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Long Walk on a Strange Road

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LONG WALK ON A STRANGE ROAD

By

Thomas E. Rich

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Thomas E. Rich is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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Thomas E. Rich August 25, 1986

ABSTRACT

LONG WALK ON A STRANGE ROAD

By

Thomas E. Rich

Long Walk on a Strange Road is a collection of stories.

In them, isolated characters contend with the immediate challenges of their environments. In the absence of other human beings—and, in some cases, any life at all—they are, paradoxically, more attuned to the rest of humanity than ever before; their personal contexts take on as much reality as the curious paths on which they walk.

We are, after all, social creatures; take that away from us, and we recreate it.

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Thomas E. Rich
2011

DEDICATION

To Elise, the strangest and most splendid find on my own long walk.

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For unwavering support, optimism, and advice, my thesis director, Jen Howard.

For unwavering support in other projects, thereby enabling this one, Ray Ventre, Laura Soldner, and Lesley Larkin.

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For commiseration, fellowship, and good cheer, my fellow graduate students.

For all of the rest—and begging pardon for the omission—all of those dear people not listed here.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
The World Ends; Time Passes.....	3
A Cruel and Stupid Lizard.....	9
Go Down, You Gray-Eyed Horses.....	19
Captain Montain's War.....	34
Bibliography.....	57
Appendix A: The Heroic Age.....	58

INTRODUCTION

The thing that I like best about being a writer is that not only can you get away with telling fantastic lies, but everyone sort of expects you to. I refer not only to the delightful lie of a well-told story, but also to the more mundane lies we tell one another about what and when we intend to write. For example, I remember going down to Jen Howard's office and telling her, with a straight face, that I planned to have most of the writing done by the end of summer 2010, so that I could spend the school year revising.

"That's a great idea," she said.

"Sure you will," said her expression. "But seriously. I'll see a first draft in, what, February?" Which is more or less exactly how it wound up happening.

Looking back at my thesis proposal I find a great deal more misinformation. For instance, I wrote that "somewhere between eight and twelve" short stories would be written: I completed four. I managed to completely fail to vary my point of view and entirely evade describing "groups of characters cut off from a broader civilization." Some variety crept in with the ages and genders of my protagonists, but overall these stories do not constitute a survey of isolation. They're four ways of approaching the same theme: "the relationship between solitude and memory, between the collective world that came before the character was isolated and the singular world that comes after."

Continually, I find that the more isolated I am, the more the rest of the world intrudes. During my time at Northern I've spent a lot of time walking alone, either roaming the streets of Marquette after dark or climbing Hogsback and Sugarloaf. I've spent a good deal of time watching storms down at Picnic Rocks. I wonder what other

people are doing, what they would say if they were around, if they wonder when I'll be back. Memories come back more vividly than they ever do in a crowded room and I imagine my way through lengthy, rambling conversations. I am, of course, an incredible narcissist.

Out of those walks, though, grew a sense that we commune best with the rest of our species when we have them at an arm's length, that when we're alone—sitting on a cold shore in a storm, walking along an empty street after midnight, standing by a little stream deep in the woods—our personal contexts, memories, and experiences rise up and become as real as the physical world around us, to the point that sometimes we remember the imagined or remembered events more than the walk itself.

In the end, it wasn't the technical decisions or proposed thematic concerns that mattered; the stories had already written themselves, one step at time.

The World Ends; Time Passes

There were two of them, a man and a woman, standing on a dirt path somewhere in Idaho, facing one another, unspeaking. All that remained of the old world were those few who roamed in little tribes that aped the vanished in their laws and chants and fierce songs. But they were few and dwindling, and most of the people who still walked the earth did so in solitude, all but bereft of words.

Somewhere on an Idaho backroad he spotted her, and he only managed to separate her from the rest of it—the rest of the mass of wordless things, indistinguishable one from another, even motion and immobility becoming the same—because she was running. Like him. She came out of the trees on one side of the road, descending the embankment with light ease, landing on the ball of one foot and pushing off even as she landed, bounding lightly across the road to leap the other embankment and disappear again. A quick flicker of long legs, a swirl of hair. Gone.

What else could he do? He followed.

The last words she had were an Australian by a campfire slowly playing an old wooden guitar and singing the same chorus time and again—*darling, darling stand by me, oh won't you stand by me*—slow and monotonous, without tune or pitch, his eyes closed, the firelight grabbing at his fingernails on each downstroke and making them sparks, the stars high up above them and the circle of light and the dark around it and the cattle station around that and the ocean and world around that even. Just the Australian

man in a workshirt with a hole worn in the right cuff and the buttons undone to show the clean white of the undershirt, the whole of him perched on a cut ring of log somewhere out in all of that land, singing slow and soft—*darling, darling stand by me, oh won't you stand by me*—a monk at prayer, a mendicant in her wilderness, a light and a face and the words that framed them all and made them into a memory.

There were other images, an infinitude, but they had lost their words and she could no longer make sense of them. All day, every day, endlessly she thought of them, or experienced them, but if there was another man or guitar or Australia she didn't know it; save that long-gone singer, her images had lost one another, like pieces of a puzzle taken to different rooms. Some key strand had broken, and bit by bit the web of connection and implication, synonymy and similarity, logical chain and random linkage had unraveled.

But for the Australian she had the words; he, she knew, was a *memory* as all of the other images may or may not have been. When the broken web became too much, she clung to him, knowing he was an Australian man holding a guitar in his hands and sitting on a log and singing and wearing a shirt. The words worked in that context. Other things that happened to her couldn't latch to one another, couldn't set themselves in opposition and become real. They happened around her or maybe they happened in her mind—racing down a wooded path, screaming into the sky, eating a thousand different meals—she couldn't tell anymore. But she knew that the Australian had happened in the past, when there had been others, when she could look around and order things and connect them.

Once, after the words had been lost, she had bent down to drink from a still pond and seen a face looking back at her. The words had come back in a rush, and she named everything—reflection pool self eyes nose trees sky—but they sloughed off like dead skin when a breeze ruffled the water's surface. She'd sat for hours in numb silence before the Australian came back to her, his slow and soft voice threading its way from that world-away campfire of another time to find her by the river, to fix itself and its words in her head and say that, yes, this was a human man, an Australian, and Australia was a country and countries were things that bordered other countries and the thing in his hands was a guitar and what he was doing with it and his voice was making music.

But she hadn't even known that much until, breathless and sweaty, she'd looked back and seen the runner—and she knew he was called a runner and that he was a *he* like the Australian and that the sound he was making was *not* music but panting—she could place it as exhausted—and suddenly the webs had started to make sense again, the spiders crawling out and away from the Australian to put things and their names together again with sticky strands. There was a sense of filling a hole the edge of which had been demarcated by the Australian, of completing a house which had as one corner-beam the all-but-hummed chorus—*stand by me, stand by me*—of putting aright a thing that would not have been wrong had it been entirely blanked.

The words were coming back in a rush, each one grabbing at something, dredging it up from her mind along with all of the other things lashed to it, like pulling at the mast of a shipwreck and drawing all of the rigging and tackle along up as well—beets: red (as opposed to blue or green), vegetable (like a carrot and unlike a banana), soft (compare crisp, reference chewy). Taken individually they had set up on their edges, tumbled, and

fallen; taken as a whole, together, they stretched from heaven to hell and the moon to the trenches of the sea.

“Beets,” she said, wide eyed. Sweat threaded down the man’s cooling body and the hairs on his arms and legs stood on end. Around them the trees, who had never lost their fellows, kept up their quiet talk. “I ate them last night. Beets. They were in a can and I used a can opener to open it.”

Now he regarded the woman before him, who kept holding out her palms to him as if against an invisible wall and rattling off strings of words without sense or meaning. She was about half a head shorter than him and had the look of someone soft who had become hard very quickly; her hands were covered in scrapes and rough calluses, the bones of her forearms pressing round against the taught, dry skin. She knelt down, spreading her palms across the dirt path.

His muscles felt warm and ached a little, the old good ache of a long run. He felt her words in his mind, interlocking with other ones, bracing each other against the crushing force of their own absence. Since he had climbed the Going to the Sun Road and passed into Idaho he’d lost everything, the horrific scale of his situation falling away alongside the recollection of his old life, like the two memories were playing cards leaned one against the other. He had a few maps in the light bag slung over his shoulder, along with his supply of nuts and granola bars and water bottles, but he didn’t bother with them; the name of his destination had vanished along with the rest of his words.

“And this is a *path*,” she said, “made of *dirt*, maybe some kind of *clay*—maybe. Some. Kind. Of. Clay.” She laughed. “And it has *rocks* on it, and I can pick them up with my hands—”

“Hey,” he said, unslinging his pack. She looked up. He was shaking “I... gotta keep moving.” His plans were returning, along with a tally of days and an awareness of the horrific gnawing in his gut and what it meant and what it would lead to. “There’s a town I can make before nightfall, and I need food,” he said, not looking at her, bringing his palms together and raising them as if in prayer.

“Food?” she said, looking up at him. “Food! Oh, *food!*” He shook his head and started to walk around her—another crazy out in the wilderness, one more lost soul. He was sure he could outrun her, if it came to that. But his strides were unsure, his legs trembling with each step as the words *lactic acid* and *fatigue* and *caloric deficit* defined themselves and went from his mind to his body and back, bringing with them the bone-weariness of nine days’ hard running.

“No!” she shouted, her eyes wide, and she sprang to her feet. He bounced back, landing on the balls of his feet, his muscles burning as they caught his weight. She held out her hands again. “Wait, please don’t. Please. I’m—I haven’t...” She waved her arms helplessly, her hands hanging fingers down. “I don’t remember how to do this. I don’t have any moves left.”

“Moves?” he said. The sun was just past its zenith, small and hard and bright overhead. The air was crisp and a little cool, smelling of pine.

“Please,” she said, sitting down in the dust. “Could you—stay?” She licked her lips. “Just a while?”

“Moves,” he said. He felt his knees bend and managed to put his hands out, nevertheless landing hard on his rear. “I don’t, um, have them either.” He looked at her, the two of them sitting like children on the path in Idaho, scrawny and dirty and tired and miraculously lingual again. “Did... you said you have a can opener?”

“Yes,” she said. “I can take you to it.” She stood up, as did he, and for a moment they just stood, still looking at one another. After a while he unslung his bag and dug around in it and emerged with a package of salted peanuts, which he handed to her. She reached out and took it, gently, and poured a palmful of peanuts in to her hand before giving it back. He took it.

“Thank you,” they both said. Later, when enough language had returned that it would make sense, they would speak of before, when people still roamed the earth in any meaningful number. But that was later: at that moment, at the rebirth of language, there was only the sharing of a simple meal, and thanks.

A Cruel and Stupid Lizard

The cave was perhaps fifty yards away across the narrow ravine, but nevertheless she could smell the reek of it. The stench hit her in the face the moment she stepped out of the trees, as if the leaves and bark had been absorbing it somehow, though how they could take in such a horrid odor and remain beautiful was beyond her thirteen years. Her eyes watered a little, but she didn't step back; *not a step back*, the little boy had said with that chanting lilt they got when they recited the lessons of their masters. The easy cadences of the mantras had no words for the creatures that lived in caves and glens and mountain passes, the things the boys were always practicing to find and kill. The things that sometimes killed them.

Not a step back, the little boy had said. She knelt down, brushing her skirt smooth across her knees, and pulled off her backpack. She began to untie the bedroll but the stench seemed to be growing, if that was possible, and her head felt light. From around her neck she took her kerchief and tied it tightly around her nose and mouth. A little better. She loosed the bedroll from her pack and unrolled it on the ground, revealing the short sword in its black-leather scabbard that she'd snuck from the home of the Master of Arms and carried, hidden, for the whole long hike from the village to the Lake of the Hills, where the other girls were camping.

It is an evil thing, the boy had said, away from the fire where his peers were pantomiming the slaying of some other evil thing to the *oohs* and *ahs* of a trio of similarly-aged girls. *A cruel and stupid lizard. Never step back from it, for its strikes are too fast.* She picked up the short sword and laced it to her belt, then rolled up her bedroll

and reattached it to the pack. This she set aside against the rocks; nothing in it would be of use in the cave.

It isn't supposed to be, he had continued. *We've learned to make it right.*

“You didn't make it right, though,” she said to the sword. “But I can. I know everything you knew.” She started off across the ravine toward the cavern mouth. Her eyes watered and stung, but she stepped only forward, onward, across the ravine and into the mouth of the cave.

The village girls were at the Lake of the Hills, camping across from the boys and learning to watch for the kind of thing that crept between the shadows of watchfires and stole bread from baskets or slinked in through open windows to strangle babies in their cribs. Small things, things every bit as cruel and hateful, wild and fierce as those the boys went on their long forays to hunt down. The girls would be practicing placing lines of salt along sills and tucking acorns into the toes of shoes, never keeping the same fires three nights running and smearing ash on babies' foreheads to ward off the night-snatchers. Each thing small, but vital, ritualistic, a code driven into every girl from her eighth birthday.

She still remembered the little boy returning from his first hunt, barely ten years old, scraped and bruised and reeking to high heaven from two weeks of tracking in the woods. He talked of running with a great boar chasing him, dashing to where the older boys waited with a steel boar-spear with a broad head and crossbar to stop the charging animal, the weapon so heavy it took three of them to hold it. The monster ran chest-first into the spear, but they held like oak trees, to hear him tell it, and the boar lived nearly ten minutes with the blade in its chest, raging and swinging its tusks with bloody froth

gurgling over its lips. She'd gone back and scattered her salt and acorns across her bedroom, and had been about to tear her honor sash when her mother stopped her.

Later that night, when her mother was asleep, she snuck out and crept as close as she could to where the man who had gone with the hunting party sat discussing the hunt with two of his peers. All of them were gaunt and hard, their hunting leathers smelling of ancient sweat and their bodies covered in scars older than she was. They clustered around a fire, the light making weird shadows on their cracked faces, and they drank cups of hard, bitter cider.

"They're lucky they lived," said the one who had gone with them. "The bait was nearly caught a dozen times in the chase. He was lucky the boar got tangled on the trees. The spear hit it in the chest, where the bone is hardest. The blade should have bent." He held up a flat hand, then crooked the fingers over.

"Was it an old boar?" asked one of the others. The first nodded.

"Old as you are, and about as torn up," he said, and all three men laughed. "They were fortunate."

"Boys must learn," said the third, the oldest, his eyelids heavy.

"They learn nothing by getting lucky," said the first. "Only to hope that they get lucky again." She crept away after that, returning to her bed to stare up at the criss-cross pattern of her thatched roof. When she fell asleep, her dreams were troubled by a great boar with long tusks made of iron, blood bubbling over its lips as it smashed everything in its path: trees, boulders, houses, men and women, boys and girls.

The cave wound down into the earth, the walls and floor battered smooth by the repeated passing of the great lizard. Her eyes still burned, but had ceased to get worse,

and even through the kerchief she could taste the air with every breath, heavy and sour like spoiled milk.

She pulled the short sword out of its sheath, the blade dull in the faint light that filtered down from the cave entrance. It was nearly pitch black, the contours of the rock walls nothing but shadows against darker shadows. To a grown man who had hunted since he was old enough to recite the words, her weapon would have been little more than a knife; to her, though, it felt heavy and solid, a broadsword in the hands of a hero. Her grip felt sure around the black leather handle, the crosstree snug against the seam in her hand where thumb met forefinger. She ran her thumb over the edge of the blade as her mother had taught her to do with knives and found it sharp.

Holding the sword across her body, she continued into the cave, her eyes no longer watering but feeling as though they were covered in a dry, tacky film, like pollen. The back of her throat was thick with mucus, the hot air washing stagnant over her tongue. She crept onward, into the dark, the walls fading and fading until the only thing she could see was the tip of her sword, a barely existent reflection of the surface bobbing in front of her eyes. It was yellow with a hint of bronze and a dose of fire, the curl of a sweat-damp lock of hair across the little boy's forehead when his companions carried him into the village square. *Never a step back*, he had said and done, and its charge had simply bowled over and broken him.

Her foot squelched into some sticky, damp mass and she jerked it back, biting on a fold of the kerchief to keep her voice in. Carefully, she slid the sword back into its scabbard and knelt down, probing the ground ahead of her to see what she may have found. Her fingers ran through sticky pools of dried liquid, across clumps of hair and

ridges of fine, smooth bone. From among the general stink she picked out a whiff of old blood. A deer, maybe, or some other large animal. She'd helped prepare them many times. But this one was barely gnawed at; most of the flesh was still on the bone, and she felt what could be intestines at one point. Most of the creatures swallowed their prey whole, or at least ate most of it.

She stood up and wiped her hands on her skirt. There was no time for a dead deer, not with the lizard somewhere down below and the little boy back in the village with a curl of yellow-bronze hair across his forehead. She drew the sword again but the glint on the tip was gone; maybe she had just been imagining it. She hadn't turned, though, and knew that she was still facing deeper into the cavern. Stepping over the carcass, she continued onward.

Now she stuck out her left hand and ran it along the wall to keep her direction. She walked for what seemed to be an age, her feet kicking aside stones and occasionally plunging into some forgotten corpse or another, all of them maimed but not eaten, many old and rotted such that only bones remained. She kept her hand tight around the hilt of the sword, not even daring to flex her fingers for fear of dropping the weapon and being left, unarmed and in the dark, with the great lizard somewhere below.

Never step back from it, for its strikes are too fast, the little boy had advised. *A cruel and stupid lizard,* he had called it. And when his time had come to keep his feet still he did and he died. *Only to hope that they get lucky again.* All of the boys' words were like that: small, vital, ritualistic. And then some of them got lucky, and grew up to repeat the mantras.

The little boy had told her their words, and she had told him those that the women taught to the girls. And she'd spread salt on windowsills and put acorns in shoes, and he'd gone into the cave and come back broken with a yellow-bronze curl across his forehead. She'd cried, of course, but she'd also wondered why she hadn't been there, why she hadn't been allowed to be there. Maybe she could have done something. Warned him, distracted it. Something.

Without warning she stepped into emptiness and fell over a low step, landing facedown on the stone floor. She felt one of her teeth snap and gash the inside of her lip, warm blood filling up her mouth. She choked and gasped, tearing away the kerchief to spit a glob of blood onto the floor and drag in a great, hacking breath of the foul air. She clutched wildly for the wall to her left but it was gone; she swung the blade but there was nothing to her right. Pushing herself to her knees, she looked up into the blackness.

The blackness looked back. By some echo of light too small and forlorn for the blade to pick up, or by some fell radiance of its own, the lizard's eye was just barely visible before her, like a film of soap demarcating a special circle of the blackness beneath the earth. She looked into that eye, the leather of the grip creaking as her hand tightened, and she felt something of herself topple into it. There was a swallowing power in the eye, as though it existed only to provide a place where the light could go to die, a deep malice and a cruelty with neither nuance nor subtlety. The eye hated, it raged, it drank the spiteful poison drained from its abscessed soul. Whatever brain lurked behind that eye was built only to hurt, or perhaps had only learned to do so, warped by living in the world shown to it by such an eye.

She screamed and lashed out, throwing herself forward as the eye vanished and some vast mass of scales shot past her, too fast for her to follow; only by freak chance did she roll under it as its great rushing maw swept past, a gaping void that sucked the air from her lungs as she tried to breathe. The floor trembled and there was a great crash as something slammed into the wall behind her, accompanied by a sound like a tree splintering in an ice storm. She seemed to be fighting to stay afloat in a sea of churning, foul air, and she slashed wildly with the sword. It struck something hard but flexible and bounced away; taking the handle in both hands she threw herself at that spot in the blackness. She toppled forward, the pommel driving into her sternum as the blade jarred against the stone floor. She vomited, nose running, eyes streaming, lungs burning.

The room became very still. She stayed where she lay, holding the sword, gazing into the blackness. It was too dark to see, but she thought the room may have been swimming; certainly she felt dizzy enough. The side of her head lay in a pool of warm fluid.

When they were both ten she and the little boy had sat on a log in a stream and talked about what they had both done since their childhoods had ended and they had begun to learn what men and women must know. “I wish I could have been there,” she had said. “The day you died.”

“You couldn’t have done anything,” he answered. “You didn’t know the words.”

“Yes I did,” she said. “You told them to me.”

“Well, you hadn’t trained to go on the hunts.”

“I wish I had, then,” she said, crossing her arms. The little boy kicked his feet in the stream. “I wish I’d had all of your training and gone with you. Then you’d still be alive.”

“You don’t know that,” he said.

“I do too.”

“Did I ever tell you that something nearly took me in my crib?” he said. She shook her head. “So my mother tells me. There wasn’t salt to put on the windowsill. Mother killed it with a knife.”

“I wish I’d been there,” she said again. “You’d still be alive.”

“Maybe our luck would have been different,” he said.

“We wouldn’t have *needed* it,” she said. “I knew the words better. *Never a step backward*, you told me, but you just stood there. You should have taken a step *forwards*. That’s what I did, and it missed me.”

“Not even all the old men believe in the words,” he said, looking down at the water.

“I knew them!”

“I hope you get lucky again.”

“Why are you being mean?” she yelled, her cheeks going red. She’d have cried but there were no tears left; the stink of the cave had dried them all. “I miss you! I don’t want you to be dead!”

The sun was going down and they were being called back, and as the darkness of the woods deepened they had walked hand in hand back to the village, their fingers twined, and she always remembered the small calluses on his hand, little islands of grit in

the soft, pink ocean of his palms. Then the sun was down entirely, and she was back in the cave.

The reek was fouler than ever, the smell of fresh excrement overwhelming even the vomit that was next to her face. The sword was gone. She ached all over and could feel her shoulder and back muscles twitching as she tried to stand. There was no other movement in the cave; all was silence. On trembling legs she began to walk, looking for some sign of the exit, hands stretched out before her, her breath coming in short difficult puffs. She felt sick to her stomach.

Her fingers alighted on something faintly warm and scaled and she recoiled, but after a moment stretched her hands out again. She ran them over the long, smooth curve of scaled flesh, the creature's hide as hard as iron plates. But it didn't move; somehow, it was dead. Keeping one hand on the lizard, she followed along it until her shin banged against a low rise of rock, the very one over which she had tripped before, or so she hoped. She climbed over it and started back up the tunnel, the flesh on her back quivering as she turned away from the lizard's corpse.

At first she walked, keeping a hand on the tunnel wall, but when she saw the glimmer of light appear in the distance, her mind went blank and she broke into a run, ignoring the clenching in her abdomen. Twice she tripped over mangled carcasses and bloodied herself further in the fall, but she scrambled upright without thought for where she put her hands and struggled onward, her breathing ragged, the stink of the place seeming to grab and clutch at her garments as she ran. The light grew larger and rounder, nearly blinding her, the images of the trees and stones in the ravine washed out by the all-consuming glare.

And then she burst into the clearing and toppled to her knees, retching into the dirt. Free of the stale air in the cave her eyes watered. She felt something warm running down her leg and looked down to see a stream of blood emerging from under her skirt to twist around her knee and into the dirt. She looked at it, and back at the cave, and thought of the yellow-bronze curl on the little boy's forehead. She sniffed, wiped her eyes, and started off for home.

Go Down, You Gray-Eyed Horses

Martin had been walking for two days, closing in on the cougar as it rested during the day and losing ground at dawn and dusk when it rose and moved off across the scrubby terrain. With each step he felt his toenails crunching against the inside of his boot, pushing through the slush of dirt and streamwater, blister fluid and blood. He'd slept with his boots on since he lost his horse; if he took them off he'd never jam his swollen feet back into the leather. Possibly he couldn't even take them off, anymore. The .223 coyote rifle made his arms ache after only a few hours of carrying it cradled across his chest, but he didn't dare sling it over a shoulder and risk missing another shot. He kept his head down, watching the blood trail on the scrub grass grow smaller and fainter. Three steps watching the blood, then head up for two steps, scanning the hard horizon for the cougar or other animals or just the lay of the terrain, and then back to the blood trail again, the largest drops working down from nickels to pennies to dimes and beyond, their satellite splatters likewise growing fewer.

Up above, the sun was hot and small like a bright pin on the lapel of a muted suit. He was drenched in sweat, his armpits slick as he walked, the back of his right hand matted and glistening from wiping his forehead. Each time he brushed the sweat away he pushed his glasses back up his nose. He had a canteen slung over his shoulder but told himself he wouldn't drink from it until he reached the patch of brambles up ahead. And he walked on, head rising and falling, toenails crackling, the trail of cougar blood fading away.

At the bramble patch he paused and set the butt of the rifle on the ground, leaning on it as he unslung his canteen. There was blood on a stone next to the rifle, a dark smear like a thumbprint. He took a long, careful pull; when he'd first drank after leaving the horse, he had been so desperate he'd poured too fast and filled his mouth before he could swallow, the water gushing out around the mouth of the canteen and running down under his shirt. He kept the canteen angled just enough so water would flow, taking a long, slow drink, then taking off his hat and trickling a little water into his hair and down the back of his neck.

When he looked down again at the rock, the blood smear had changed to just a patch of red stone. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, bent to look more closely: red stone. Still kneeling, he glanced back and found the last real blood drop he'd seen, a little smear in the dust a half inch long and no wider than a pencil. Too small to be followed by a thumbprint. He cast around, seeking another drop, but there was nothing.

Truthfully, he'd been lucky to follow it that far; had he hit the cougar anywhere else it would have licked the wound closed and that would have been the end of it. From the back of his horse he'd drawn a bead just behind the cat's shoulder, hoping it was like a deer or a coyote and the bullet would rip up its lungs and heart and drown it in its own blood before it could run very far. But at the last second, even as his finger curled around the trigger, the cat dropped to its forelegs and let out a scream like sheet metal flexing back and forth and the little blanketed Appaloosa had shied away so that when the bullet flew it tore through the base of the cougar's ear and the big cat turned and ran. For two days, the cougar had pawed at the wound, clawing it open and refreshing the trail. No more.

“Hell,” he said, standing up and taking another lay of the land. It sloped down in front of him, gently but distinctly. The patch of brambles would be easy enough to find if he kept going. He set off, slicing back and forth across what he thought might be the cougar’s course, head down, taking long, slow steps and checking every rock for blood before he set a foot upon it. Back and forth, a little breeze tickling the back of his neck, moving like a ship tacking against a strong wind.

At length he heard the sound of water on rocks and broke his pattern, hurrying ahead until he stood at the edge of a little stream winding its way down from the far-off mountains to die somewhere in the dust. But here it was still strong, waist deep in places, with soft banks and grass in some places. Looking back he spotted the brambles and guessed that the straightest line from them to the water was to his right, and he dragged his heel through the mud to make a mark and started off, his feet still pulsing with every step but his head clear.

When he saw them—a cluster of deep pawprints on the edge of the stream, the clawmarks clear at the ends of the toes—there was a *click!* somewhere inside his skull, the sort he sometimes felt when he was trimming a horse’s hooves just before it kicked or bit. Some different consciousness floated out to the tracks and became the cougar: dipping its head down to drink at the stream, snarling low in its throat, then soaking one paw in the sharp cold water and rubbing against the blood-matted fur at the base of the ear, managing to clean the fur but tearing the wound open again in the process. The cat looked back over its shoulder, then splashed across the stream and up the other side, blood running from the reopened wound into the water and then onto the far bank.

Whatever had gone over to the tracks came back, and Martin looked up to the far side to see blood on the banks exactly where he'd envisioned it.

Careful not to disturb the tracks, he sat down and drained his canteen and filled it from the stream and drained and filled it again. Then he stood up and splashed across, holding the rifle across his chest, the water running down into his boots to stab into the tender flesh where his toenails were coming loose. When it became clear the stream would rise up above his waist, he took a one-handed grip on the rifle and went to draw his pistol. But his injured foot betrayed him, or some shift in the current seized him, and his feet slid and he went to one knee in the water even as he pulled the revolver from the holster, jamming the pistol into the sky as the rifle plunged under the water. In alarm he pulled the trigger on the pistol, the gunshot racing up and down the stream.

He got back to his feet and sloshed out of the river and up the other bank, holding the rifle with the barrel tilted down to get as much of the water as he could from it. He swore and wiped the rifle with the dry parts of his shirt. The blood spots were dried but clear, and when he'd composed himself he emptied the water from the holster and jammed the pistol home, then started after the cougar once again.

That night he lit a fire in the lee of a craggy hill and spread his shirt out in the dust to try and clean the rifle. The moon rose early and a little over half full and the sky was full of stars. He unloaded the rifle and set the cartridges aside, then broke it down, cleaning and drying everything as best he could with his bandana. When he was finished, he put the gun back together, drew the bolt and fired it empty, the bolt clicking home and the pin striking true. He drew the bolt and fired again, then one more time. As long as the

bullets were fine it should work. He reloaded it and set it aside, then leaned back against his backpack and watched the stars through the waving fingers of the top of the fire.

He wondered where his horse was. When he'd left to chase down the cat, he'd taken the little blanketed Appaloosa, the horse Leah had picked for him and that he had ridden when he boarded at her parents' barn in Missoula, before she met Robert and they followed him out east, near the Badlands. There were other horses in the barn, but none so calm and tough. When he bought her, Leah had named her Little Soldier, but it didn't stick and Martin had never really thought of her by any name.

They used to ride all weekend, camping on state land and riding during the day, her on her little silver-gold palomino, him on the Appaloosa. The little gold horse was faster than his and he always remembered the sun setting as they raced down a long hill, shafts of light like warm fingers on a cold night cutting between the clouds to stretch across their path, and Leah ahead of him on her horse, her flannel shirt billowing loose around her, her hair working its way loose from the tie, one hand on the reins while the other swam in the air currents alongside her, that arm tossed out for balance, leaned back so she was vertical even on the sloping land.

When they reached the bottom of the hill, she stopped and veered off to the left and he followed her. The horses were panting and blowing from the run, but still high-stepping and dancing: their blood was up and they wanted to run, and if one had broken from its rider's control, the other would have followed and the two humans wouldn't have had much say in the matter. Instead Leah turned back to face him, the two horses sniffing at one another and touching noses. They hadn't said anything; sometimes, on those long rides, they would go days without speaking, or so it seemed when he

remembered it. She looked at him, flushed from the ride and smiling like a sunrise, and he smiled back, as always. They rode for a long while along the base of the hill and eventually they made camp, and the next day they rode more.

They hadn't said anything, but he remembered that day in part because at the base of that hill he'd known that he and Leah would follow Robert and throw what they had together on the little farm and try and make it raising horses. The idea was less than ideal, and even with Robert shoeing and Leah giving lessons and making the shrewdest trades she could, they still struggled. And from there it had been a fairly straight line passing through all the rest—from learning to shoe horses to the heat of a haymow and Robert's quiet words in the dancing golden dust—to the little gold palomino lying by the hay trough, throat ripped open, eyes wide and staring, and from there to the fire by the little hill, his feet throbbing. He set his hat over his face, drew in a long breath—the air thick with smoke and sweat—and fell asleep as he blew it out.

He ran cold water over his hands, sliding them in and out of one another's grasp as the basin went pink with horseblood. When he'd heard the horse's scream he'd been in the kitchen drinking coffee, an hour or so before dawn; sometimes, when he came to shoe the animals late, Robert and Leah would stay in town for the night, leaving a plate in the oven for him. He usually didn't sleep much on those nights. There hadn't been any hope for the little gold horse when he found her, hooves kicking but just barely. Even so he knelt down and pressed his hands into the wound on her throat as if he could push her blood back in and close up the ripped hide. When the water ran clear he turned off the sink.

Back in the living room, he unthreaded his belt and walked to the gun safe, where he took out the revolver in its leather holster; he threaded the belt through the loop on the holster and those on his jeans, cinched it tight. He took out Robert's rifle, too. Then he packed the saddlebags, jerky and trail mix, canteens of water and bags of feed, a lighter with spare fluid. Before he left he set a note for Robert and Leah on the dining room table:

There's a cougar loose on your land. Killed Leahs' palomino. I borrowed Robert's guns; hope that's alright. I took the Appaloosa too, and I know Leah'll be mad but she's mine to take out and I'm sorry if that was wrong, too. But that thing'll come back I think and anyway it's not right that we don't do something. Maybe it'll hurt a person sometime, too. I'll feed the horses before I go. Take care, Martin.

Outside it was brisk and cool, the sun just edging up away over the mountains. He set the saddlebags and his own pack next to the barn door and held up the rifle, an inexpensive bolt-action Robert used to kill coyotes. But Robert was far away and Leah with him, and as far as he knew there was nobody he could call who would make a credible effort at bringing down the creature that had killed Leah's little gold palomino. It wasn't even his to kill. He hadn't lived at the farm in six years, hadn't seen Robert in five and Leah in nearly as long, for all intents and purposes; she usually left his pay in the tack room, but sometimes still came out and held the horses while he worked. He propped the gun against the barn door and went inside.

The old blind horse stuck its nose out and huffed as he passed, and he took a moment to rub its nose, murmuring nonsense. It'd been a good horse when Leah had found it in the back of a barn where Martin was shoeing, but not long after they'd gotten it home, it's eyes had gone and now it was all but entirely blind and stallbound. Even Leah, hardhearted trader that she was becoming, couldn't bear to part with it. He'd ridden it once, and now he kissed its forehead and gave it a little grain before he went to the back of the barn.

The little Appaloosa came dancing out of the stall as soon as the door was open, happy and animated, bobbing her head and bumping her nose against his chest and shoulders. Her neck and chest and shoulders were black, while her hindquarters and legs and belly were pale gray with black spots, each one with a thin corona of white hair around it like an eclipse. Her face, too, was gray and spotted, and her eyes were a rarity, a blue so pale it was sky-gray. She snorted and shook her mane.

"Shh, girl," he said, rubbing her nose. "We've got a ways to go." He led her to the tack room and put on the saddle and bridle, then outside where he fit the saddlebags behind the saddle. He slung his pack over his shoulders and fastened the rifle's holster to the saddle where it would ride just in front of his leg. Then he climbed up, settling into a cowboy's slouch with one hand on the reins and the other resting on the upthrust butt of the rifle. The weight of the pistol felt good on his hip. The Appaloosa danced and sidestepped, and when he dug his heels into her flanks and flicked the reins she jumped off into the evening, as if little gold palomino was running in front of them, Leah sitting tall in the saddle.

Luck and the speed of the little Appaloosa kept him on the cougar's trail; it had stepped in the palomino's blood, and there were dark red pawprints to follow. Too, the big cat was moving quickly through tall grass, leaving broken stalks and trampled patches that even Martin could follow. He rode a little off to the right of the trail, as Robert had talked about once, though Robert seldom hunted anything other than coyotes. A few times he got a view of the great cat from a distance, slinking across an open patch of dusty brown waste, sometimes looking back over its shoulder. He kept at it for three days, resting through the night and chasing through the day, winding away into the desert.

And then on the third day, he caught up to it in the middle of a patch of barren land, and the great cat turned as he drew close and prowled back and forth, growling and spitting, its fur still dark with horseblood. It was a big male, the snarled lip and the three parallel bare patches on its flank marking it as the loser in a fight for territory somewhere. Maybe that was what drove it to within sight of the house, to the pen where the little gold stood. He drew the rifle from the saddle scabbard and knew the gunshot would drive it off, that he had one shot at it, and that that shot would be better if he dismounted. The Appaloosa's ears were up, and she snorted and shook her head, but she held her feet. He had gone coyote shooting with Robert a time or two and the gunshot wouldn't scare her. But her breathing might throw off his aim, and if he dismounted the cat might take the moment and make a run for it. It looked at him, a low rumble in its throat.

So he shouldered the rifle, letting the reins droop down around the saddlehorn, and sighted down the steel barrel and felt a trickle of sweat run down the crease by his eye where his brow furrowed and just when he tensed his finger, even as the trigger

began to move and all the mechanisms of the gun started clicking—just then the cougar screamed and the little blanketed Appaloosa shied away and the shot went wide. Then the cougar screamed again and was gone, and the horse danced in a circle and Martin, his hands on the gun, toppled and fell, landing hard on his side. The horse ran off to the south.

For a long time he lay in the dirt, staring up at nothing in particular and thinking, strangely, about the night in the house when Robert had cooked the three of them steaks and potatoes and green beans and after they'd eaten the two of them had cleaned slowly, Martin washing and Robert drying each dish and utensil and Leah still at the table watching them and smiling over coffee. Strange, that from the six years they'd spent together at that farm it was the only night he remembered with any clarity. Robert's hands running the towel over the dishes. Her smile over the coffee cup.

That would've been the summer when things were coming together. Not long before the day when the hay wagon had come in and they'd all gone out to unload it, working with the farmer in a human chain to stack the bales six high in the loft over the barn. It was hot work, the air thick with hay dust that stuck to the sweat on exposed skin and dyed their sneezes black. Robert, ever the strongest, was at the top, taking bales from Martin and ramming them home, packed so close it was as if there were no separate bales. They'd taken a break and Robert had climbed down to bring two cups of water up for them, and as he sat there catching his breath Martin watched Robert place a kiss on the back of Leah's head and wrap his arms around her. He'd seen it a hundred times before, but that day in the haymow the same *click!* sounded in his mind, and he saw all of the long rides back west, all of the years on the farm, all of the sweat and work they'd put

into it, Robert—he saw all of it, and he saw himself, from Leah’s eyes. Said to himself, *I didn’t just miss my shot; I didn’t even know there was a shot to be missed.* Not long after that he left.

He stood up, dusting himself off. The pistol had fallen out of his holster and he returned it and checked the rifle for damage. Luckily he still had his pack. The cougar was bleeding badly and the trail was fresh and clear; the Appaloosa would find its own way back to the farm. Holding the gun across his chest, he started off along the dusty red trail.

When he woke up, his feet hurt, but he ignored it and kicked out the embers of his fire and started off after the cougar once again. He struggled onward, nails crunching and blood sloshing in his boots, rifle across his sweat-soaked chest, pain lancing up his legs with every step. Up ridges and down slopes, across barren rock and little patches of scrub grass, long through the afternoon into twilight, and all day the black clouds gathering overhead.

And as the sun slipped past the clouds to set low and gold far off in the west, just a fingerwidth above the horizon, he came upon the end of his trail, a clutch of brambles in a little place between the hills where the rainwater would gather. The blood trail led into it, but from where he stood he could see all around, and there was no exit; the great cat had gone to ground for the night. He looked at the brambles for a long time, the vines twisting around one another like a Celtic knot, but he couldn’t pick out the cougar.

He unslung his backpack and dug out his lighter and a spare shirt and a pair of balled-up socks and the spare lighter fluid. He crammed a stone inside the socks and

wrapped them in the shirt, leaving one of the sleeves to trail down below. Then he soaked the socks in the fluid and set them on fire and whirled the flaming ball over his head by the sleeve, loosing it to fly down into the brambles like the missile of a medieval siege engine.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the flames leapt up among the dry grass and brambles, grabbing at the twisted vines and sharp thorns and running along their lengths. Birds erupted from their nests as the conflagration spread, and he watched a mass of rodents boil outward in all directions, squeaking in terror of their own microcosmic apocalypse. The flames leapt up and up, as if trying to meet the setting sun halfway down the sky and prop it up.

And then, from the far side emerged the cougar, slinking out from among the brambles, its head matted with blood. It loped up and over the hill and was gone, and he gave chase, sprinting as hard as he could manage on his injured feet, every step sending a jolt up the very marrow of his legs, but he pressed on after the great cat, the blood of the little gold palomino fresh in his mind. He topped the hill and came down after it, and when he reached the bottom the cougar turned at bay, snarling and hissing.

It was a huge animal, or at least seemed huge, its fur golden brown and its eyes narrow and pitiless, the cruelty of a housecat with the power to trouble an unhappy world. As he raised the gun Martin felt slow, felt his muscles fail to respond even as he watched the cougar's shoulders bunch, its powers gathering to destroy him. He took aim as the cat's ears went flat; he tensed his finger around the trigger, and this time there was no gray-eyed horse to spook and throw him off. He fired.

The cougar charged, bounding up and forward, a red blossom on its throat where the bullet had entered, and Martin dropped the rifle and went for his pistol, firing wildly from the hip as the great cat gathered to spring. But as it lunged its leg failed it, and it wobbled in the air and veered to the left even as Martin threw himself to the right. He was up again, and the cat was attempting to rise, each breath it took sending blood bubbling out of the ragged hole in its throat. He shot it again and drew the hammer; when he went to fire a second time the gun only clicked, but it didn't matter. The cat was dying.

He stood out alone in the desert with the dying cougar, watching its blood pool in the dust under its throat as it still scrabbled its claws and tried to stand. He picked up the rifle, slung it on his shoulder, watched the great cat's eye slow its frantic movements, grow cloudy. The land grew dark as the sun eased down the horizon.

He sat down and waited for full dark; it seemed a long time coming.

It rained that night and kept on raining when he woke up, hard rain coming straight down to pool around the crown of his hat and run off in sheets around his head, misting over his glasses. The blood trail vanished before he woke up, and in all the bluster he had a hard time figuring his direction. When he arrived at the little stream he found it already swollen and rushing, and he didn't trust his injured feet to hold against the current. He turned and started along the bank, heading into the west and hoping to find someplace he could risk a crossing.

The rain kept up all morning, soaking him through, and during the afternoon it came and went. Lightning stroked the horizon and thunder boomed its way from one

edge of his vision to the other. By nightfall he was shivering hard and his feet and hands were numb, but there was nothing for a fire. He ate a cold meal from his pack and slept poorly, troubled by dreams of the cougar coming at him, blood spraying from its throat like water from a hose when you put your thumb over it. The next day dawned bright and hot, and he limped onward as the sun dried him.

Passing over a ridge that afternoon he came upon a small herd of wild horses, mustangs of every color and size milling about, grazing vaguely in Martin's direction. Off to his right, perhaps a mile from the horses, a corral had been erected, portable steel fences brought out on a trailer and assembled into a rough circle. The trailer was still parked nearby, alongside two large livestock trailers, big enough to hold the herd, and another small horse trailer. Three men in cream-gray uniforms and cowboy hats rode away from the corral, making toward the herd and leading a riderless horse: a Judas horse, trained to infiltrate the wild ones and lead them into the corral. Martin sat down to watch them, cleaning his glasses on the corner of his shirt.

They halted a hundred yards out from the herd and cut loose the riderless horse, which started off toward the mustangs. It wandered in among them, sniffing and bumping noses and gradually working its way toward the front. The three uniformed men watched, maintaining their distance from the herd. When the Judas horse had arrived at the front of the herd it turned and started toward the corral, and many of the others followed it in, grazing their way calmly into the trap. One of the men shut the gate behind them. At some point they'd be auctioned off to wealthy enthusiasts and live out their days on private ranches, at least for a time; though they were protected by law, at least some found their way to the meat market. So it went.

Martin stood up, drew his pistol, and fired a shot into the air.

When they got over the shock of the gunfire, the three Bureau of Land Management officers were very kind to Martin; they gave him coffee and a blanket and chair near the corral to rest in. He peeled off his boots and one man helped him apply antiseptic to the worn skin and shredded blisters. There was a helicopter nearby, working to move other herds of wild horses toward the corral, and they asked the pilot to keep a lookout for his little blanketed Appaloosa. It seemed sad that the mustangs were corralled, but Martin couldn't be angry at the Judas horse; after all, the wild horses had followed of their own accord. Looking over his coffee cup, he sat and listened to the officers' chatter on the radio, and watched a little spotted mustang with pale blue eyes grazing alongside the fence.

Captain Montain's War

She carried things mostly on her shoulder, dragging them off the sledge and throwing them up to nestle against her neck. The burden placed, she straightened from her sledge and turned toward the great mound of food heaped around an aluminum flag pole, all of it already dusted with flecks of white snow like fairy dust. Sinking halfway to her knee with each step, she struggled over to the depot and stacked this latest offering among the others, a mountain of powdered milk and freeze-dried vegetables, chocolate bars and canned beef stew, multivitamins and medicine. The depot was half again as tall as her; it would be among her first stops on the way back, and she deliberately overloaded it in case things went wrong.

Returning to the sledge, she dug out a pennant, a blaze-orange nylon triangle with two metal eyelets on the short side. She returned to the depot, head bowed and one shoulder cocked forward into the wind. The weather was worsening, the sky going dark and a few more flakes of snow drifting down. The temperature, too, was dropping, and that it could get any colder continually amazed her. If it stormed, there was a very real risk it would pick up too fast for her to place the flag, climb down, and set up her tent. She imagined being trapped in the wind on top of the mound of food, clinging to the flagpole as the white built up around her until all she could see was snow on snow, freezing to death with her tent fifteen feet away.

She reached the mound and climbed the rough stairway she had built from sturdy boxes of canned pears. There was food enough to sustain her for two weeks at the nearly ten thousand calories a day she burned while hauling the sledge. Reaching the top, she

seized the two carabiners and fit them through the eyelets. As soon as she let it go, the flag jumped in the wind, the pointed tip flipping and snapping about like a hornet. She hoped the orange would be visible even through a whiteout.

Though the storm was rising and she could have only moments left, she couldn't help but turn away for a moment, one hand on the flagpole to steady herself, and survey the landscape before it was swallowed by the rush and thunder of a polar storm. There was precious little to see. Antarctica gave no comfort, no promise of anything but snow and ice and occasional rock. Not a tree, not a river, barely a hill broke up the flats. Somewhere up ahead she would have to scale the vast Beardmore Glacier to gain the Antarctic Plateau and make her run at the South Pole, but that was a distant goal, beyond sight and thought. Now there was only the placing of depots, a trail of breadcrumbs leading halfway to the South Pole that would sustain her on her march back to the sea.

The wind whipped and howled, and she climbed down, careful at each step not to slip; in the cold air, her bones were more brittle, and a broken leg was absolute death. She carried a satellite phone and a radio at all times, and if she put out a call the Americans or Australians or Russians would hear it and send helicopters and scientists and doctors to find her, but with a storm rising they could be delayed days, and regardless she wouldn't call. It would defeat the purpose of being there.

She reached the sledge and dragged her tent off of it, snapping the structure together and positioning it so the sledge would be in easy reach from the front door. The tent was a state-of-the-art design, the sort used by the great Roald Nansen on his many ventures to the frozen places of the world. Such a tent was one of the first things Nansen

had insisted upon when she'd tracked him down in Norway. "Twenty seconds in a polar storm, Ivy," Nansen had said. "Any more and you aren't going to make it."

That day, though, she didn't need to rush; the storm was rising, but she had ample time to bring some supplies inside to make waiting out the blow a little more comfortable. She crawled inside and drew the flap shut, pulling the zipper tight and securing the Velcro over it and pulling tight the drawstrings around all of that. She unrolled her sleeping bag and crawled in, squirming against the ground on her side. She could almost feel the snow through her coat and the sleeping bag and the tent, the snow shifting a little to accommodate the roundness of her shoulder.

She felt herself slipping off to sleep and forced her eyes open, thinking over the mental items she thought of as the Not-Gonna-Die List. She had eaten. She had fuel and her stove and food with her in the tent. The sledge was right there. Her sleeping bag was secure, and she could draw it tight around her if need be, to the point where only her face showed. The tent was sealed. She shifted her shoulder again, feeling for the round depression in the snow, and looked across at her companion, who hadn't bothered with a sleeping bag but was lying on his back, hands behind his head.

"Good afternoon, Captain Mackintosh," she said. He turned his head to greet her, one reindeer-skin mitten sliding off his chest as he shifted. His good eye fixed on her while its glass counterpart, as always, focused upon a point somewhere inside her skull, just behind her nose.

"Good afternoon, Captain Montain." Smooth as cut glass, his voice filled the tent and overpowered the storm, leaving an instant of silence after he spoke before the rush of the wind filled the space again. His voice enthralled her—mannered, cultured, fringed

with an old Scottish brogue that made her think of tartans and bagpipes. It gave his every word a slight buzz at the end like running your thumb slowly along the teeth of a plastic comb. “The depot is laid, then?”

“Done and done, sir,” she said, smiling. “Just in time.

“Just in time indeed,” he said. “Finished piling food into a great mound so you can lie in a tent for three days waiting for a storm to break, and when it finally does you can get up and start hauling your sledge. Cherry-Garrard was right—polar travel is the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time.”

“It must have been even worse for you,” she said.

“We had a pretty bad time of it,” he said. “Scurvy is—” he stopped, picked up the fallen mitten and set it on his chest, then folded his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling. “Scurvy is certainly a bad time. The Boss had it bad when he was with Captain Scott’s first expedition. They practically had to carry him back to the ship.”

“Is that what made him want to come back?” She nestled the sleeping bag more comfortably around herself. Mackintosh was talking, and she wanted to hear as much as she could before he unfolded himself from his blanket and got up and walked out into the storm. *I’m just going outside*, he would say. *I may be some time*.

“You’re thinking of Captain Lawrence Oates,” he said, gently. “From Scott’s final expedition.” He pushed himself onto his elbows. “No, being Ernest Shackleton is what made Ernest Shackleton want to come back to this God-awful place. A man like Sir Ernest, born into a place like the British Empire...” He shook his head, then turned to her and smiled. “Are you *certain* the American Navy is the greater power now?”

“Positive.” She smiled, too; when Mackintosh asked about the world since his disappearance, she knew he would stay and talk for a while. “And McMurdo Sound has a little town on it.”

“British?”

“American.”

“Unbelievable.” He lay back, spreading his arms, and fell quiet. Ivy’s chest went tight, sharp, painful lines radiating out from her solar plexus, thrumming just under her skin and brightening when she breathed. The tent seemed small and shrinking.

“Tell me more about Sir Ernest,” she said. Mackintosh shook as if a fly had landed on his nose.

“Well, physically he was all but fearless,” he said. “He required it of himself. Quite brilliant, in his own way, though not in some of the ways he fancied. On Scott’s first expedition, he drove everyone on the ship to tears by wandering around shouting Browning and Swinburne at them. Not a literary man.” His hand groped along the front of his jacket, then down to his trouser pockets, then slid back behind his head. Looking for his pipe, she suspected. “You know there was talk in England after he was sent back early by Captain Scott that he’d mutinied on the ice and Scott used his scurvy as a way to get rid of him without disgracing him.” He fell silent, and closed his good eye.

“And?” she said after a long minute, but Mackintosh stayed quiet. She squirmed in her bag until her arms and shoulders were out and propped herself up. “Captain Mackintosh! And!”

“Hogwash,” said Mackintosh, slow and through a thick yawn. “Complete hogwash.” He rolled over, turning his back to her and tucking an arm under his head for a pillow. She stared, and willed him awake.

The rucksack was Army issue, but not her Army; it was a relic of the Vietnam era, bought at a surplus store from a fat man with a mustache and camouflage pants. The *Band of Brothers* miniseries had been playing on a TV behind him. Now she heaved it onto her shoulder and started away from the baggage terminal. The crowd was sparse and spoke a comfortable haze of Norwegian, of which she understood nothing. It made Ivy think of a cow field, standing among the big animals and their noises, not understanding the why of the sound but feeling it in her ribs just the same. She settled the strap more comfortably on her shoulder and set out to find Nansen, and with him the key to the South Pole

Out on the street, she dug the maps she’d printed out from her back pocket and unfolded them. The creases made the streets seemed warped, the roads shifting and bending toward the new valleys dug through them. She had a long way to go; Nansen lived out in the country, a good long drive away from the airport. Stepping to the curb, she hailed a cab, and when one stopped she climbed aboard and showed the driver her map. They haggled briefly, but in the end he agreed to deposit her in a town some ten miles from Nansen’s front door.

She slept on most of the ride there and dreamed that she was in Virginia at night, sitting on a hill looking down at a field and an oxbow of a river. She could see lights moving inside the oxbow, hundreds of them, and she thought she could see shadows

moving around the lights, and after a while she was certain there were tents and horses and rebel flags. They were talking and laughing, starving and drinking a foul brew made of mashed acorns and pretending it was coffee. She told her sister about it, but Anabelle said that they were fireflies, not Confederates, and Ivy woke up sad in the back of the cab. Awake, the story fit itself into her own context, joining up with a night in Afghanistan when Private Wineman had told them about her youth in Virginia and the night she saw one of the regiments move out to join the defense of Fredericksburg. But that, too, was wrong: by the time they reached Afghanistan, Private Wineman wasn't speaking to Ivy, and Fredericksburg was too long ago for either of them to have known it.

Not long after, the cab stopped, and Ivy paid and got out and stood with her rucksack on her shoulder in a tiny Norwegian town. An old cat looked at her from across the square, the building behind it silhouetted against high, pine-covered mountains. Somewhere between her and the snowcap lived Roald Nansen, described by some as the greatest living polar traveler and by those he had beaten in his famous ski race across Greenland—seven and a half days, three of them in a blizzard—as barely human. Ivy set out, one hand tucked under the strap of her pack, the other swinging at her side.

She passed out of the town and into the hilly countryside, moving along the gravel shoulder between the blacktop road and the green fields, some of them empty and some of them full of sheep and some of them cut like steps. Though she made an effort to walk rather than march, she couldn't help but hear "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" rolling at the base of her mind, her footsteps and thoughts falling into the groove of the old song's cadence. It made her think of North Carolina dawns and a hundred cadets charging along, still bleary-eyed with sleep, their t-shirts in disarray as the drill instructor

somehow managed to suck enough wind both to make it look like they were standing still and to let them know all about what disappointments they were. Every so often she would find herself on the verge of shouting “Hurrah! Hurrah!” and realize that the song had become “The Ants go Marching.”

She knew the house as soon as she spotted it and checked her maps as a formality. It was small, and even from the road she could tell it was well-maintained, the siding and shingles immaculate, the paint smooth and clean, the walk swept. It was set back against a stand of Norwegian pine, the square, brick chimney stark against the deep green trees.

Hurrah, hurrah, she thought, and approached the door.

Everything Nansen did, from closing a drawer in his kitchen to lowering himself into an armchair across from Ivy, he did with the careful deliberation he would later attempt to teach her. He wasn't a tall or big man, with tawny yellow-gold hair and a drooping mustache and small blue eyes set deep into a face so worn by exposure it seemed coated in a layer of permafrost. The cracks were deep as the scars on Lieutenant Harper's face, but it was Harper who had forced her to Nansen's door—Harper's coldness, Harper's cruelty, Harper's blood on Private Clocks's boot. She wanted Harper and Nansen to be as separate as possible. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, hands curled around her coffee mug. Across from her, Nansen sat straight in his chair, frowning at the steam rising from his own mug.

“Your coffee is good?” he asked in English, his words as slow and careful as his movements. She nodded. “Good. You came to ask me a question.”

“Yes,” she said. “Thank you for speaking with me.” He shook his head, peeled one finger away from his mug in dismissal. She licked her lips, thought of how best to phrase it, then said “I want to go to the South Pole. Teach me how to do it. Please.” Nansen was quiet; he took a slow, small sip of coffee.

“Why?”

“Because you’re the greatest polar traveler of...” she began, but the slight shift of his head stopped her.

“No. You can buy a helicopter ticket to go stand on the South Pole. You want to get there the hard way, or you would not be at my home. Why?”

“I could buy a ticket,” she said. “But I don’t want to be a tourist. Ernest Shackleton wasn’t a tourist. None of the Norwegian expeditions were tourists. I want to know the Antarctic like they did. As much as I can.” Nansen went quiet again, looking at his coffee.

“I will show you what I can,” he said at last. “For what little it is worth.” They didn’t speak again that evening. Later, she lay awake in Nansen’s guest bed, staring up at the black wooden beams of the ceiling and imagining swirls of snow drifting across it.

“Captain Montain,” came Mackintosh’s voice along with the sharp sting of his hand against her cheek. “Captain Montain, wake up.”

“I’m awake,” she said, opening her eyes and looking around the tent. One wall was bowed in from accumulated snow, but the door seemed clear; outside, all was silence. She heaved herself up from her sleeping bag and smacked her cheeks with the flat of her hand, blinking the chill from her eyes.

She opened the flap and looked outside. The supply depot was partially drifted over, but the flag was still visible, twitching in the light air like the wing of a strung-up bird. The sky had cleared and looked to stay that way, though there was, of course, no certainty. Nevertheless, Ivy was confident. She crawled back into her tent, dug out her journal, and wrote an entry:

December 10, 2012. Waited out storm in tent. Depot laid. Traveling ahead to lay next depot. Spoke with Mackintosh; heard more stories of Sir Ernest. Wish the Boss was here now. Onward. Upward. To the Pole. Cpt. I. Montain.

Stowing the diary, she packed her things and donned her layers of gloves and mittens, hats and hoods, before stepping out into the hard, diamond-bright Antarctic day. Shortly, she had the sledge dug out from beneath the drifted snow and her tent stowed away. Donning her skis, she settled the harness into the grooves pre-set in her jacket—the material was unworn, but the cold kept the jacket from expanding outward once compressed.

And with that, she was off, sliding foot by foot over the cold, hard crust of the Antarctic snow. For a moment the sledge fought her, but soon it had picked up its own momentum and she was only nudging it along, the straps on her harness tightening a bit with each stride, then relaxing as the sledge slyly overtook her in between strides. The land was fairly flat, the snow mostly rolling in low hills and mounds. She dreaded fighting through another mass of sastrugi—hard ridges of knife-sharp snow cut parallel to the prevailing winds and hazardous even to a great skier like Nansen. The chroniclers

were forever bemoaning the crossings of sastrugi; their appearances were followed by the mangled, bloody feet of sled dogs.

But there were no sastrugi, and Ivy made good time that day and the next, eating constantly to fuel the furnace that her body had become. Sitting at a desk she needed perhaps two thousand calories per day; out on the snow, working every minute she was awake and burning calories even while sleeping just to keep from freezing, Ivy could burn ten thousand on a good day. The pockets of her coat were stuffed with chocolate bars, bags of peanuts, packets of energy gel, and a jar of peanut butter with a plastic spoon taped to the side: hers was a moveable feast.

At long last, her GPS chimed and she arrived at the designated point, a featureless patch of snow amid featureless patches of snow, or perhaps the intersection of the edges of several. Had she not selected the point before coming to Antarctica, she would have skied over it, never pausing, but she stopped, the sledge easing to a halt behind her and sliding her forward as it bumped into the backs of her legs. She unbuckled herself from the harness, dug another blaze orange flag from inside the sledge and, without ceremony, drove the aluminum pole deep into the snow. The flag twitched a little in the breeze.

She looked forward, across the long stretches of snow and ice toward the far-off bottom of the world, where the ancients had dreamed men with faces in their chests dwelled and where a small and brilliant town sat, the Amundsen-Scott Station, filled to the brim with PhDs frantically taking their measurements and preparing their studies. One hand on the flag pole, the other held out before her with the palm down as if casting her benediction upon the snow, she threw back her shoulders and tossed out her chest,

daring everything between her and her goal to crash and break over the bastion she had become.

But the moment passed, and she turned her back to the Pole yet again; the depot needed supplying, and she had a long way to go to get the rations to fill it. As she harnessed herself in and forced the sledge in its awkward turn back coastward, she felt the weight of that great distance settle itself onto her shoulders once again.

Up above her, the skua was clearly lost; it was a seabird, dwelling along the Antarctic coast, where it raided the nests of penguins for eggs and chicks and the carcasses of adults, but it was far over the mainland, and tiring. How it had become lost was anyone's guess, but the skua knew it was off course and searched its senses for some trick to get it back to the coast: a shift of a magnetic field, a trick of the light, a drop or rise of air pressure below one wing or another, anything to tell it the way back to the sea. It could have peered downward and seen the tiny black speck on the shelf below, turned and followed it to the sea. It didn't peer downward; it was a bird, and it kept searching the senses that had already failed it. But being a bird didn't keep it from knowing alarm or panic, and though they didn't tell it where the sea was, its senses were adamant on one thing: a storm was building.

The skua didn't last long in the storm, but the speck did: Ivy felt the change in the air, the wind picking up, and she ripped the harness off and skied around the side of the still-moving sledge, grabbing the straps and hauling her tent out. *Twenty seconds in a polar storm, Ivy.* The tent took twelve, bursting from its collapsed state like a time-lapse butterfly crawling out of its cocoon. She threw a few packages of food and her sleeping

bag through the door and shimmied in after them, barely pausing to kick some of the snow off of her boots.

For a long moment she sat, heart pounding in time with the wind rattling some loose buckle on the sledge outside, *clink-tap, clink-tap*. She could be wrong about the storm; being wrong was, in fact, a possibility. *Clink-tap, clink-tap*. Ivy sat on her knees, her legs curled under her so that her feet stuck out opposite one another and most of her weight on her splayed hands, breathing as shallowly as she could to keep down the moisture in the tent. *Clink-tap, clink-t-tap, c-clink-ink t-tap*, and then the wind gave a great rushing howl like a cargo plane revving its engines, and the storm was upon her.

She released and righted herself and set about arranging her tent, unrolling the sleeping bag and setting the little propane stove aside and holding her boots out of the door while she cleaned them as best she could, though the wind and loose snow mocked her efforts. She ate a chocolate bar, then another. She looked at the walls of her tent, flexing and popping against the wind. And, when it was resolved that the blow would be no brief gust and that she was in for the long haul, she slid into her bag, drew the string tight around her throat, and went to sleep.

When she awoke, or perhaps shortly before, she was joined by the one-eyed Scotsman.

Mackintosh was lying on his back, mittens off, coat unbuttoned, smoking a black wooden pipe. For a long time she looked at him, the crooked nose, the glass eye, the thumb curled around the stem of the pipe, a small brown discoloration draped across the joint where the digit joined his hand: The fruit of too much pipe smoke, perhaps, or too

much sunlight at sea, or just a mark on a thumb. The intelligent mouth, always a little turned up in a smile, but a cool one, the confident expression of a gentleman officer of the British Navy.

“Captain Montain,” he said, not turning to her. “We seem to be snowed in once again.”

“True, Captain Mackintosh,” she said. She flexed her shoulders, settled the sleeping bag around her. “But we’ll wait it out, like the others.”

“There’s always another storm,” he said. “The depot is laid?”

“Marked. We need to go back for more supplies.”

“That,” he said, “is the most maddening part of the whole business. Leap-frogging your way up and down the whole blasted continent, piling things up so they can be buried in snow before you find them again. Bloody foolish business. You know that Scott died within a few miles of his last depot?”

“One Ton Depot,” said Ivy. “Only two weeks after Oates.”

“Walking off into the night to give his companions a shot at living,” said Mackintosh. “Well, it certainly fed the British appetite for gallantry.”

“You think he should have stayed?”

“I think they all died,” said Mackintosh. “But he was a cavalry officer, after all. They’re a bit touched in the head.” He shifted, squinting, and took a few quick draws at his pipe, his cheeks puffing out with each. “How much longer will this storm last?”

“Not long, Captain Mackintosh, hopefully not long,” said Ivy, sitting up while still in her bag, like a worm. “Tell me about Tom Crean.”

“I never met the man, but Shackleton spoke very highly of him.” Mackintosh sat up and tapped his pipe against the side of his boot, upending the ash onto the floor. He groped for his mittens, eyeing the door of the tent. “I think the storm is dying down. We might make it if we can have a good run.”

“That’s what happened at Hut Point,” said Ivy, struggling to get free of her sleeping bag. “Captain Mackintosh! You don’t live if you go out there! Stay with Wild and Joyce.”

“Richards stayed behind, too,” said Mackintosh quietly, not looking at her as he stowed his pipe and pulled on his mittens. “But Hayward and I think we can make it.”

“Don’t listen to Hayward,” she said, still fighting to clear her arms. “He’s wrong. Stay with Wild, Joyce and Richards.” But Mackintosh was already up and moving for the door. He pulled the zipper and crawled out into the shriek of the wind and the rush of snow, and was gone.

“Captain Mackintosh!” she yelled, but the wind drowned her out. Ivy fell back, lying on her side, the bag still twisted around her shoulders. She stared up at the ceiling of the tent, the red of the nylon, the little mesh equipment hammock swaying as the wind and snow beat against the tent, and she begged Mackintosh to come back, to emerge out of the snow as suddenly as it had swallowed him, to crawl back up through the gap in the ice where he and Hayward fell through, to leap off the shelf of ice that carried them into the ocean to die and swim for shore, to do anything to save himself and the Ross Sea party and her.

But he never came back. The storm blew on, her tent like a circle of candlelight in a powerless night, a space behind a sofa where the thrown plates and cups couldn't find her, an office in a supply depot inside the wire, proof against bullets.

It was a field in the rain, a snapshot whose time she couldn't place: a gray day in late April, the clouds rolling in and bringing a fog and a cold drizzle that promised to last all day, so faint that it almost seemed to manifest from the air around her as she stood by the fence looking out across the empty field. That was all it was, just an old fence and a field full of tall, straw-like grass, bounded on three sides by trees and on the fourth by a ditch and the cracked asphalt of a state highway, and she standing there in her shorts, legs steaming in the drizzle, breathing heavily from the run, looking across it at the ruts made by tractor wheels and the trampled places where deer had crossed. That was all there was to it, the sensation of a rainstorm passing away, the heavy and damp smell of the dirt, the knowledge of steel equipment having passed and passed and passed again.

But there was another deeper than that, like the root of a wart under all the malformed skin, a memory that gnawed at her as she lay in the Antarctic tent and remembered the field: a gang of older boys somewhere—the place, their number, all of the details were vague. They'd beaten her, driven to knock her down by forces many of them would never understand and that would never allow those that did to sleep quietly. When the strange energy decreed, they dragged her up and yelled, "Run away, run away!" And when she did run, stumbling and gasping, they'd chased her and knocked her down and kicked her ribs again. "Run faster! Run faster!" they'd jeered as they shoved her off on another stumbling flight, and that time they gave her a few strides before running her down and pinning her to the ground while one of them sat on her stomach

and landed childish blows on her chest and shoulders. Then they did the whole thing again.

By the time they stopped, she was a mess of blood and bruises and shame, but she'd never lost that taunt—"Run faster! Run faster!" Not in all the thousands of miles run, not in the back stretch of a bad two-mile when her ribs creaked with every breath, not standing by the field and feeling the tractor ruts dig into her mind. Not once. "Run faster!" It was the one bruise those long-gone boys had inflicted that never did heal.

And then she was back in the tent again, the storm in all its light and fury raging outside, beating the tent, pummeling it into submission, daring her to curl up in her bag and die on the cold, bitter Antarctic shelf. She tore free of her sleeping bag and threw on her mittens and fit her snow goggles over her eyes, and then she was out in the snow, the wind so loud it bordered on silence. The sledge was buried, the tent was nearly under: after a few steps there would be no turning back. There were no signs of Captain Mackintosh or his tracks. Lowering her shoulder, she started off into the night, into the very teeth of a wind born at the bottom of the world.

On she went, out into the storm, her strength against that of the old and bitter continent that girded the sole of the Earth. She fell and arose and struggled on, fell again and pushed back to her feet, all the while spitting and snarling and daring the wind to bear down upon her harder, to bring more weight upon her shoulders, to pile whatever it had upon her: bear any burden, carry any load. *Physically he was all but fearless*, and so was she.

And then she fell again, and her arms were almost too weak to raise her up. The strength seemed to ebb from her, the power that had driven her away from the tent to

abate. She didn't dare look back, even when she fell again and her arms were truly too weak and she failed to rise again. She surged, struggled, but nothing. She was down, in the snow, and there was no hope of return to the tent. She tried again.

Looking down at herself, Ivy saw that the falling snow was already beginning to cover her, bury her under the pack where nobody would ever have a hope of finding her. Another relic under the Antarctic sheet. She drew her knees up to her chin, wrapped her arms around her shins, and closed her eyes against the hard, cold wind. She could all but feel the sleeping bag around her.

Run faster, run faster.

She raised her head from between her knees to look around at the others in the back of the plane, but most were either asleep or drawn fully into their headphones, and Private Wineman wasn't visible anyway; she was somewhere further down, hidden from Ivy's view. She thought of unbuckling herself and roaming the plane, making sure everyone was alright, attentive, ready for what they had to do when they landed, but she knew that it was a memory and she was dying somewhere short of the South Pole, all of it years and years in the past, and that no amount of trying would enable her to go to Private Wineman, to talk to her, put a hand on her shoulder and say, "Carrying on, soldier?"

Run faster, run faster.

She felt the crunch of Harper's nose under her knuckles again, saw him hit the floor in between Privates Wineman and Clocks, watched as the two enlisted women slammed their boots into his ribs again and again. Heard the bones breaking, saw Clocks

bend down to make sure the blindfold didn't slip off. Saw the light of the streetlamps through the motel window. The splash of blood across the white baseboard when he started coughing. Landed another kick to his thigh and threw the phone down next to him before they left him there to cough and bleed.

Run faster, run faster. And she had, as far and as fast as she could, throwing all of her savings at a dash for a pole that would set no record and garner no attention. She'd taken her blood, shed by those long-ago boys, and the blood she and Melanie Wineman and Bridget Clocks had wrung out of the poor bastard Harper on that motel room floor and put it in a box and fled for the Pole only to find it sitting there, gift-wrapped for her as she lay curled in the snow far from her tent, body heat seeping out through the sleeping bag that couldn't be there.

And she remembered his doorway, standing with one hand raised on the doorframe and the other on her hip, thumb slipped under the band of her underwear, biting on her lower lip because she knew it did something to her face that he liked. She could see herself reflected in the screen of the television and knew the light was lying perfectly along the seams and ridges of her muscles.

He stood up and came to her, a glass of straight gin in his hand. He stood close, so close that when he took a sip the bottom of the glass bumped against her chin. Then he held the glass to her lips and tilted it until the gin flowed into her mouth, lapping around her tongue like Christmas trees. She swallowed, his eyes following the bob in her throat, the pitted scars on his cheeks—shaving or acne or violence, she didn't know—shifting and moving as he watched her.

Later, she would find out he treated her gently only because she was close in rank to him, that when he took Wineman to his bed, he was anything but. Later, Clocks would convince them that her plan was the best plan. Later, Wineman would convince him to let her blindfold him, and Clocks and Ivy would slip out in the night and meet her, and the three of them would break two ribs and four teeth and a nose. Later, Clocks would take the blame that belonged by rights to all three and by rank to Ivy, and Wineman would stop speaking to Ivy save when it was unavoidable. Later, her commanding officer would be baffled when Ivy turned down a promotion and allowed herself to be discharged.

She shook away the phantoms and awoke in the bottom of the lifeboat *Jaimés Caird*, Shackleton and Worsley asleep to either side. From up above, cutting through the thunder and the roar came a low sound, a monotonous and slow voice like a Buddhist chant. She rose and crawled around Vincent and McCarthy, her hands slipping on the watersmoothed ballast stones, and wormed her way past the snoring Chippy McNeish to emerge onto the deck. Around her, the South Atlantic was in full rage, great greybeards forty feet from trough to crest swirling around the little boat. Their crests were white with foam, their depths blacker than a polished boot. She made her way to the stern and stood next to their pilot for a long while as he sang on, low and solemn, like a monk at prayer.

“Good evening, Mr. Crean,” she said at last. He turned to her and smiled, then back to the work at hand.

“Cap’n Montain,” he said, touching his fingers to the edge of his knit cap.

“Please, call me Ivy,” she said, then gestured to the great waves around them.

“It’s a hell of a mess out here.”

“Oh, it’s not as bad as all that,” he said. “Cap’n Worsley has us a course for South Georgia, you know.”

“I know,” she said. “I know that you make it, too.”

“Well, Cap’n Montain, we’ll certainly give it a go,” said Crean. “But I wouldn’t say that we know we’ll make it.”

“Mr. Crean,” she said, “if I call you Tom, will you call me Ivy?”

“Only if you absolutely insist, Cap’n Montain,” he said. “It’s not proper for a regular sailor like myself to address an officer by name.”

“I’m not a Navy officer,” she said. “Or even British. And I do insist.”

“Alright, Miss Ivy,” he said. They were quiet a moment, Crean humming his old tune a little, and somehow it came to her ears through all the roar, clean and simple.

“And you’ll remember there were no women along with you,” she said. “So I know you make it.”

“As you say, Miss Ivy,” he said, adjusting the tiller.

“Tom?” she said, and he looked at her, humming once again. “How did you do it?”

“What’s that now, Miss Ivy?”

“You were on two of Scott’s expeditions and one of Shackleton’s,” she said.

“Walked thirty miles alone through a blizzard to get help for Lashly and Evans. This boat voyage,” she swept her hand wide, encompassing the boat and the sleepers below and the whole furious South Atlantic. “When you get to South Georgia, Shackleton picks you and Worsley to cross the mountains with him and get help at the whaling station.” Crean frowned, but Ivy pressed on. “How did you carry on through all that?”

“Oh, well,” he said, scratching at his head. “You just sort of go on, is all. Keep doing your duties.” He frowned, bit his lower lip. “Er, Miss Ivy, I hate to interrupt you, but could you wake Cap’n Worsley? It’s about time to take another sighting.” Ivy shook her head, smiling in frustration.

“Of course,” she said, and went below again.

And then she awoke, in her tent, the sleeping bag around her.

She sat up, feeling the silence settle around her; her eardrums pulsed with it, as if straining to find some sound. But the storm was over, the rush of the wind, the surge of waves, the noise of breaking bones all gone. Disentangling herself from the sleeping bag, Ivy stood and exited the tent, feeling each of her vertebrae crack as she stood erect next to the door, hand on the flap.

Before her lay Antarctica, stark and white, the sledge and the depots and her footprints hidden by the new snow, the entire vista clean as new paper. She drew herself to her full height, shoulders back, chest out, and drew in a deep breath of cold air that burned her nostrils and sinuses and the back of her throat all the way down to the deepest reaches of her lungs. When she let the breath go, much else went with it.

She dug into her jacket for her emergency radio and called Amundsen-Scott station; not long after, a helicopter appeared and she climbed a rope ladder and was flown to the South Pole. Long after that, she returned via snow-tractor and recovered her gear and her depots, leaving it all with the researchers at the base of the world before returning to the northern hemisphere and all that waited for her there. She had two women to find, two duties to perform.

And that night, as the sun went down as far as it ever did in that bright season, Captain Mackintosh watched her depart from the top of an ancient ridge of snow. When the helicopter was in the air and hastening away, he turned to the figure at his side.

“Shall we be off, then, Captain Oates?” he said.

“She may be some time,” said Oates. Mackintosh smiled, and the two turned and walked off into the white, the wind whipping the loose snow into their tracks at each step.

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APPENDIX A

The Heroic Age

Polar travel is one of my enduring interests, and when I decided to write about isolation there was little doubt in my mind that I would tell at least one Antarctic tale. While “Captain Montain’s War” stands up perfectly well on its own, it is greatly enhanced by added knowledge of the Heroic Age of Polar Exploration. In this appendix I hope to introduce those individuals referenced in my story, in the hopes that it will both enhance the reader’s experience and spark an interest in the topic.

Cherry-Garrard, Apsley: The youngest member of Scott’s ill-starred Terra Nova expedition, Cherry-Garrard helped lay One-Ton depot. He is best remembered as the author of *The Worst Journey in the World*, a classic of Antarctic literature.

Crean, Tom: A legend of the Antarctic, the Irishman Tom Crean traveled south three times: with Scott on the *Discovery* and *Terra Nova* expeditions, and with Shackleton on the Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition. He distinguished himself as an unfailingly hard worker, logging among the most hours sledge-hauling on several journeys. He once walked 18 hours to get help for Lashly and Evans, barely outrunning a blizzard, and was part of both the journey to and crossing of South Georgia Island. Upon returning to Ireland, he shut his medals in a box, opened an inn, and seldom spoke of his achievements.

Evans, Edward “Teddy”: Though he didn’t travel with Scott on his first expedition, Teddy Evans did serve on one of the relief vessels. During the *Terra Nova* expedition he was part of the support party for Scott’s attempt on the South Pole. On the return journey he was stricken with scurvy and unable to pull his sledge, but his companions, Tom Crean and William Lashly, ignored his pleas to leave him behind; all three survived the journey.

Hayward, Victor: One of Mackintosh’s companions in the Ross Sea Party, Hayward journeyed to Antarctica seeking adventure. He vanished along with Mackintosh when the pair attempted to cross the ice from Hut Point to Cape Evans.

Joyce, Ernest: As a seaman in the Royal Navy, Ernest Joyce participated in three Antarctic expeditions: Scott’s *Discovery* expedition of 1901, and Shackleton’s 1907 *Nimrod* expedition and 1914 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. On the last, he was a member of the Ross Sea Party.

Lashly, William: Along with Tom Crean, Lashly served on both of Scott’s expeditions, and was a member of the support party sent back by Scott during his ill-fated attempt to reach the South Pole. When Teddy Evans fell ill and begged them to leave him, Crean and Lashly refused; Lashly would remain behind to tend to Evans while Crean made an 18 hour journey to get help.

Mackintosh, Aeneas: An Indian-born, Scottish-descended Royal Navy officer, Mackintosh traveled to Antarctica twice: on Shackleton’s 1907 *Nimrod* expedition, and again in 1914 as commander of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition’s Ross Sea Party. He successfully laid the depots that would have allowed Shackleton to cross the continent. Trapped in a storm and low on

supplies, Mackintosh, along with Victor Hayward, decided to attempt to cross the ice pack to Cape Evans; neither was ever seen again.

McCarthy, Timothy: McCarthy was one of the crew of the *James Caird* during the famed journey to South Georgia Island. After they landed on the wrong side of the island, he was left behind to look after the ailing Vincent and McNeish.

McNeish, Harry “Chippy”: It was McNeish’s work as expedition carpenter that allowed the men of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition to survive after their ship, the *Endurance*, was crushed in the ice. He briefly refused to follow Shackleton’s orders during the long march; as a result, he was one of only four members of the crew not to receive the Polar Medal.

Nansen, Roald: Not a real person, but a combination of Roald Amundsen and Fridtjof Nansen, two of the great Norwegian explorers.

Oates, Lawrence: A Captain in the Inniskilling Dragoons, Oates joined Scott’s ill-starred *Terra Nova* expedition to manage the ponies. He was a member of the party which reached the South Pole only to find that the Norwegians had beaten them to it. On the return journey his health quickly deteriorated and, rather than slow the party down, he famously left the tent in the midst of a storm, saying “I am just going outside and may be some time.”

Richards, Richard W.: A survivor among survivors, Richards lasted not only through the harrowing trials of the Ross Sea Party, but outlived all of his fellow explorers; he died in 1985, the last survivor of the Heroic Age.

Scott, Robert Falcon: A sometimes-hero of the British Empire, Scott led two expeditions, the 1901 *Discovery* expedition and the 1910 *Terra Nova* expedition, on which he

died only a few miles short of the infamous One-Ton Depot. Scott's reputation has fluctuated over the years, ranging from a tragic hero to a cowardly, incompetent glory-seeker.

Shackleton, Ernest: The great leader of men in Antarctica, Shackleton first journeyed south as a member of Scott's *Discovery* expedition. He led the *Nimrod* expedition in 1907 and, in 1914, led the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, in which his ship, the *Endurance*, was crushed in the ice pack. He led his crew across and around the ice flows to Elephant Island, where he left the bulk of the crew behind to chance a risky open-boat journey to South Georgia Island. Impossibly, he reached South Georgia, but landed on the wrong side; undaunted, he took Frank Worsley and Tom Crean and crossed the glaciated interior of the island, a feat modern mountaineers have been hard-pressed to duplicate. They arrived at the Norwegian whaling station and secured rescue for the crew; not a single man of the *Endurance's* company was lost. He died in 1922, on South Georgia, in the midst of yet another Antarctic expedition.

Vincent, John: Vincent was chosen by Shackleton to be a part of the crew of the *James Caird* during the attempt to reach South Georgia Island. When they landed, Vincent was too weak to carry on, and was left with the boat while Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean attempted to cross the island.

Wild, Ernest: The younger brother of famed Antarctic explorer Frank Wild, Ernest went south only once, as a member of the Ross Sea Party. He was known for his good cheer; to boost morale while trapped at Hut Point, he concocted a mixture of tea, coffee, sawdust, sennegrass, and dried herbs for the smokers in the party.

Worsley, Frank: On Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, Frank Worsley

accomplished one of the most legendary feats of nautical navigation. Using only a sextant, he steered the 22 foot lifeboat *James Caird* through 800 miles of storm-tossed South Atlantic seas. Upon arriving at Elephant Island, Worsley was among the men who accomplished the first ever crossing of the island's glacier-covered interior.