Now that we have a crate of the stuff we're overjoyed to be indulging in the civilised habit of having a cocktail to end the day.

It's past midnight. The sun has now dipped behind the mountains of the Fenristunga and it is desperately cold. My teeth throb in torment with every breath. The radio and cook

tents flap in a strong katabatic wind and the stovepipe rattles with a poignant clang.

I plod about 500 metres from camp. I'm far enough away not to hear the household timbre of the cook tent. I veer well away from the yellow patches of ice that attest to the gentlemen taking their daily ablutions. I walk northeast, behind the empty fuel barrels and out past the snow runway. I find my patch of untouched ice and crouch on the snow beside it to maintain my balance. I glide my hand caressingly over the ridges and rises of the dimpled ice before raising the axe and making short, sharp blows on its pale blue surface. The axe chips off chunks and I take one glove off to pick up the loose pieces. My nose starts to run and the tip of it feels like I could slice it off without feeling a thing. My snot freezes between my nose and my upper lip.

I want this moment to last in perpetuity. Not the part where the snot stays frozen to my lip but the knowledge that I can troop out my back door for glacial ice for a gin and tonic in a setting that, even with dense cloud cover, is impossibly haunting. Sometimes, as I'm laying out my washing to dry on the sledges or pinning it to the guy ropes of the cook tent, I think I could be happily domestic down here until the end of time. But then when I'm walking back from a nunatak and I momentarily lose my bearings and the ice abrades and cracks with the release of tension, I understand that Antarctica is no place for humans. As a mortal I react to it with inexplicable tears.

I can hear someone shouting out my name. I can either stay here and blub frozen snot and tears onto my pristine ice or be warm and drink an Antarctica gin and tonic with fresh lemon. I stand up and half-jog back to the entrance of the tent.

A small group stands around the Twin Otter. We watch as John and Shane walk around the plane scrutinising the wings and making last-minute adjustments to the skis attached to the

wheels. I stand looking at the plane's snout, determined to be adult about this latest leavetaking. Shane is wearing a padded blue flying suit with his favourite beanie covering his ears. John is in his Gore-Tex overpants and a red jacket. Neither of them is especially happy about flying home earlier than their contract stipulated but William has made his decision so they are off.

Earlier in the day I'd wandered over to the plane where Shane had been going over its mechanics with the careful scrutiny of a surgeon. I'd heaved myself into the hold of the plane and watched him bolt the extra fuel tank to the floor.

'I have to find someone to rent the spare room in my apartment back in Sydney. Can you recommend anyone for me?' Shane lays a spanner on the floor and picks up a screw-driver.

'You could post flyers on the telegraph poles around here. You never know who might answer.'

The boys are ready for their laborious trip out of Antarctica and on to Punta Arenas. They are hoping to stop at SANAE and have one last knees-up with the South Africans. I have been snappy with them for the last week. It's hardly their fault that they are leaving earlier than expected but I haven't been able to keep emotions together.

The final flight checks are made. No one wants to stay for an extended tearful farewell but we can't drag ourselves away.

'You keep an eye on that Mike Sharp while I'm gone, you hear?' John instructs me.

'Sure, I'll do my best.' I sniff into his shoulder then step back. Shane enfolds me in his huge arms.

'If you're in Newfoundland we'll have to take the boat out for a bit of a fish.' I nod uselessly and return his hug. And then they climb aboard and the plane's propellers begin to rotate faster and faster, their blades blurring almost into invisibility. Mike waves one last time and stomps back to the cook tent. Maxo and Lisa stand with their arms around each other,

waving furiously. Geoff has his hands in his pockets and looks on. And I stare and stare at our little plane as it taxis and then turns to face the easterly headwind. Its shadow stretches across the snow one last time. The throttle is jammed forward – I can picture in my mind's eye the two pilots with their hands resting on it. The Twin Otter moves purposefully down the runway. Finally it lifts smoothly into the air and I have a brief glimpse of John's arm waving as the plane turns in a graceful arc back over Blue 1. I wave until my arm aches. The Twin Otter's familiar, comforting drone becomes fainter as it heads westward towards SANAE.

First Air is going home.



It's a strange time at Blue 1. There is an urgency hovering around us but we have a week or so of complete rest before Alain Hubert's expedition will slowly wrap up and head back to Blue 1. Some of them plan to ski back while others will be picked up on skidoos at the end of January. At the moment the camp is hushed and quiet. Our days are overcast and we are sleeping long, long hours. Sometimes I won't poke my head out of my sleeping bag until eleven in the morning. And even then if no one is in the cook tent I'll turn around and go straight back to bed and snack on chocolate bars. I'll lie on top of my sleeping bag, revelling in the warmth of the tent and yawning over *War and Peace*.

Geoff discovers a new crevasse field on one of his wanderings around the camp. Another black flag marks its deadly depths, revealing just how tenuous our position is. After dinner one night we all troop the 300 metres to the north of the camp where the field lies. I quail inwardly at its location: not five weeks ago Charlie and I were hooning across this very patch of ice, arrogant in our ignorance.

Cautiously we approach the field. The area is disquieting in its inconspicuousness and too close to my tent for me to have the luxury of oblivious sleep for the rest of my time here. I trail Geoff, determined to keep behind an expert. For the most part, the crevasses are concealed by snow bridges but here and there a gap is glimpsed. Geoff ambles up to a hole and kneels down to take a closer look. I peer over his shoulder but the light is too dull. Instead I lie down on the snow and gaze bemused into the depths. I can make out one ledge but

otherwise it's an ink-black hole. Geoff points out the field's erratic line but I still tread in his footsteps, unwilling to place any trust in my own perceptions.

Occasionally I'll drag Terry the DC-3 mechanic down the runway for a bit of exercise. I barrel down the strip of snow that runs parallel to the ice runway as if a posse of penguins is flapping at my heels.

'Hey! What's the rush? Is there a bar somewhere that I don't know about?' Terry is shuffling calmly along with his hands shoved in his waterproof vest. He is a good ten metres behind me.

'Sorry. I tend to take off,' I shout back.

'No kid. My knees are crook so there is no way I'm gonna keep up with your pace. You don't have to be any place do you?'

'Nah.' I wait for Terry to catch up with me. We're heading directly south, in line with Ulvetanna. Its sheer walls are purple in the afternoon sun. We walk in a companionable silence for a while.

'I've got this inner peace thing goin' on at the moment,' Terry says eventually. I look across to him.

'Geez. You're a lucky man. Some people search for a lifetime to find that state of mind.'

'Yeah well. I'm no guru but it feels darn fantastic, that's for sure.'

'What's the secret do you think?'

'Search me but hell, I'm nearin' fifty so you'd think it's about time, right?'

We both sagely nod our heads in contemplation. About two kilometres away we can see a post sticking out of the snow.

'Let's make it to that post then we'll head back.' I'm giving orders as usual.

'Whatever you say, you're the cook.' We walk on. I occasionally veer away to the left or right to pound my foot in

rotting ice. I am kind of wishing to come across a crevasse all on my own. Then again, I'm not so I keep skipping back to Terry for comfort.

'That post down there is moving.'

'Can't be.'

'Yep it is. We've got no closer since we've been travelling. Stop and watch it.' I stand still and peer ahead. The post is indeed shifting in the gelid air.

'I bet that's your mad Englishman on his daily sprint.'

'You think?'

'I know so. Who else is nutty enough to run a marathon day after day?' I raise expressive eyebrows at Terry. We abandon pursuing the post and turn back to Blue 1.

'Do you think you'll come on the trip to the Holtedahl? You have to,' I answer for Terry. 'You'll never forgive yourself if you stay cooped up at Blue 1.'

'Sure. I'm up for it. Don't know about Dave though. He's not enjoying the accommodation at the Blue 1 Hilton.' Terry and Dave are not the best of mates. The dour pilot of the DC-3 is certainly not the happiest camper out here. 'That man can't tell his butt from third base.'

I giggle traitorously. I miss Shane and John and Charlie and Blair. Dave is perhaps too inflexible, too fastidious, too... maybe I'm too tired to warm to him.

He fusses in the kitchen to boil three eggs for his breakfast. He uses the biggest burner with the smallest pot and hovers over it, clucking like a constipated hen. I try to muscle in, using the excuse that I must get lunch on the go but he steadfastly ignores me. I probably wouldn't give an inch at my standover tactics either.

We tramp back home. No one is inside the dining tent. Terry decides he's up for a bit of a snooze and trots out again. I hop from one foot to the other in front of the stove and look at my prep for dinner spread over the benches. It's mid-afternoon and I'm not ready to throw myself into the evening meal

just yet. I follow Terry and flop into my sleeping bag for an afternoon nap. Blue 1 sleeps in the sun.

Our final outing for the season is a camping trip to the Høltedahl, the mountain range to the east of the Fenristunga. On an overcast, breezy afternoon we load up the two skidoos and head south. I sit behind Mike on one skidoo, which drags a sledge with Terry sitting snugly on some mattresses and camping gear. Geoff drives the other skidoo with Dave hitching a lift in similar fashion to Terry. Our little group waves to Maxo, Rob and Lisa who returned from their own little trip the day before.

In no time at all I'm huddled behind Mike's back desperately trying to protect myself from the vicious cold that seeps through my extremities and into my body with numbing thoroughness. I'm supposed to keep an eye open for the cairns that Lisa's group erected when they were out here but it's almost too much to peer over Mike's shoulder. The mountain range doesn't seem to be getting any closer either. I occasionally turn back to see how Terry is faring on his sleigh bed. He casually waves to me as he spies my goggles peering at him.

We reach the base of the range in the late afternoon. The mountains are monoliths of harsh granite and scree, reaching thousands of metres above us. We set up camp at the snow-covered base of a scree slope. Geoff toddles off to set up an outdoor loo; more for the lady in the group than the blokes. Terry and Dave have set up their tent and it's a haven of mattresses, sleeping bags and after the evening meal, the belches and farts of the two gentlemen.

For dinner we cook up a festive repast of dehydrated food, the first such meal that has passed our lips since the beginning of the season. We find a flat slab of rock and drape thin foam mattresses over its surfaces to place our delicate bottoms on. We have brought with us a couple of bottles of South African

red and, wonder of wonders, the contents have yet to freeze. With unseemly haste we uncork the wine and slosh it into our mugs, raising them in a toast to the late evening sun and the mountain range.

Terry is eyeing our dining slab with the zeal of an amateur geologist. 'I reckon we're sitting on garnets,' he states with conviction. 'Look at the glitter of these specks.' The rock does seem to glitter with small, even particles of reflective red. We fantasise briefly about lugging the semi-precious boulder back to camp and onto the Ilyushin when we leave.

Later that night I wander over a small scree slope to gaze westward to the Fenristunga. The peak of Ulvetanna has nothing of the jagged incisor outline that we see from Blue 1. From this angle I can see the huge, oblong walls that make the base of the mountain. Surrounding it are the mountains that Alain Hubert's team are exploring and climbing.

The sun slants across the ice and the mountains, bathing the landscape in shimmers of dancing, brilliant light and reflection. It's impossible to define the majesty that surrounds me. I open my mouth to emit an involuntary, rasping sob.

From vast bureaucracies to my insignificant self looking westward to peaks that are an embodiment of a Tolkien world, we all want to stamp this unknowable, unownable magnificence as ours. Scientists carry out experiments and surveys on its weather, geological features, wildlife, glaciers, ice... We've parcelled the land into categories of acceptable knowledge but for me Antarctica's savage inhospitality eludes understanding. Yet paradoxically, I can sit outside my kitchen and consider the view and the territory *mine*; I too have staked my claim.

The next day Mike and I begin a slow climb into the scree slopes of the Holtedahl. The scree is dense and coarse, my weight sinks into it as I climb. For the rest of the day I move as if sleepwalking through vistas of huge mountains and icy

debris-filled valleys. We stumble across nesting petrels and swooping skuas. Occasionally I step over the small, bloody body of a petrel that has been unable to escape the predatory skua. I gaze at the walls of the mountains and the landscape seems to morph before my eyes. One pinnacle looks like Queen Victoria wearing a cap and a long train, another mountain has the distortion of a Dali face. Still another looks like a malevolent warhead. I feel assaulted by the geography that surrounds me. Again I muse about this mysterious land. Maybe rather than trying to define it, we should allow its vivid starkness to calm the fevered mind into awe and reverence – and leave it at that. Benjamin would be breaking out in a rash if he could read my thoughts.



We are racing across the blue ice on skidoos – our two-day camping trip at an end. It's an overcast sky but visibility is clear. We have packed up the camp and radioed ahead to Blue 1. Rob, Lisa and Maxo are expecting us in the next couple of hours. The only news is that Ewan, Alain and René left Holtanna two days ago. They are skiing back to Blue 1 and we might meet them somewhere out here. I don't know if I'm ready to see Ewan.

The five of us rattle over the blue ice and hunker into our jackets as the icy wind burns exposed skin. My feet in my boots are numb and I huddle behind Mike's back trying to draw all the warmth from his bulk. I am wearing goggles but my eyes are watering and tears course down my face to freeze on my cheeks. We're moving at about fifty kilometres an hour and I've never felt so cold in my life. We skirt a crevasse field. I angle my face sideways and look at the virgin snow covering its deadly depths. My body shudders fitfully. We stop to get the blood flowing to our extremities.

I clap my gloved hands on my cheeks and don't feel a thing.

We move off again. I think I would murder someone for a steaming bath. My mind wanders off, searching and dreaming of memorable baths I've had. I think about watching my toes manipulate the gleaming faucets as the rest of me is soothed in lapping hot water. It's unbearable to know that we'll get back to Blue 1 and the only warmth will be the feeble heat from the wretched stove. I snivel piteously.

Mike turns to me and gestures with a mitten. 'Can you see what I see?' he yells in my ear. My gaze follows his outstretched arm. About six kilometres in front of us are three figures. My heart bumps uncomfortably in my chest. This is the last thing I wanted to see out here. I contemplate asking Mike not to stop for them but that would be impossible. I peer over Mike's shoulder as our little group draws closer to the skiers up ahead. They don't see or hear us. We're all heading north and we're travelling against a headwind.

We bump and clatter over snow and blue ice, drawing ever nearer. I stare down at my thighs on the seat. They judder with each bump and I inch closer to Mike as we catch up to the skiers. Geoff is behind us and he sees them as well.

It's so strange. The skidoo seems to be hurtling towards a fate that has yet to be ratified by me. I once revelled in spontaneity; now I feel overwhelmed and unnerved by the impending encounter.

The figures ahead are pulling sledges as they amble slowly over the ice. This stretch of terrain holds few dangers; Blue 1 is about four hours' walking distance. We slow as we come alongside them and Mike guns the throttle. I see three faces turn to us, their expressions all incredulous. Mike springs off the skidoo while it's still gliding to a stop. I proprietarily reach across to the handlebar and kill the engine. There is no time to arrange a suitable expression on my face.

All I can think of are Ewan's e-mails from Holtanna and our recent futile radio conversations. He, quietly and persistently trying to talk me out of my monosyllabic anger, and me refusing to succumb to his subtle and unceasing charm. And then the news that Ewan could be travelling from Holtanna direct to Neumayer, the German base to the north-west of us. Suddenly, there's the possibility I won't see him again. The DC-3 would fly to Holtanna, pick up Alain, René and Ewan and fly them to Neumayer without a stopover at Blue 1. Ewan isn't the one to tell me this. With the season coming to a close,

Mike is trying to rationalise plane flights. Alain has secured passages out of Antarctica on the icebreaker *Polar Stern* and Mike is contemplating giving the three a lift with the DC-3 boys who will be flying to the Antarctic Peninsula for a week's work with Rothera, the British base. *Oh fuck – over.*

The news startles me. It pulls me out of my introspection for a few crucial moments. My ethical and principled arguments about becoming involved with married men drop away as if they had never occurred to me in the first place. All I know is I would like to see Ewan again before he leaves the continent. My unravelling has begun.

I swing off the skidoo and walk to the nearest figure. It is Alain. We hug and stand back from each other to exchange happy grins. I turn to René and again I beam and hug him with genuine delight. One person left. He is enthusiastically shaking Geoff's hand and laughing delightedly at this unexpected reunion out in the wilderness. I have about three seconds to try to stop this nervousness that is rolling through me like a wave. Ewan is standing solidly on the ice, his legs bracing themselves on his skis. His stocks hang around his wrists. He turns to me, his arms stretched out in an expression of unconditional delight. I almost turn around to see what is making him look so dazzling. He looks radiant, so strong and alive. I walk into his embrace and I feel as if I am shedding my skin. With each step towards him I sense I am finally leaving a life behind me. I grip his waist and look up into his bearded face. 'Hello there.'

We don't stop for long on the frozen plateau. It's too cold. Alain and René give us their sledges to take back with us. We wave goodbye to the skiers and continue north. I am driving. Mike sits behind me; he lounges against a metal prop, his long legs nudging my back. I hunker down behind the visor and ram the throttle down hard. We slew over the ice and sail across sastrugi. It's an exhilarating rush to my brain. Blue 1 blinks in and out of sight as we travel over the subtle

undulations of our icy terrain. We come to the end of the runway and now I know we're nearly home. There are no crevasses between here and the camp. I open my mouth wide and yodel ecstatically into the wind. Mike laughs.

Maxo, Lisa and Rob are mooning us as we pull into camp. We rev our engines and catcall at the sight of their gleaming bums exposed to the elements. I feel as energetic as a puppy. We crowd into the camp, all of us talking over one another with our news. No one seems to resent our arrival. I am amazed. The five campers crowd the stove and blow into stiff and frigid hands. Maxo hands us piping mugs of tea and pushes chocolate biscuits at us. Lisa and Rob are bustling around my kitchen, banging open the oven door, stirring pots and joking happily together. It's a wonderful homecoming. I am buzzing.

'Hey Lisa – care to cook for the rest of the season?'

'You must be out of your mind, you're lucky I'm here in the first place.' I hold up my hands, palms out to placate the light of battle in her expression.

'Just jokes.' Mike sits at the table swinging his booted mukluk and chatting quietly to Maxo. The tent is tidy and the table has been set for a party of eleven. Our numbers are growing again. It's mid-afternoon, and Lisa and Rob forbid me to come near the kitchen. I am happy to leave them to it.

I tramp outside to the Orange Palace. I plonk the lid down on the toilet seat and sit there with my elbows on my knees and the palms of my hands pressed against my face. I keep thinking, what now? I know that I won't let myself step back from what I felt on the ice. I don't think about Ewan's wife, I don't think about any of the consequences that will certainly arise. I think about nothing except the expression on his face and the release I felt in me.

Standing up, I look at myself in the mirror. I look no different – I have hat hair and my curls are limp and bedraggled. My skin

is excoriated by the elements and my cheeks are a Santa-suit red. These are not the looks of seduction. I grin delightedly at my god-awful appearance and stamp out of the Palace.

The three skiers have arrived; I hear them as I squat over a plastic washing bowl of boiling water that is rapidly becoming lukewarm. Next to the bowl are two flasks filled with boiling water and a water bottle of colder water. I liberally splash hot water into the bowl and add a dash of the cold. I have taken all my clothes off save my socks and boots and now I attempt to wash myself without wetting too much of my bedding. It's an uncomfortable process. It doesn't help that the water on my skin quickly freezes in the air. I am shivering involuntarily but continue to sponge myself down. It feels ritualistic. I am washing for someone other than me. I soap my body in sections and wipe it away carefully with a washer. Earlier in the afternoon I washed my hair and it dried while I sat in the dining tent reading *War and Peace*. I'd half-expected someone to comment on a glow of excitement in my manner but no one seemed to notice.

I change into clean underwear, pull a woollen vest over my head and then over that a long-sleeved woollen T-shirt. I pull on a pair of woollen long johns and a pair of polar fleece pants. The tent rustles with the quiet breeze that is whispering through the camp. The ice has begun to seize and splinter as the short summer comes to its end. It makes me jumpy to hear this sound. It won't be long now before Blue 1 is closed for the season.

My reverie halts while I re-bottle the dirty water from my ablutions. I curse at the antiquated bathing routines we must adhere to. At last, with the aid of a funnel, I mop up the 'bathroom' and emerge into the pale light of nighttime, clutching my bits and pieces. My feet scrunch the snow as I make my way to blue ice where I'll tip out the bath water. I see René who is walking towards the dining tent. The Frenchman waves at me.

I stomp inside the dining tent from the western end, into the kitchen.

‘Get out, get out, get out – you’re not allowed in here.’ Lisa shoos me away.

‘But I want a gin and tonic,’ I insist.

‘Rob – see to her, will you?’

‘Yes, Ma’am. Will Madam be having lemon with her G&T?’

‘Madam most certainly will,’ I reply. I grin at Geoff who is sitting at the table doing his cross-stitch.

Ewan is deep in conversation with Alain and René and I leave them alone. I turn to Mike and bicker gleefully with him about our long-running card game fracas. I’ve taught him how to play five hundred and he’s been teaching me racing patience. Both games bring out a brutal disposition to win at all costs. Mike is the worst and the best player to have as an opponent. He calculates the consequences of his every move, planning his strategy to the nth degree like Napoleon taking on the Russians. I play purely on instinct, hoping to confound him with spontaneity. I’ll bid a hand even if the cards are atrocious, hoping to pick up something less shabby in the kitty.

With two different ideologies at loggerheads, our games are not for the faint-hearted. Mike has come close to being murdered in his bed on a number of occasions. If he wins a game he will lean in close to me, raise a fist to my nose and bawl, ‘Yeeees!’ I will look back with the lidless glare of a snake, ready to close my jaws around his clenched fingers. Every night is a showdown at the OK Corral.

The two of us suffer from a strange amnesia, preferring to forget the defeats of the previous night and front up for more skirmishes. We begin in a most civil manner. One of us ambles out to the blue ice with the ice axe and goggles to chip out a few virgin chunks for our glasses of Laphroaig whiskey while the other shuffles the cards.

It's all good-natured bonhomie until the killer instinct is unleashed. It could be a careless reference to the tally of wins or losses, it could be a raised eyebrow at the cards placed on the table or it could simply be a Machiavellian thirst for blood. Suddenly it's three in the morning and the players are still hurling invective and cards across the table in a personal vendetta.

'So, Mike. Three to one I think. How are you holding up?' Mike smiles happily at me and nods his head.

'You really should learn bridge, you need a team to boost your game plan. Think about it.'

'Oh there's really no need to offer me any tips, the numbers speak for themselves.' We nod at each other; two adversaries, each waiting for the other to turn their back, the quicker to plunge the knife into it.

'Swine,' I mouth as he turns away.

Dinner is served. Maxo has defrosted almost every meat group we have down here. There is lamb, beef, chicken and ham spread across the table in sizzling pans with baked potatoes, carrots and lashings of garlic. It looks a slaughterhouse but the smells are intoxicating. We fall on this mountain of flesh with all the delicacy of slaving beasts. Lisa looks on us with vegetarian disdain as she tucks into her chickpea casserole.

Ewan sits two down from me across the table. I sneak glances at his face. His beard is longer and he is wearing a snug-fitting cap with small earflaps that have been lifted from his ears and rest comfortably on the side of his head. He looks the picture of health and vitality. He catches one of my furtive peeks and quickly smiles at me before I look away. I marvel at his persistence with me. I gave up on myself a long time ago so what does he see in such a prickly, unruly person?

'Can I talk to you later?' I ask Ewan.

'We can talk now if you like.'

‘No – of course. Um. I need to see you alone.’ How loquacious of me.

After the meal, Rob, Lisa and Terry begin a spirited game of Scrabble. Terry accuses them of hornswoggling his attempts to put down a word. Mike and I have a few relatively civil rounds of five hundred. For once I am too keyed up to get hot and bothered about his winning streak. Ewan leaves the tent but returns as the evening is winding up. For a few minutes people stand around clutching toothbrushes with their backs to the stove, idly discussing the weather and the imminent arrivals. I innocently sit at one of the tables looking at a page of Tolstoy.

And then there are two of us.

‘I don’t know where to begin,’ I say. Ewan raises an eyebrow and leans up against a bench with his arms folded. ‘You’re a strange man. I never for a moment thought that I would begin to change my mind about you but I have and I just thought I should tell you.’ There is silence. I take a lungful of air. ‘Anyway. That’s all.’ Suddenly I want to retreat.

‘Can I ask what is different?’

‘I really don’t know. I saw you standing on your skis out there and I felt as if I’d been given a slap. I don’t know what it was but you looked wonderful and... shit. I don’t know, something just fell away. That’s all.’

‘Come here.’ I remain standing by the stove and clasp my hands behind my back.

‘I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.’

‘Why?’ I pull an expression. We both stay put. I rub my nose with the back of my hand and look steadily at Ewan.

‘I just want to hold you,’ he says.

‘But what will happen then?’ Jesus, Alexa, I think to myself. Do you want everything in triplicate? There’s still an opportunity to temper my confession with any number

of caveats. But what is the point? I don't want to leave things as they are. I move forward.

We just hold each other. I feel enfolded in warmth and kindness. It's safe and wonderfully bracing. I go limp in his arms and burrow myself deep into his chest. I turn my head and rest my ear on his heart and listen to its rhythm. I could stay here for the rest of the season.

Neither of us moves for a long time. His head rests on top of mine and I don't feel that he is uncomfortable or waiting for something more. The pleasure of holding him fulfils a yearning till now unrecognised. It is a blessing for me and I feel my heart settle with wonder and release. This feeling is so unexpected that it startles me. I haven't held someone like this in such a long time – if ever. All secret desires and hungers disappear. I am not hiding anything. I snuggle in even closer and I think I'm about to cry. 'I just want to hold you – that's all,' Ewan speaks into my hair and I smile with joy.

After a while we stand back and smile in amazement at one another. Something has happened and neither of us knows quite what to make of it. But we're elated to be close. Ewan turns me around and settles my back into his stomach. He clasps me around my waist and I cover his hands with mine.

'I thought about this for a long time, you know. But I didn't think it would happen, you were so cold on the radio and you never replied to my e-mails.'

'I thought it was really wrong of you to tell me that stuff. It stunned me because it was so unexpected.'

'You didn't seem stunned in the ice cave.'

'That's because I couldn't think of anything to say or do. I felt completely trapped.'

'What's made you change your mind?'

'I don't think I really know. Maybe I'm lonelier than I care to admit.'

'So I'm a social experiment?'

‘No. That’s not fair,’ I say quietly. ‘I didn’t come here looking for this. I think I’d stopped assuming that I would meet someone a long time ago. It sounds contrived I know but I’d let that idea go way before Blue 1. Maybe that’s what we all have to do – give it up and then it will come.’

‘What are you talking about?’

I laugh at his question. ‘Oh look, pay no attention to me. I don’t know what I am saying any more.’

We talk quietly together and abruptly I wonder what it would be like to kiss him. I face him and tentatively place my lips on his. Ewan has to swallow air. His beard, instead of being prickly and distracting, feels wonderful against my chin and cheeks. We both murmur with excitement. We hold each other gently, cradling faces in hands. I’ve come to the end of someone I used to know.



Ewan is in my tent. I leave the cook tent ten minutes before he arrives. I crawl into my cramped shelter and gaze distractedly at the mess. My fantasies of seduction never involved a tent, subzero temperatures and deceit. The reality is so much more bizarre. Before undressing I attempt a few household chores. I shove all my dirty clothes in an empty rucksack and zip shut my red bag in an effort to tone down the junk that's in it. I fluff up the sleeping bag and then sit on the edge of the mattress chewing my nails.

I can't hear anything outside over the wind. Thank God. I could only do this on a night when the katabatics are blowing. It deadens all other camp sounds and I have no intention of anyone hearing the two of us. The tent flaps and jerks in the wind and I slowly unlace my boots. I undress and pull on fresh woollen tights and a clean vest before leaping into the sleeping bag. I'm quivering both with cold and apprehension. What a reckless, idiotic fool I've become. Maybe Ewan will decide that it's prudent not to come after all and he'll save me the embarrassment of being caught with a married man in my tent. But it's too late. The zipper of the tent's fly is opening and there he is.

He's wearing his heavy jacket with the fur trim. He looks straight at me, flushed from the bitter cold outside. His cheeks are red-frozen and his eyes dance with joy. It's such a strange, desirable sight to behold in this tiny tent: a man's face framed in fur. In that instant I forget my anxieties; I sit up and open my arms as he pulls himself further inside. His bulk fills the tent and I'm overwhelmed at this masculine presence in my

cramped sleeping quarters. He slides up beside me and holds me tightly to him, encased as I am in the sleeping bag. I turn reluctantly and look at him.

‘Can I join you in there?’

‘If you like.’ Part of me keeps thinking that maybe now I can stop this. Maybe right now is the time to call a halt. But each moment slips away like water and there is no right moment because I know I don’t want to stop it. He sits up and unlaces his boots, grunting as he pulls them off. Then he eases his bulky jacket off and lays it on top of my red bag. He tugs his Gore-Tex pants over his ankles and then he’s crouched next to me, wearing long johns and a T-shirt. I half sit up and our lips touch in a gentle caress. His lips are warm and full. His tongue laps mine and I grip the back of his neck to pull him down on top of me.

We wriggle into my sleeping bag and the logistics of two people in one bag momentarily get in the way. We grunt and swear, initially twisting the bag tighter around our bodies. We laugh uproariously at our predicament and I quickly place my palm over his mouth to stop the sound spinning out over the other tents. Ewan muffles his guffaws and I lie on top of him, wrapping my arms around his chest, gripping his warmth and happiness. We lie quietly like that for some time, our breathing rising and falling in syncopated rhythm. I lift my head and stare into his brown eyes. I’ve never been this close to a man with brown eyes before. I stare intently at them as if scrutinising a picture. Ewan blinks under my examination and I lean up to kiss each of his eyelids. The curve of his cheekbone and the softness of his eyelids are intoxicating. I place my mouth over each eye again and again, marvelling at the texture of skin over bone. This physical luxury is potent. We roll awkwardly onto our sides still holding each other. It’s so warm inside my sleeping bag but to strip we’d have to climb out of the bag and then back in again – for now we explore each other under our vests and murmur and giggle

as we find ticklish spots or we groan through clenched teeth as the stroking becomes sexual and desire makes us jerk and writhe.

I feel like I'm on my first date and neither of us knows the moves. The tent is too small, too incommodious for grand gestures. Outside the winds continue to harass the camp and I can hear the *scritch scritch* of snow grazing the nylon. If it weren't for the cold we could be camping on a beach.

In the early hours of the morning Ewan leaves. I cringe to think of people seeing us emerge from the one tent. I think I care more about this crassness than people knowing that something is going on.

I am ambivalent about Ewan and myself. I relish our moments together but I'm not the person who should become involved in secret affairs. I don't have the mettle for it. When we find precious moments to walk out together, either down the runway or towards a nunatak, I spend most of my time not only gazing back at camp and refusing to hold Ewan's hand but also furiously wiping out all traces of our footprints, which otherwise would leave lasting patterns on the snow. I have come across skidoo tracks from two years ago on the ice and I am beyond paranoid that someone will see our footprints and realise something is going on. By the time we reach camp again I am mentally and physically exhausted by my attempts to camouflage our movements. There is no refuge out here in this blankness.

The only day I truly relax with Ewan is a walk we take together to the top of The Wall nunatak. We are unaware that it is the last day of solitude before the season ends. Geoff is the only person in camp. The DC-3 crew have flown to the British base at Rothera, taking Alain and René with them and Mike, Rob and Lisa have taken the skidoos to meet the remaining Holtanna crew who are now skiing back to Blue 1. We don't expect the skidoo party back for at least a day. I casually tell Geoff I'm off for a walk with Ewan and then

scuttle out of the tent before I become nervous about the lucid glance that he gives the two of us. We tramp up to the summit, stopping often to hold one another and exclaim over the lucky break we've been given. Ewan discovers a nook on the very edge of a 1,200-metre drop and we sit wrapped in each other's arms, alternately holding each other close and swallowing gulps of tea and eating chocolate biscuits. We are sheltered from the wind and the sun bathes us in a benediction of light and warmth. It's an afternoon of pure joy and wonder. We talk about everything and nothing, most of the time we're laughing at our incredible luck to be here, alone, gazing out at the ruthless grandeur that surrounds us.

Geoff is not impressed with our late return. Immediately I feel guilty and rush about in the kitchen, cooking up a frittata and admonishing myself for not being *here*. I feel so bloody restricted. I want to spend time with Ewan but I have to parcel out my time with him. I am too conscious of 'fraternising' with a client and it makes me hypersensitive to what others may perceive. As it is, we make eyes at each other like besotted teenagers while the tent mills with people and I am deliberately naive in thinking that only the two of us are aware of what is going on. Nothing escapes anyone's attention.

'All right, dinner's ready.' Geoff and Ewan are quietly reading and I've been bashing pots and pans in the kitchen, revelling in my solitude. Geoff couldn't raise Mike on the radio and so we don't know when he is expected back. I am acutely aware that these hours should be treasured. When Mike returns with the Holtanna team it's going to be the beginning of the end.

Tom Waits blares over my makeshift CD player. His mournful ballads have accompanied me since I arrived and now that it's almost time to leave, his songs take on a melancholy significance that makes me want to stand outside the tent and howl like a dog. Our band of reprobates will finally

break up for good. I've weathered the departure of Charlie, Blair, Shane and John but now it's my turn. I pause briefly to contemplate my imminent departure but realise I don't have the mental vigour to deal with it at this moment.

The three of us chew our meal in relative quiet. Ewan and I smile at each other over the table. I am becoming a little alarmed at the fierceness of my affections for this man.

'I can hear something,' Geoff addresses the two of us. We drag our gaze away from each other to look blankly at him.

'What. What is it?'

'Listen,' Geoff holds his hand up, as if it could magnify the sound. I strain my ears and gradually the noise of the skidoos reaches us. I look to Ewan. Our quiet times together have been so fleeting. The three of us troop out of the tent and look south. It's even worse than I'd imagined. All of them, Mike, Lisa, Rob and the remaining four from Holtanna are speeding towards the camp. André and Fabrizzio are on skis and are being towed by a skidoo; Katelijne and Jacque are sitting behind the drivers. I sigh to myself, understanding that there will be no early night for me. I am so annoyed at this sudden invasion that it makes my breath catch in my throat. I turn around with furious tears prickling my eyes and stomp back into the kitchen to start cooking another meal. I have to counsel myself very sternly. I am the cook and this is my job so just get *on* with it. I have just enough time to swallow my rage before the first people tramp inside.

'Hello! Welcome back, everyone. Katelijne – you look half-starved,' I blurt out. It's true. The bones of her hips jut out prominently, even through the bulky clothing she is wearing. She is freezing cold and she stutters her words of greeting. My anger abates suddenly as I look at her. We hustle her over to the stove and someone gets her a chair to sit on. She hugs her arms around her body and hunches over, straining towards the warmth. Everyone is tramping in through the kitchen and the tent becomes crowded with

voices and accents and exclamations. I retreat to my end and continue cooking. Lisa fills a hot water bottle and gives it to Katelijne. André, Fabrizzio and Alain look more robust but their faces have been excoriated by the bitter conditions up at Holtanna. They have lost the sheen of their first days in Antarctica. Their physiognomy is flayed and exhausted but they are happy to be back in the relative luxury of Blue 1. Of all of them it is Katelijne who has suffered the most. Her time in the hills has been very arduous and it is with great relief that she looks about the tent. She had guts to take on this assignment but the toll shows in her exhaustion.

After serving a late dinner I look about for Ewan but he has left the tent. I feel bereft and very tired as I slump in a chair next to the stove. Most people have stumbled off to their tents. Fabrizzio and Mike are propped up at the table. I'm too tired even to challenge Mike to a game of cards. Things are grim indeed.

'Fabrizzio – happy to be back?' I enquire of the young climber.

'There's better food here.'

'Why thank you,' I drawl in my best imitation of a gracious Southern hostess. 'And what of the mountains you climbed?'

'It was freakin' cold, what can I say? And no one wanted to speak English,' he says petulantly.

'But your Fringlish is a marvel,' I tell him. Fabrizzio has perfected the mangling of English and French to an art form. Listening to him chatter blithely to André and Alain is an education.

'Hey André. Pass us le bottle of vin s'il vous plaît.' André considers Fabrizzio impassively but the big man nevertheless accedes to his request.

Katelijne and Fabrizzio have become close during their time at Holtanna. It is the closeness of siblings and they chatter to each other in their own shorthand which excludes

the rest of us. It is how we all must sound if outsiders were to observe us.

Before I head to my tent I trundle over to the ice cave to ferret about for more meat for our growing camp. For now I will be cooking for four expeditioners from Holtanna but when the DC-3 comes back it will be stopping off at Aboa to pick up the Finns before making trips to Troll to bring the remaining Norwegians to Blue 1. The cave is stocked full and I have been making an exhaustive list of our current supplies. As the season draws to a close, everyone is inventorying like crazy. I am so sick of my constantly changing lists but it's easier in the long run to have a master plan than find yourself at the end of the season with only a few hours to compile an inventory for future seasons.

I pull a bag of diced steak from a Rubbermaid and rummage around for more cheese and bacon. Satisfied with my provisions, I pile it all on my trusty sledge and drag it back to the main tent. It's about one in the morning and the sun is now setting behind the Fenristunga. Ominous winter lurks on the darkening horizon like a predatory beast. At night we're putting candles on the tables to illuminate the gloom that has begun to cloak our camp, a portent of seasons changing. It's a bleak and depressing landscape and our brightly coloured tents now look forlorn on this illimitable ice field. I clatter inside with my shopping and laboriously lay the meat on top of one of the snow smelters to defrost overnight. Everyone has gone to bed. I cease my clanking and look about the silent tent. There is a lived-in homeliness to the mess in front of me. Two half-empty bottles of wine and a discarded game of Scrabble lie on the table. A pile of books are stacked on a chair and someone's washing hangs from the tent rails near the stove. More chairs and tables are stacked at the eastern entrance of the tent in readiness for the returning scientists from Aboa and Troll. I drag a chair to the stove and sit down. This is it, I think. My transcendent days of chilled, crystal

tranquillity are ended. Sitting in the quiet I feel a welling of breathlessness and panic. Back in November the hours seemed to stretch forward like an unexpected bounty and an awareness of limitless time surged through me. What a phantasm that was. This scene before me is going to be packed away in crates and buried underneath the snow until another season begins. No one knows when that will be. Looking at the strewn domestics before me it seems impossible to imagine that in a few weeks' time a lonely bamboo pole will be all that is left of Blue 1.



Ewan and I are endeavouring to be discreet but it's impossible to quell our desire to be together. We're conducting our romance using Ewan's Palm Pilot. He leaves long messages in a file on his machine and slips it underneath the kitchen bench. In quiet moments I turn the machine on and read his messages with my back resolutely turned to the throng behind me. I smile guiltily and happily and idiotically like a hormonally charged teenager. I cover my mouth at the words he writes and then I turn and try to catch his eye as he chats innocently to Mike or to Geoff.

We are sitting by the stove after everyone has gone to bed. He takes hold of my hand and brings my fingers to his mouth and kisses them. It is a gesture of tenderness and desire.

In that instant I realise I've misjudged our intimacy. I'd told him that what we had was something that was finite. When I left Antarctica I would leap straight back into the Sydney scene in the hope that my time with him would give me a much-needed boost of confidence to brave the pleasures and pitfalls of sex in the city. But his heartfelt gesture has put paid to my frivolous intentions. What is going to happen when we leave? Any control I thought I had over this liaison vanishes.

I am shocked how quickly I've fallen for this man. I am gripped by a numbing dread. It's not possible to consider continuing our relationship; circumstances and geography are going to upset that hope. Equally I have no urge to pick up my life in Sydney from where I left off. What other options are possible?

Over these past months I sensed a different me emerge, like sloughed skin. I'd begun to appreciate and relish this person. I don't want to lose her. Slowly, inexorably, another reality is smothering our camp.

I have flung myself onto my mattress (as much as that's possible in these circumstances) and I am crying snotty, gulping sobs. The time for departure is eight or so hours away, so it could be that this heaving, ridiculous noise is of despair. But it's not. I have just been told that the Spanish expedition who will be due in for lunch will be eating with us after all. They have been up in the mountains climbing near Alain Hubert's camp and until this time they have been self-catering. Mike has informed me that I will cook their last meals. As usual, I hadn't anticipated this change of plans. It seems I never learn. I have reacted to these latest events with what I would like to think is uncharacteristic hysteria. Instead of making a dignified and respectful departure, I feel panicked and harried by the thought that I need to return to the kitchen and find yet more food to prepare.

For the last three days I have been spending my time ensconced in the kitchen preparing meal after meal. I am dog-tired, I feel completely unprepared for the departure and I am growling with the ferocity of a pit bull. The news of the Spanish joining us for the final meal has tipped me into irrational rage. Mike gets the benefit of my wrath before I barge out of the tent and onto my mattress.

I wanted to savour my leavetaking of Antarctica. I had been thinking of a solitary walk to the nunatak, or maybe one last tramp down the runway for a final, wistful gaze at the Fenristunga and the Høltedahl. But there'll be no time for such indulgences. Instead I drum my toes into my mattress with the fury of a four-year-old having a temper tantrum. This impotency makes me angrier than I care to think about so I just sob louder. It's too pathetic.

The last few days have been a strange kind of torture. Everyone is desperate for the plane to arrive and take us away from this place. The changing season is playing on our collective minds and our tents, always vulnerable, now look frighteningly fragile. It is time for us to go – everyone recognises this. We look increasingly to the north and to the east where bad weather generally begins, hoping that the plane will not be delayed for days by storms. So far, so good. I can't pack up the kitchen because some of the team will remain here for a few days after I leave. The DC-3 crew, Mike and Benjamin will have the unenviable task of putting Blue 1 to bed. I start to store excess supplies in Rubbermaids.

The camp is heaving. It's like a crowded pub, people are propping up the kitchen benches, slouching over tables, lolling tiredly by the stove, attempting to wheedle the remaining alcohol supplies out of the cook, watching disinterestedly as Blue 1 is slowly packed away in Rubbermaids, in tent bags, in crates. Terry is suggesting we pour some petrol around the perimeter and *whoosh*, toss a match on it. He suggests we barbecue a couple of sides of beef for the lads while the place burns and be done with it. By now we think that's the most sagacious idea we've heard all season.

Rob has grabbed Terry for last-minute games of Scrabble and discourse. The two of them are firm friends and it has become a fixture of the camp to see our fresh-faced young doctor and the jovial mechanic hunched over the board game cursing and muttering like a couple of demented walruses. They give the illusion of constancy; the camp will be here forever.

Our manic, frenetic camp gives way to a strange quiet on the final evening. People group themselves around tables as Mike lights the candles. Ceremoniously he finds the remaining bottle of gin from his supply and pours many of us our final gin and tonic. I drink mine quietly and look sideways at Ewan who is deep in conversation. He will return to San Francisco

from Cape Town and my flight to Sydney has been confirmed from Johannesburg. The last three months could have been a dream.

I am subconsciously avoiding Ewan now. My Sydney antenna has started to rise from the Blue 1 morass and I haven't a clue how I am going to feel about him when I arrive back in South Africa. My brain won't let me daydream about any of this and in a sense I'm glad. I can't cope with it.

'Wake up, Alexa... Alexa you've got to get up. The plane is about to leave.' Geoff is shaking my feet.

'Huh?'

'The Ilyushin has been refuelled. Everyone is down at the threshold and we've got to get down there.' Suddenly I'm awake and completely disorientated. I gasp and sit up. The cold is ruthless outside the sleeping bag. It's about three in the morning and the sun has sunk behind the mountain ranges. At nine the previous evening I'd gone to bed after doing some final packing of the kitchen and talking desultorily to Terry. The Ilyushin had landed a few hours earlier in the lengthening shadows of the mountains. This time we'd guided the plane in with orange flares as the sun's rays were not bright enough to allow the pilot to see the runway.

I had cooked dinner and felt nothing as I watched everyone eat my final meal. I wiped the two ovens down for the last time and closed the splash-back screen on the big oven, ready for it to be buried in a crate. And then I wandered over to my tent to pack my bags and fell fully dressed into my sleeping bag. I didn't even think to ask someone to wake me when the plane was due to leave.

I can hear the scream of the engines and suddenly I'm terrified that I'll be left here. I scramble out of my sleeping bag and begin shoving it into its bag. My other sleeping bag has already been packed away. I lie back on the mattress and pull my overpants on with panicking fingers. Thankfully

I don't need to pack up the tent because Benjamin will be bunking down in it. My bags are stacked outside and I throw my sleeping bag onto the snow and fall clumsily out of the tent. People are milling about everywhere. All their tents and gear are down at the runway but there seems to be a still-steady stream of people going in and out of the dining tent. I half-run towards it and then veer off to the Orange Palace. My reflection is flushed. The toilet seat is freezing and I tell myself to hurry up and finish peeing before my skin sticks to the rim.

I leap up and rush back to the dining tent. It's still quietly busy and I try to settle my nerves. I have made sure my gear is on a skidoo that has gone to the plane. There is nothing left of my presence here, except for my books and recipes which I've decided to leave for posterity, or for the next person lucky enough to experience this incomparable world.

The kitchen is in complete chaos. Half-packed Rubbermaids lie forlornly next to my benches. The big pots and pans are stacked on the northern bench and there is a jumble of flour and sugar and spices lying in jars around me. I begin to pack most of it away but remember that the boys will need some of it. I decide to label what is in the boxes to help them out. I yawn and rub my eyes.

'It's time to go, guys. Are you ready?' Maxo is in his cotton flying suit and looks sadly at me. He won't be seeing Lisa for at least a month. Ewan is behind Maxo and he insists on a final shot of me in the kitchen. I look startled as he raises the camera to his eye.

The ordered panic is catching. Everyone in the tent has gone except me, Lisa, Geoff and Ewan – the originals, but this fact doesn't register with us. We climb into our outer gear and exit the eastern door. Not once do I look back at my home.

I walk with Ewan the 800 metres to the plane. The last of the empty fuel drums is being rolled off the spill mat. Benjamin,

standing with his hair askew and fuel dirtying his hands, looks tired beyond belief. I feel briefly sad that we couldn't understand each other. I grab Terry and Maxo in a brief, tight hug. It seems I haven't seen Dave for days but I tell Terry to say goodbye to him.

'Not if I can help it. He should be here himself,' Terry says with typical bluntness. I chuckle at him. When will I get to meet the likes of him again? I never met them in Sydney.

'Goodbye, Mike.' I pause and chew my bottom lip. 'It's been an amazing...' I stop. Words won't cut it and Mike would look askance at any pathetic outburst from me. I kiss him on the cheek and he enfolds me in his long arms. And then there are no more goodbyes.

Geoff climbs the ladder to the plane and I follow him up. I stop and turn to look back at the camp. The tents and the DC-3 are forlorn on the horizon. An Antarctic moon shines dully in the north-eastern sky. The sun has set behind the Fenristunga and the light is opaque and grey. The interior of the plane is filled with noise and people milling around our cargo. It has been laid out in the shape of a panhandle and runs the length of the plane. At the rear of the jet it rises at least five metres into the air. Fabrizio lounges at the very top of this small mountain and gives me a cheery wave. Along either side of the cargo everyone has crammed themselves up against the walls of the plane. I look at the chaos with bemused resignation. I follow Geoff down the right side of the luggage and we find space next to Ewan. I am nervous in his presence now. When he turns to smile at me, I grimace in his direction and turn away, seemingly to find a more comfortable position but in reality to try to collect my thoughts. Earlier I had suggested we spend some time in Cape Town – to see how we felt about each other in a more ordinary environment. I felt assured and worldly when I suggested this. Now I feel sick with apprehension. I'm thinking I shouldn't have said anything at all. I half-wish I could walk away from Ewan and

these feelings I have for him. My mind is leaping forward, it's back in Australia, back at my desk in downtown Sydney. I feel helpless as a sense of finality descends on me.

I am anxious to meet up with my family. The only time I've spoken to them was at Christmas. I need to tell them about Ewan, about my feelings for him and what they think I should do. I glance at Ewan and he senses my regard. He smiles gently. My job has been held open for me in Sydney but the prospect of returning to it is frightening. I want to screech at the feeling of panic and numbness that is beginning to swamp me.

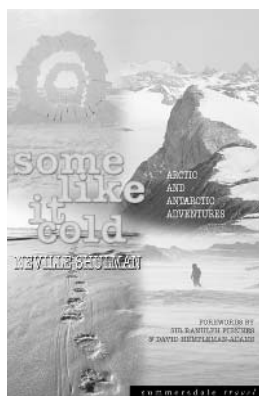
I look over to the door of the plane. While I've been brooding, the door has been shut and we're sealed in the hold. Suddenly Antarctica has gone. There is no possibility of finding a porthole to take a final look at the camp. It's as if the curtain has fallen on a stage play. This unanticipated action brings me to my feet in surprise. 'That's it?' I say out loud. No one can hear me. Around me the Norwegians and the Finns are stripping out of their polar gear. Bare bottoms and white legs are glimpsed as people scramble madly out of their constricting polar clothing. The pilot has turned the heat up in the hold and soon many of the scientists are standing around in shorts and sandals – a few are wearing garish Hawaiian shirts. I blink at this incongruity. The plane hasn't left the fuel cache but we might as well be at a nameless airport anywhere in the world. I think about crawling over the luggage to one of the portholes but I can't move for the crush of bodies. I look down at Ewan and he gazes steadily at me. I begin to smile, my doubts diminishing and a tentative hope filling me with a strange joy. The plane starts to roll away from the fuel cache. I sit back on my bit of bench and block my ears to the rising scream of the engines. We're going home.



Antarctica ebbs and flows through my mind. I've made some enquiries to go back, asking the Australian Antarctic programme about possible jobs but then I'm not sure if I want to go to Antarctica and live on a base, the equivalent of a four-star motel. My experience would be hard to repeat. In a way I'm glad that I can't hop on a plane and be there all over again. It pleases me that Blue 1 is not there, that it's been buried under blowing snow. The only thing that remains of our camp is Ewan's weather station. He still receives the data from a satellite over the summer months. During the winter the weather station goes quiet, the sun's rays disappear and cannot power the solar panel. But generally around September of each year an e-mail arrives, signalling the return of the sun to Antarctica. The two of us will whoop loudly and then I'll become happily melancholy for a moment.

I didn't return to my job in Sydney. There was no point, particularly knowing how uneasy and unhappy I'd become while living there. Ewan and I spent some time in Cape Town and it was there that we decided we would do what we could to be together. I moved to San Francisco to live with him. It was a simple decision to make. Ewan has since returned south to set up another weather station in West Antarctica. I stayed in San Francisco. He called from Punta Arenas, telling me how the place hadn't changed, that the bars where I'd enjoyed pisco sours still did a roaring trade. He flew to Antarctica with the Russians again, only on this flight they had seatbelts and safety instructions. Times have changed.

Maybe one day I'll have an opportunity to go back; to sit on the top of the nunatak and gaze at that silent landscape that shimmers like a dream in my mind. If I were to dig at the site of Blue 1, I would find amongst the crates my copy of *War and Peace*, an oven, my recipes and the stove. A bamboo pole still marks the site of those brief three months. It is planted in the snow like a flexible sentinel, bending with the winds that sweep across the desert.



Some Like It Cold

Arctic and Antarctic Adventures

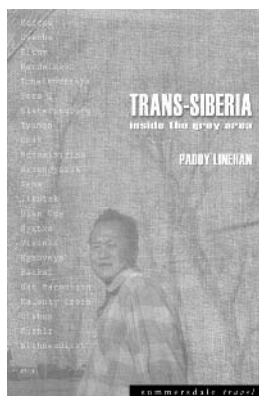
Neville Shulman

£7.99 Pb

From the icy plains of the Arctic to the glacial wilderness of the Antarctic, **Neville Shulman** embarked on two epic journeys achieving his dream of reaching both the North and South Poles.

Travelling to the North Pole, Shulman traces the footsteps of Andy Goldsworthy, as part of a Tate Gallery team invited to view the artist's Arctic works. Ten years later, Shulman sets out on an expedition to the Antarctic, this time with the goal of raising money for charity. While undertaking this arduous journey, he meets Robert Swan, the first ever man to walk to both Poles. Throughout, as in all his adventures, Shulman's Zen philosophy enhances his encounters with the polar wilderness and with Nature and provides a unique perspective on adventure travel.

Some Like It Cold also recounts the stories of the early explorers of the frozen climes – Scott, Amundson, Ross and Franklin – and provides little-known information about both the flora and fauna of these remote regions.



Trans-Siberia

Inside the Grey Area

Paddy Linehan

£7.99 Pb

‘...Mapmakers in general display a distinct prejudice. Europe is planted on the middle of the pages and coloured vibrantly; pinks, blues and duck-egg greens. But when you venture East, things turn spooky. Colours become muddy, borders doubtful and names rare...’

It all started in the mind of a child with the desire to travel. Siberia was full of darkness, struggle, cold and desperation.

Years later, haunted by a shadowy image that he just can’t shake off, **Paddy Linehan** decides to pursue his Siberian dream. He learns to think on his feet and travels ‘like a Russian’ in a culture struggling with post-Soviet, post-communist flux.

Traditional post-bath beatings, bonding with a love-sick Siberian boy, bizarre occurrences on the 44A Trans-Siberian train: this is an extraordinary and very human journey.

‘...very cold and very far...’ You almost want to go there yourself. Almost.

www.summersdale.com