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## HOME TIME

MORNINGS HERE ARE JUST as bad as mornings anywhere else. I sit up in my bunk and scowl at the mirror. The ceiling feels close as a coffin over head, and if I reach out either way, I can touch the walls. We travelers need a tight place to call our own; a burrow to crawl into. Here at Epsilon Base, we call them torpedo tubes.

It's my turn to fix breakfast. The three of us chomp shriveled waffles and pseudo-bacon hunched around the little table in the kitchen area. We've all put on weight during our stay; stress and boredom do that to you. Janey's in jeans that were tight three months ago when we started out and now look simply painful, the same T-shirt as yesterday and the day before. Figgis rereads one of his old technical mags, a glob of butter hanging on the strands of the beard he's grown over a face still neat with youth. No one says a word. Janey tosses her greasy blonde hair. She sighs. As I didn't hear any sleep-period ramblings between their torpedo tubes, I guess I'm sitting in the chilly slipstream of a lover's argument.

My turn to clean up. Funny how often the rota works that way, but still I can't be bothered to argue. Gives me something to do before we get ready for the final lump. In a nice domestic touch, Epsilon's Korean designer placed the tiny basin beside a porthole so you can see out as you stand there. I plunge my hands into the warm recycled water.

Outside, the storm has died. My hands pause, aimless fish swimming. Ice furs the rim of the porthole like the white spray that was used in shop windows at Christmas back in England when I was a kid. It's October, which means that the sun here dances a fire around the horizon. The high . winds of a few hours ago have left streaks in the ice like the claw marks of some giant animal. The storm may have died, but faintly through the filtered triple glass, I can still hear the wind. In the Antarctic, it never stops.

By the same cosmic coincidence that made it my turn to cook and clear, it also falls to me to check the outside of Epsilon before our next Jump. There's no room for me to kit up in my outsuit in my torpedo tube, so I have to do it in the one corner of the cramped living pod that isn't strung with washing. Figgis and Janey just sit around and watch as I strip down to bra and knickers. I'm conscious of my wobbling marbled flesh and the stray bits of body hair, but of course I'm just good old Doctor Woolley; she's past modesty and all that kind of thing.

It feels good to squeeze into the privacy of the inner hatch, to bang it shut and watch the warm air cloud to crystal as the frozen atmosphere gushes in. There's no question that, barring the ocean floor, I'm facing the most hostile atmosphere on Earth. Nothing compared to Io or Venus, of course, but astronauts

don't have to breathe the atmosphere or fiddle barehanded with bits of frozen machinery that can peel the skin off your hands like a rubber glove. And astronauts have up-to-date equipment. And they're all Taiwanese.

The outer hatch booms open. The shiny suits hiss and squeal as it adjusts to the 60-degree drop in temperature. I climb out and down. The white hits my eyes. My lungs go solid tight inside my chest. I glance back. Janey's face is at the porthole. She gives me a smile and a wave, like someone moving off on a train. I stomp a few yards across the ice.

Epsilon is shaped like a dumpy starfish. The central mound contains the main life support systems and the comms bay, with the kitchen, the torpedo tubes, the living bay, the medical bay and snout of the canhopper fanning off. I can't say that Epsilon actually looks like a starfish because --in the one part of the deal that our college really held out for--the whole of the outer body was re-coated in military-grade camouflage paint before we left our home time. Even now, from what must be no more than twenty shuffling paces away, I have to squint hard to make it out as more than another frost ghost given momentary reality by the wind. Janey's gone. Figgis, too. I could almost be alone.

I pick my way around the drifts and hollows, checking for accidental debris; anomalies that would almost certainly destroy us. The bitter wind pushes and pulls at me like an argument. It roars in my ears. I do a slow circuit of Epsilon, then another for luck. The wind has already raked away my first footsteps. I brush ice away from the canhopper's cockpit.

"Woolley!" Janey's voice suddenly crackles over the wind in my ears. "What are you doing out there?"

"Won't be long," I say, then pluck off a glove to reach inside my hood and dislodge the comms wire. I don't need you, Janey, not out here. Woolley doesn't need anyone.

I breathe the air. The wind snatches the frozen vapor from my lips and throws it back in my face as grit. Overhead, the sky is lace over blue oblivion. When I was a child and my mother first told me stories about this place, I used to imagine that there really was a pole up here, striped like a candy stick, around which the planet revolved.

I squint, darkening the lenses of my goggles by a couple of notches with the presspad inside my mittens as I re-inspect the ground. But it makes little difference. Pure Antarctic roars over my inadequate senses. I'm leaning twenty degrees into the wind just to stand up. Looking down at my feet, I see the drift ice racing. Nothing feels still. Snow here is as rare as rain in a desert; all that ever happens is that the wind drives the ice, scooping it into high drifts, baring the underlying strata, destroying-- thank God--every trace of life. White on white on white. I still have to keep reminding myself that we are in the Year of Our Lord, 1890.

Gladstone is Prime Minister in England. Zeta Tauri is still a distant star.

Etcetera, etcetera. Look at it this way: if I fumed my back and walked out across the ice away from Epsilon, if I crossed the Queen Maud Mountains and got as far as the McMurdo Sound and came across a whaler lost amid the penguins and icebergs far from its normal hunting ground, if those rough and stinking men would take me aboard, I could visit India in the Raj, Imperial Saint Petersburg, Venice before the flood. Chat with Marx or Freud, ride through London in a hansom cab. The whole world--if my very presence didn't cause it to heave into oblivion--would be mine.

My toes are dying off. I turn back. When I reach the porthole, I remember that I've tom out my comms wire. A tiny worm of panic bores at my spine. But there's no need to worry. Janey's seen Woolley through the porthole, and she lets Woolley in. She and Figgis once again watch the show as this ugly butterfly strips from her chrysalis out-quit, but by now I can't be bothered to feel any irritation. We've all got other things on our minds.

It's time for our final Jump up the line. We clamber through the internal hatch to the communications bay. Figgis is in charge of this aspect of the mission, so he gets the comfy chair in front of the console while Janey leans her rump against a mainframe that's so old it bears an IBM logo. I have to stoop awkwardly under a plastic strut.

Figgis drums his fingers. Janey chews her lips vigorously. Pushing strands of graying mousy hair back from my face, I wonder what exactly it is that I do that gets on their nerves. The numbers on the 2D screen tick by in seconds. The console is a mess of the scribbled stickers that Figgis used to re-label the original Korean han'gul script. Taped beside it is a postcard of Interlaken where he took a pre-Epsilon break, blowing what little advance money the College had been prepared to loan him. The plastic ski runs on the arid mountain slopes look like spilled rolls of toilet paper.

Jumps are something I can never get used to. This is the fifteenth if you count the big power surge that first threw us back to 1565 and the vicinity of the South Pole. From there we've moved up through the years --collecting data and growing increasingly weary of each other--by a series of smaller Jumps powered by our own internal batteries. Now at least we're that much closer to home.

Figgis gives up drumming his fingers and begins to stroke his beard, tugging it as though he's trying to pluck a chicken. The minutes plod by on the screen, and each one is just like any other. Bus this time of waiting is special with worry. Jumps involve the orbit of the Earth around the Sun, the rotation and the ever-outward drift of the Galaxy. And then you must add to that the flow of time itself. What actually happens is that for a dimensionless moment we exist in several times and places at once, hovering like a mayfly over the waters of reality as Epsilon calculates exactly where we should land. So far, the system has worked perfectly....

That's what's happening now. We Jump and the porthole on our right fills with the soundless buzz of the Jump, which is almost the way the old-fashioned TV screens used to go between channels, but pushed back to three or possibly four

dimensions. A blizzard without color or sound, a glimpse into the swirling plughole of the non-universe, a place where there is in fact no light at all, where the absence of everything means even an absence of nothing. We all know that our eyes are simply tricking us when we try to look. We know by now that it's better not to.

The screen registers contact. Stocking ladders of data flutter and clear. Figgis sits back and rests his hands behind his neck. The chair creaks. I can smell his sweat. I guess he can smell mine. We brace ourselves for something more. But that's it. This is March 14, 1912. Epsilon is well within tolerance--even if we're not. Figgis pulls harder at his beard. Janey draws another flake of skin back across her lips.

"So what we have here," Figgis says, "is 1912. Tell us what's happening, Woolley."

This is our ritual. I half-close my eyes and recite that Asquith is Prime Minister in Britain, that the Titanic will soon be starting her maiden voyage from Southampton. I describe how Nijinsky's wowing Paris, and explain that China has just become a Republic. I don't mention that Roald Amundsen has reached the Pole a month and a half ago, and that Captain Scott's men are still struggling to get back to Cape Evans. That goes without saying.

"You see," Figgis says to Janey, tipping her a smile, the beginnings of a reconciliation. "Woolley knows her stuff."

"That's me," I say. I grin and slap the strut I'm leaning on with one of my big hammy hands. "Good old Doctor Woolley...." Epsilon booms faintly. "Let's get going."

"You're the boss," Janey smiles up at me. For a weird moment, I can almost see why men find her attractive. And I wonder if I'd become a lesbian if she turned it on strongly enough using all that stuff with the pressing tits and the fluttering eyelashes, the way she does with Figgis. Perhaps that would be the answer to all Woolley's problems. Janey's smile widens. Woolley finds herself blushing as she heads for the ladder between the dangling knickers and Y-fronts.

JANEY PILOTS the canhopper. Figgis and I squat on the rumbling seats over the engines with the stretcher I rack crammed behind. Watching Janey now, brushing the controls as though they were bruised, the sleeves of her outsuit rolled back from those narrow wrists, I can't help but admire her ease and absorption. The canhopper rocks slightly as the eddy from an ice dune tucks under the fuselage and her hand slides out to brush the boost control. The tone of the right engine alters a fraction through my pelvis, then resumes.

Figgis has got the big Canon holocam balanced on his lap. He nods toward it and says to me, "Did I tell you that Janey and I gave this a trial run a few weeks ago in her torpedo tube?" He's grinning. Back in 1650, Janey and Figgis were at maximum rut for each other. It didn't exactly keep them quiet, but it did keep them more or less out of my way.

I force a nod, and the skin of my outsuit crackles as if it shares my discomfort. Janey's eyes are still on the window. She doesn't even blink. She's so wrapped up in piloting the canhopper that Figgis and I can talk about her as though she isn't here. Over her head on the consale is the date and time. March 14, 1912. And the day is yet young; Epsilon's computers have thoughtfully avoided any kind of Jump lag. It's still only 10:30 in the morning.

Trackless, unseen, undetected, we sail five meters above the ice desert on an electro-magnetic tide. I was expecting a storm, but everything looks clear and sharp as a wedding cake, the sun gold and midway down the sky now, well into the polar autumn. As always, I looked for changes when we first crawled out onto the shattered ice of this new era, but there was nothing. If it were safe for us to Jump as far 1950, it might be possible to pick out that hint grayish haze that the jet pilots had started to report in the sky, but the real differences in this polar environment are being sniffed out by Epsilon's many sensors. More methane, more nitrogen, more carbon dioxide. More of most things apart from oxygen. Even if the dictates of relative safety hadn't determined our choice, the very sterility of the Antarctic would still have made it an ideal place for monitoring the planet. But that's down to the data in the spectrometers that our college will eventually download and sell to the highest bidder. All our poor human senses can report is whiteness.

Janey clicks her lips open. "This is it, folks," she says.

I lean forward to see out of the windscreen. She's right; there are black specks on the horizon. The canhopper sails quickly toward them.

Flags. Uptilted skis.

"For God's sake don't knock anything over...." Figgis murmurs.

But Janey's in control. The engines sigh to a halt. The canhopper settles its smooth underside a safe distance away across the ice.

We bang elbows as we seal up the out-quits and the specially wide and flat-soled shoes. Figgis says he thinks Woolley should go first. Janey nods from underneath her hood and mask. I feel a flood of gratitude, but as I unseal the hatch, I wonder if they're doing it this way just so that Woolley'll get the blame if anything goes wrong. Not that any of us really need to worry about that.

And out. And down the steps. This really does feel like a historic moment. Even if Scott is a month gone from the Pole and Amundsen by longer, we're lonely travelers here, too. Amid these fragile signs of human presence, it feels as if we've arrived somewhere at last. The wind pours over me. It flutters the Norwegian and British flags. The little tent Amundsen left behind is half-buried in drift ice. He's already safely back at Framheim and preparing to report his triumph to the world, but Scott's team are still out there, with Petty Officer Evans already dead and Captain Oates starting to limp badly....

Black shapes of tent and ski poles, the sun low and distant across the sparkling ice. The whole scene belongs in some Edwardian painting, but it makes me feel incredibly nostalgic for past times of my own, for the stories my mother used to tell me on late afternoons after school by the lake in the park. Though she had never been to the Arctic, she filled my head with dreams of whiteness; a once-upon-a-time continent that, at least until this last dreadful century, remained almost untouched by man. She told me about Shackleton, Amundsen, Scott.... Their names grew sharp for me as pavement frost. I saw them as silhouettes in the wild white dark, hopeless and determined, their ships crushed by the ice, death walking beside them, struggling endlessly back toward base camp.

We have a picture show back at Epsilon when we've finished. We're all unusually chatty. I don't know about Janey and Figgis, but for me the ordinary details we found out there were the biggest shock. These men may be legends from my childhood history, but here at the Pole they were just weary and afraid. They left an inconsequential litter behind them. God knows why, but one of those narrow bicycle repair tins was lying out on the rough ice. There were frozen dog turds from the huskies, a Norwegian cigarette packet, a screwed-up wrapper of Cadbury's chocolate. It almost looked like the remains of a picnic. I longed to touch.

We kept the holocam running all of the time, and that's what we're watching now. We didn't realize what we were doing at the time as we grouped self-consciously around the tent and the flag, but our pose mimics with terrible clarity those old shots of Amundsen's and Scott's teams doing the same thing. It's eerie. We look almost as tired and afraid.

Janey makes dinner for a change. She ransacks the store for freeze dried plaice and mushrooms, little balls of cardboardy rice. She looks at Figgis all the time he eats. A peace offering, of course. He gets the message and rumbles male comments about how good it tastes. And there's some acidic Frascati she's reconstituted to loosen us up. We keep the conversation safe, going over ground already worn smooth with repetition.

After coffee, I offer to clear up in the expectation that Janey and Figgis will beat a swift retreat to the torpedo tubes to discuss more urgent matters. But something goes wrong behind my back and Janey storms off alone, shouting You Never this and Why Don't You that, leaving Figgis drumming his fingers on the table and the cramped atmosphere colder than it is out there beyond the porthole.

More than happy to stay out of it, I take a shower and give myself a good rubdown, marveling at the swelling blue veins in my legs. Then I flop down inside my Korean-sized torpedo tube balled up in my dressing gown. Faintly, I can hear Janey still sobbing next door. I close my eyes. Relax, Woolley. Tomorrow's a big day. The biggest. I wish I could imagine--

Figgis raps on the hatch. He wants to talk. I let him in.

"This all is so ordinary," he says, crouched between the little shelf and the rim of the bunk. "Janey and I are arguing like kids. I wish I had your distance from this kind of thing, Woolley."

"Didn't the College psychologists tell you what was going to happen when they did the profiles?"

He shakes his head, then nods. "Yeah, but I didn't believe them." He pulls at his beard. "What did they tell you?"

"They told me I'd be lonely.... They told me I was used to it and that I would cope." I pause, but why not speak the truth for a change? "They told me that you two squabbling and screwing would get on my nerves."

He reaches out a hand. My veiny leg is sticking out of my dressing gown as far as my thigh. He gives it a pat. "I'm sorry, Woolley."

"That's okay," I say, shifting slightly to cover myself. "You read any truthful account of this kind of mission, it's always the same. Think of Thigh on the Bounty."

Figgis grins. "And Captain Oates is cursing Scott for his incompetence at this very moment."

"That's right," I say.

He pauses. Janey's gone quiet next door. Probably listening to us, trying to catch the words over Epsilon's plastic hum and the muffled scream of the wind. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Fire away."

"Tell me how you feel about sex, Woolley. I've always wondered."

"You mean, do ugly people have a sex drive! And if so, what do we do with it?"

He doesn't answer. He's down to shorts and a cutoff T-shirt that's ridden up over his taut belly so that I can see the beginnings of his pubic hair. His whole body is clear and sharp; no cause for shame. His eyes are sharp too, and his breath smells sweet through that ridiculous beard: maybe he's drunk another bottle of the wine. You get used to seeing bits of people when you're a doctor. But that isn't the same as the whole.

"Yes," I say. "I do have a sex drive. And I'm not a virgin, either. I was once nineteen like everybody else. You know what it used to be like at those parties when the College was still taking regular admissions? When people paired off, there was always some lad drunk enough to do the ugly bitch in the corner a favor. I went through all of that...that phase. But sex on its own is a disappointment, isn't it? It's everything that surrounds it that counts."

Figgis's eyes don't flicker. He's watching me the way Janey watches the instruments when she's piloting the canhopper. "Would you have liked to have children?" he asks.

That's another question entirely, although I understand from my own bitter inward arguments that it follows on neatly enough. Is that why I'm thinking about my mother so much these days?

I take a breath. "I don't know," I say. "Things would just be different. I probably wouldn't be here for a start."

"Yeah," he says with a sigh, and I realize that I've been tactless. He leans forward. I like the way his young muscles move, and for a moment I wonder if I don't detect some sexual charge--or at least a need for sharing--in this close torpedo air. But he's just trying to shift his arse on the uncomfortable rim of the shelf. Figgis, he's at ease with Woolley. He could almost be on his own. He says, "Do you think Janey's asleep?"

"I doubt it."

"Well maybe I should go see her. Clear the air."

I smile. "You do that."

So Figgis works his way out of Woolley's torpedo tube and bangs the hatch shut, leaving me with his faint mannish odor, my own stale disappointments. I dim the lights and lie back. I play music through my earset for a while. It's Bill Evans in concert, June 25, 1961, but even as the baseline joins the piano for "My Foolish Heart," I can hear Janey and Figgis next door. Making up. He's groaning, she's groaning. It's no good. I turn the music off and wait for silence. And it comes, it comes. With Epsilon humming and the faint gathering storm, my fingers reach down and find the place, and touch. I realize that I'm aroused anyway. Poor old Woolley gets off just on the sound of other people doing it. My fingers circle and dance. The darkness moves with them. For a few moments, the sun breaks through the rainclouds and flickers white on a lake where laughing bodies dive and mingle, going deep to a place where there's nothing but music, nothing but light.

My vision spins back. This torpedo tube. The sound of my heart. Eventually, I sleep, and I dream, as so often recently, about my mother. And with her face, with her voice, comes an echo of trolley wheels squealing along a hospital corridor, the bright wash of fluorescent light, the itchy feel of the stool on which I had to sit and wait for her on that day she went to collect her test results. The dream's so familiar that part of me's just watching. As she comes back through those swing doors and stoops toward me, somehow still managing to keep a smile on her face- looking, in fact, almost relieved--I realize that she must have already known that she had cancer. Mum was also a doctor, after all. And they always tend to expect the worst when their own health's at stake. So this would just be confirmation that she was dying.



Perhaps she brought me with her to the hospital for moral support; perhaps it was just because it was in the school holidays and she didn't know what else to do with me. And I sat waiting for her on that seat in the corridor whilst the nurse behind the desk gave me sweets that had gone sticky in their wrappers.

The face of the woman I see coming out through those double doors--big jaw, small mouth, big forehead, large, deep, close-set eyes--is much like the one that stares back at me nowadays from the mirror, even if I do sometimes wish I could manage her smile. Mum said something to me as she bent down. Always in these dreams, I can see her lips move, but I can't quite understand. Not exactly. It was something about making the most of time, love. Time. Love. Home. Not Long...somethinglike that. And, as always in my dream--in memory, too--I strain to catch her words. But I can never quite hear them.

MUM DIED WITHIN A YEAR. She fumed gray and her skin faded off her big bones and the pain that she was reluctant to take medication for often made her irritable. Little Woolley was eleven by then, with most of her mother's ugly features, most of her mother's aptitudes. Like Mum, I was already a loner, the giver and taker of easy playground jokes. And, like Mum, I eventually became a doctor. The only thing about me, really, that's different--until recently, anyway, when even my own biological clock has given off the occasional pre-menopausal ping--is that I've never entertained thoughts of having children. Not that Mum took the usual step of pairing off with a suitable man. Like me, I suppose, that course was less than straightforward for her. She went instead to a sperm bank and had the thing done coldly, methodically, without all the lies and the fumbling, the pretenses of passion. Thus it was that little Woolley, the product of a nameless and unknown father, finally entered the world. Thus it was that Woolley began a life that has ended up here in the Antarctic of a different century as the product of genes which had, appropriately enough, been frozen.

Two hours out from Epsilon on the trail of the British Antarctic Expedition under the command of Robert Falcon Scott. Janey pushes the canhopper hard across the ice plateau. She's in control. Figgis drums his fingers. The tight air inside the canhopper resonates as the engines drone. Whatever happened between the two of them last night has left a residue that lies somewhere between love, lust, anger, despair; the Greeks probably had a word for it. It seems to me that they've both finally realized that this relationship is heading in the same direction as every other relationship they've ever been involved in: that the personality profiles were right. The fact is, Janey and Figgis--despite their good looks, their relative youth, their admirable if somewhat over-specific intellects--are both constitutionally incapable of sustaining a long-term friendship, let alone love. At times like this, I feel truly sorry for them, and sense more easily the desperation that has driven them here. Both double-divorcees, Janey and Figgis have been ejected from the present at least as thoroughly as poor old Woolley has. Perhaps they'd entertained thoughts of staying together, of using the chat show and media spin-off fees we're hoping to get when our college goes public to buy a proper house in a Sony enclave and recover custody of the children they've left in their turbulent wake....

Amazing, when you think about it, that we've lasted out this whole month

together. But we have--just about. The profiles were right about that, too. Me, I'm simply glad that we're nearly at the end of it, and that the chances seem reasonably high that we'll return to home time.

"Your turn to drive, Woolley."

I blink my way back to the present.

"Okay, Woolley? You look like..." Janey glances back over her shoulder. The canhopper is on hover and she's human again. She smiles a human smile. "...I'd better not say."

Right, I think. Right.

I take the controls. All the dials are pointing toward the top--except for those dials that should be in the middle, which are in the middle, and those which aren't working at all or have been disconnected, which are limp, or blank. I ease the canhopper forward. Another couple of hours on the plateau for Janey to rest before the difficult bit. The ice rushes by, not as fast as before although Woolley does her Woolley best. I search left and right for the tracks left by Scott's men, but there is nothing. Even assuming they kept a course this straight on their return, the wind scours everything away.

The sun has dropped west, but I still need to keep the screen fairly dark. I can make out the faint reflection of Figgis and Janey behind me. I watch Figgis rest his hand on the inside of Janey's thigh. I concentrate on the driving.

Three Degree Depot flashes by a couple of hundred meters east. Flags and litter. I circle once at distance, but we decide not to stop. We're too afraid by now, too hurried, too eager. The sun slides closer to the ice at our backs, throwing huge shadows. Far ahead, something jagged breaks the flat horizon. The canhopper races on. Saw serrations become teeth, teeth become mountains. The sun sinks lower and reddens, daubing them with blood.

Janey yawns behind me. She says, "Move over, Woolley."

I slow the canhopper without argument. Janey settles into the pilot's seat. Figgis scratches his beard.

The Transantarctic Mountains rise and rise, damming the glacier of the Polar plateau. The ice starts to buckle into great ridges. We're sailing over the wreckage of a vast conflict. Janey has to climb hard on manual to get over and around the pressure faults. Looking out of the side window and down into the blue chasms is almost as bad as staring out of the porthole during a Jump. The canhopper's engines hiss with effort and I lever my arms for balance against the bulkhead.

Everything is huge...blood and shadow. Trying to ignore the part of my mind that insists on trying to give meaning to the shapes, I crane my neck up toward the mountain flanks where there are slashes of bare stone. Scott's men made special

detours, just to take off their mittens and touch. In this desert of ice, I can understand why.

We pass into mountain shadow. It can't be possible, but I feel the chill. Then out into a glare of light, too extreme for the screen's somewhat aged dimmers to cope with. Janey slows abruptly as she waits for the whiteout to settle. We're moving through a jagged gouge; it's too rough to be called a valley. The shadow blinks over us again. Bluish ice tumbles into squares that for a giddy instant could be the size of sugar cubes of the blocks God hewed to make the universe. Janey checks the readouts, draws back to a total crawl. Now that the engines are quietened, I can hear the patter of wind-driven ice striking the canhopper's fuselage.

Slow ahead. The canhopper crests a ridge. There's a glimpse of a far horizon, then another ridge, and my stomach drops into space beyond. The wind tips us like a kite but Janey's hands ate three places at once, taking us down a magnetic slide. The Beardmore Glacier is below us, an immense fan of ice and moraine sloping out from the mountains. The land ends here but the ice carries on, the Great Shelf filling the bay of Ross Sea. My stomach settles and for a few moments I believe I can see the blue rim where the ocean finally begins, but that's 400 kilometers away and already the cloud directly below is thickening.

It closes over. We drift down the Ice Falls...Ghost ships lean from the coiling mist. There are cracks and chasms--it's a devil's stairway. I keep telling myself that five starving men have recently picked their way up and down this glacier and beyond. I can't believe it not even when Janey slows to point out a discarded glove lying close to a crevasse. Figgis muses that maybe this is the place where Petty Officer Evans fell and neatly lost his life, even if there are grounds for supposing that the accident was dreamed up by Scott to provide an excuse for Evans's drift into insanity.

We pass the flags and the wreckage of Last Glacier Depot. I can sense desperation in those remains as Janey does a slow circuit. Shreds of torn canvas. The ice scuffed as though there was some kind of fight. A dented paraffin can rests a good twenty meters away; it's all too easy to imagine it being kicked or thrown there in anger when they find out that the extreme cold had leeched its precious contents away. And Evans will be sulking and muttering to himself, ill and getting iller. And Scott remains aloof, perhaps already sensing what lies ahead; that his diary will be the only thing that matters. We're catching up on them now, both in time and distance. They were here twenty days ago: unbelievably, it's taken us just half a day in the canhopper to gain a whole month on them.

Everything is so real now. So close. Everything else we've done; all the research, all the secrecy, all the back room deals, all the delays, the endless planning, all the reassurances we've given ourselves that, despite the odd tiff and hiccup, things have been going pretty well; they count for nothing. Suddenly, we realize that we're approaching the only moment in this journey that ever mattered. Forget about fame and money and glory and science and history. Forget about the muffled arguments in the torpedo tubes and park bench dreams of

whiteness, the endless wastes of half a dozen lost centuries. Forget about the hope of what we might or might not bring back to home time. We're simply very, very afraid.

Even allowing for the fact that the universe, at least in mathematical terms, seems to function just as well running backward as it does forward, time travel remains a paradox, a mystery. In many ways, we know little more about it than did the researchers who made that first tentative backward-nanosecond push a quarter of a century ago. Can you really assassinate Hitler, Napoleon, give an early warning to the residents of Pompeii, Hiroshima, Liverpool? The truth is that, in a sense, we still don't know.

Of course, time-travel research was instantly a hot property. Imagine! A bomb that arrives at its target before it's been fired! A strategic early warning computer that jumps backward to give itself time to issue commands! Better still, you can eliminate the commanders of pesky military rivals before they've been born! For a while, the possibilities seemed endless. But they were not.

The timeline we live within is somewhat elastic, and will seemingly accept the disruptions that the very presence of something like Epsilon will cause, but it is also extremely sensitive. Anything that might actually change things simply disappears with nothing more than a clap of returning air. That, at least, is the generally accepted theory. As, by the nature of these things, any time-disruptive jumps have simply failed to return, and have left no mark on history, there will always be room for doubt. It may be that the stored-up energy that the outraged meta-universe emits when confronted with an irreconcilable kink in time seeds a new big bang. Or it may be, as some optimists still assert, that those lost time-travelers and recording devices are still out there in some alternate re-run of our world. But even the optimists have no answer to the question of how they can be deemed to have got there using time travel from a "future" that will no longer be their own. And the optimists haven't looked out of Epsilon's portholes during mid-Jump.

For all our hunger for the past, it seems that we can only peer under its very edges. And, for reasons that may have something to do with our penchant for recording and studying history, or possibly even the anthropic cosmological principle, it remains especially dangerous to tamper with the works of man. The very universe, it seems, resists. Thus it was that many international treaties and protocols were agreed, to be policed by watchdogs at least as powerful as those that oversaw the rampant proliferation of nuclear weapons in the previous century. The United Koreans, in particular, were more consistent in the breach than the observance. In view of their spectacular military and industrial success, it may be that they succeeded where others failed. But even they "em to have lost interest now. Time travel--at least in the sense that we once imagined it--is itself in danger of becoming history.

FIGGIS TAKES THE CONTROLS for a while as the canhopper slides away from the rubble of the glacier. Janey curls up in the seat beside me and snatches reluctantly at sleep. A storm blows up quickly, lying flat white across the screen one moment, then tunneling back and back the next. It looks unnervingly

like the empty buzz that comes when you Jump.

The clock above the screen says 2:30 P.M. Match 15, 1912. We have a big margin--there really is no need to push this hard--but we are caught up in the urgency of the chase, the need to get things done. Unbelievably, the storm gets worse. Janey takes over, and even she has to use the scanners. The green images flicker. I can see lips and faces, the star-skulls of Lovecraftian Old Ones. Gothic shrines to the wind. Faces in the playground shouting Stupid Ugly Woolley. I close my eyes....

After school, at what was also called home time in those days before the words were purloined, the other kids would stop taunting me when they saw my mother waiting on that bench beside the lake. In the winter, her big hands would be red and blue from the cold, and in the summer there'd be rings of sweat under her arms, and her face would often be so wet that she looked as if she'd been crying. I'd sit down beside her, and she'd tell me about her day and then those stories of the Antarctic and all the other things I suppose most parents tell their kids. Like how she'd sat here on the first afternoon after she'd been inseminated at the clinic, and stared across the water and breathed the scents of mesh-cut municipal grass, ice cream vanilla, litter bins...

Those were some of the last good seasons in England. Summers that brought decent heat, autumns of mist where leaves fell from the living trees, winters of snow and frost. The last glimmers, as it fumed out, of our country's wealth and glory. Across the lake on the hottest of days, lads in cutoff jeans dived laughing from the wooden pier. And, every year since Mum could remember, the cold undertow from the deep natural caverns would draw one of them down, and a body would be discovered days or weeks later bobbing in the lime pits on the far side of town. Mum being Mum, she sometimes tried to warn them of the risk they were taking. But they always just kept on laughing. They'd never listen.

Eventually, we'd make our way up the streets toward home. I'd hold Mum's hand and she was tall above me, and I'd think of Shackleton climbing that last mountain toward the whaling station, and of Scott, and of Captain Oates...

The biodetector at the bottom of the console gives a gentle bleep. I blink awake and lean forward. My spine goes cold. This is much too soon. Scott's men can't be here. I can almost feel the outraged universe preparing to spit us out with one simple cataclysmic heave. Then the rough shape of a calm looms out of the ice storm; a cross and the ripple of a flag...

The canhopper circles and still the biodetector bleeps, unable or at least uncalibrated by its Korean makers to distinguish the frozen dead from the near-frozen living.

"Must be Evans," Figgis says. "Isn't anyone else it could be.... Pity we can't get a decent picture."

So this is the grave of Petty Officer Edgar Evans, who dreamed not of reaching the unattainable, but of retirement and a good pension from a grateful

government, maybe enough cash to buy a pub down in some pretty part of Kent. His decline could have had something to do with a fall on the Beardmore Glacier, but what medical evidence there is makes that unlikely. To Edwardians like Scott and his team, the initial signs of mental instability in a man such as Evans would have been a source of puzzled embarrassment. They would try to find a simple physical explanation. Scott had his own complex obsessions; he didn't realize that the simplest hopes are the ones that break most easily. And, although Evans was easily the biggest of the team, he had to make do on the same starvation rations as the others as they manhauled their sledges across the ice.

Janey turns the canhopper back on their trail. In a quiet moment that is probably the closest an old agnostic like me ever gets to prayer, I wonder how I can ever complain about having to put up with her and Figgis when the four men ahead of us have had to share Evans's last hours as he screamed and raved in their tent. And then I wonder--I simply can't help it--what death will feel like; that last push when I cross the final barrier. Will I know about it? Has it already happened?

At last.

We are close.

Janey is at the controls. Even she is keeping the speed down now. We're at the buzzing edges of the storm, with snatches of clarity between the flurries. Moving slow left and right over Scott's estimated course, she finds fresh sledge tracks, the scuff of wounded feet. She follows, keeping low. On the map display at her side, our course now wavers the same drunken line followed by the four men ahead.

It's exactly 1:30 P.M., Friday March 15 local time, when the biodetector starts to bleep. The range is just over three kilometers. The air is jagged crystal now as Janey pulls up the magnification on the detector's bearing. There are black specks against the white. Stopped. They don't seem to be moving...yet they are. Slowly. Janey matches the canhopper's motion to theirs, she increases the magnification again. The canhopper balances their distance, moving forward an agonized footstep at a time.

So that's it. Contact. We dare not move closer for now even with the canhopper's military camouflage. Janey clicks all the controls to Auto. Then her shoulders sag and she draws her hands over her face, rocking back and forth. Figgis is pulling at his beard. I can hear the soft snap as it comes out by the roots.

The afternoon is endless. The canhopper moves forward in tiny jerks. It's agony watching the image of Scott's men magnified against the whiteness, but none of us can look away. Amundsen got to the Pole with skis and dogs, but the British way had always been manhauling. Sure, Scott brought along dogs, but no one had been trained to use them. He brought ponies, which all died, much to the distress of Cavalry Captain Oates. He brought skis, which they didn't know how to use. And he brought three snazzy mechanical sledges, one of which fell through the ice, whilst the others broke down. At the end of the day, every

British explorer knew that the Antarctic was about manhauling, a harness and a heavy sledge to pull. Even looking at them, I can't believe it. They've dragged themselves this way across 3,000 kilometers of ice. As Janey and Figgis and I stare out, the thought surely crosses all our minds that we should drift in closer, turn on the canhopper's lights, beckon these men over, feed them, give them warmth...This, I decide, must be how God feels: looking down, knowing that he cannot intervene.

With the engines almost at shutdown, I can hear the wind quicken, then decrease. Ghosts rise up from the ice, white on white. I'm too tired to think, and again I can see claws...ravenous eyes and teeth...faces pushed close and shouting...a park bench...

One of the four men ahead is obviously in greater pain than the others. It's difficult to watch any of them, but with Captain Oates, it actually hurts. He doesn't walk--it's an inhuman shuffle, something out of a monster comic book. He falls behind. After a while, Scott, Bowers and Wilson droop their limbs and loosen their harnesses as they wait for him to catch up. Eventually, he does, but soon he falls behind again. Oates is suffering from scurvy, which was still the scourge of polar explorers at the start of the last century. One of the diseases's many unpleasant characteristics is that it unknits old wounds. His thigh was shattered by a sniper's bullet during the Boer War: by now, the scar tissue will have dissolved.

I watch as he falls behind once more. There can't be any doubt amongst them that their chances of survival are thinning by the hour. Scott has already called Oates "a terrible burden" in his diary. But not for much longer. For today is March 15, 1912, when Captain Lawrence Edward Grace Oates finally walks out of history--and into legend.

Evening of a sort. With Oates still shuffling far behind, the others begin to put up the tent. It takes a long time and there are fresh ice flurries coming from the east. Clumsy fingers. Clumsy minds. None of them seem inclined to take a piss before they go in; they'll be dehydrated as well. Or maybe they've given up caring. They close the tent. Oates finally gets there too. There's an odd sort of pantomime before they let him in.

Janey rests the canhopper on the ice for an hour. None of us is hungry, but we eat, guessing that the men inside the tent are doing the same, sharing out the frozen crumbs of their few remaining rations. We have hot soup, crackers, a chocolate bar each. The wind howls. After an hour and no sign of further activity, Janey starts up the canhopper again and drifts in much closer. Down from two kilometers to one, then five hundred meters...four...three...two...one hundred. Then fifty. She uses the screen projection and the biodetector to make sense of the storm, but now that we are this close, the tent, the skis and the sledges are clearly visible through the streaming white. Janey kills the canhopper's engines. In the sudden silence I can hear the rattle of ice against the fuselage. ...and canvas fluttering...

We all dress awkwardly in our out-quits and move the litter of the journey away

from the canhopper's outer door in case anything should get blown out. It's uncomfortable in all this thick padding, but we dare not be anything but fully ready now. We wait. Wilson--the doctor in the party --has given Oates a heavy dose of morphine. They all hoped without saying that it would finish him off.

The storm is unnerving graywhite static. Any time now. We wait. The storm quietens a little. The midnight sun flickers gold. Just as the drift ice begins to sweep over again, the side of the tent flutters oddly. For a moment, I think it's just a twist of the wind, but then I see it jerk again. There's no doubt that the laces of the outer flap are being pulled. A head appears. We watch without a word. Janey's gloved hand circles the canhopper's door release.

Oates falls out from the tent on hands and knees, his head down between his shoulders. Behind him, the ties jerk as someone pulls them shut again. He crawls forward without looking up, makes an effort at standing, fails as his right leg shoots out at an agonizing angle. He's dragging something behind him. I can't exactly make it out through the storm, but I know from the records that he's taken his sleeping bag and boots out there with him. Neither would be any use to him, but at the very least it must have been plain to the others what Oates was doing.

Still, we wait. It could take several hours for him to die, and it was decided long ago that we should wait for him to get at least twenty meters from the tent. But he's moving so slowly. He keeps standing up...falling over. He looks drunk--maybe the morphine has affected him. After about twelve meters, I put up the hood of my outsuit and say Let's Go in a shout that comes out as a whisper. Janey pushes the release. The Antarctic storm roars in.

I climb down the steps from the canhopper. Swaying against the wind, I unclip the syringe gun from my belt. My body is screaming hurry hurry, but the last thing we dare risk is one of us sustaining an injury. I take my bearings as Figgis and Janey back out with the stretcher. Oates still has his head down. The screaming wind is masking whatever noise we are making. He still hasn't seen us or the canhopper.

We push forward toward Oates and the tent. They've stacked their gear on the far side to act as a feeble windbreak, so at least we don't have to worry about tripping over a sledge or damaging something. Figgis has a flashlight on the shoulder of his out-quit. The idiot turns it on, and I signal wildly to him through the blizzard, too excited to think about using the comms set. The tunnel of light, if it caught directly on the tent's filthy weave, would shine straight through. Janey gets the message, and reaches to turn the thing off herself. Still, Oates is crawling, the ties of the sleeping bag looped around his trailing injured foot, his hands wedged up inside the reindeer skin finnesko boots for leverage. And the world is still here. The ties of the universe haven't broken. And Oates hasn't seen us.

I push on into the storm. Half my mind is still on that tent and the three men inside it who belong, untouched by us, in history. Now, Oates looks up, his hands still pushed into the boots like clumsy mittens. I'm three meters from



him. I raise the syringe gun to quieten him, expecting him to yell or struggle; seeing the three of us coming out of this storm must surely feel like one last nightmare on top of every other. His face is blotched red and white inside the porthole of his balaclava, puffed beyond all normal expression. Maybe it's that or snowblindness, but I can sense no surprise. Reluctant to use the gun unless I have to, I bend forward, holding out my hand. I know it's absurd, but I'm smiling under my mask. Hi, we're from the future. Please keep quiet. For God's sake don't take us to your leader.

I get a whiff of him even through my mask and the storm. Gangrene. I grab at the cloth covering his shoulders. It's half-rotten and starts to break up in my hands, but Figgis and Janey have got the message and are moving quickly to the left. Oates looks straight up at me. Maybe it's just the pain, but I get a cold feeling of recognition. He moans something. It's far too quiet to be heard over this storm, but to me it sounds like make the most of. Time. Home. Hurry. Something like that. Now I give him the syringe gun. His body has no strength. He goes loose instantly.

Janey and Figgis lay the stretcher on the hissing ice. The three of us roll Oates onto it. We can't take any risks. Figgis untangles the sleeping bag before we lift the stretcher up. He has to use his bare hands, and Janey grabs one of his gloves just before the wind spins it off into the storm.

We lift the stretcher, and, as we do so, the boot comes away from Oates's right hand. This time, I remember the comms set.

"Remember," my voice crackles loud in my own head. "They found the sleeping bag and the right boot."

Figgis gives what could be a thumbs up. As we back away toward the open door of the canhopper, the boot and the loose sleeping bag start to tumble east, where they will be discovered next spring by Surgeon Atkinson's party after they have found Scott and the others dead in their tent just the few extra kilometers they managed to drag themselves down the trail.

It takes a million times longer than it should for us to haul the stretcher up inside the canhopper. I have to keep telling myself that what we're doing is already part of history. Oates is safe. Nothing has changed. This is the exactly what always happened, right down to that boot and that sleeping bag tumbling off in the terrible wind. The body of Captain Lawrence Oates was never found. Never was and never will be. We were here. We took him. We've always been part of history.

The door swings in on silence. The ice swirls confetti, settles on the canhopper's plastic floor. It's still freezing in here and our breath is pluming clouds, but already the heaters are starting to whir, already Janey is sliding into the pilot seat, slamming on the engines. Already we are on our way.

Figgis helps me settle the stretcher into the supports behind our seats. Janey's pushing the canhopper ridiculously hard. I rip off my mask and yell at her to

cool it. Steadying myself with one hand, I tear the wrapper off a steel and cut through layers of hood and balaclava. I have to remind myself that there really is a human being underneath this mess.

I ease the boot away from his left arm. Oates has slit the reindeer skin down as far as the toes so that he can get it on and off his swollen foot. But something else looks odd about it. There isn't time to think now, but my mind tells me anyway just as I drop the soggy weight to the floor. It's his left arm, but this is the right boot. I glance back at Figgis and Janey. They are too busy for anything right at this moment. I say nothing.

He needs oxygen. I turn up the supply and hold it above his face without touching the seared flesh. One breath. Two. Easy now. Then I take a whiff myself. The smell of Oates gets worse as I slice away more layers. I have to keep the overhead heaters on full to bring his body temperature up fast and the flesh and the rags--sometimes it's hard to be quite sure which is which--are starting to warm.

Oates's hands are swollen tight, the skin and nails peeled back like old paint on a fence. I drag my suddenly sweating body from the outsuit and work in underwear--hardly sterile conditions, and God knows what Captain Oates is going to think if he wakes up now. But Oates is barely alive. The shock of us and the stretcher and the syringe gun can't have helped. The blood analysis is up on the screen. It tells me that Wilson gave Oates a lot more morphine than anyone back at our college had predicted. I can't imagine what power it was that moved him across the ice.

I take another hit of oxygen before I start work on the legs. This is the worst bit. I already know what I'll find from the smell of rotting meat, but that doesn't make it any easier. The right leggings are swollen taut from the thigh to the feet. I tease apart a seam and start to cut down and through. The flesh is white...blue...red...black...green.... It spills out like weak jelly. I cut further. Bits of bone jut up. Just as I reach the knee, Captain Oates's eyes snap open. I wonder if the morphine has somehow nullified my own injection before I notice the screen and realize that this is the characteristic spasm that begins seconds before the heart stops beating.

I jam open his mouth and slam the electrodes onto his wasted chest. Bits of flesh flake away and I snap some bones in my hurry. I'm shouting for help and even Janey must have sensed the sudden urgency because she's brought the canhopper back to float. Figgis knows enough to hold the oxygen over Oates's mouth end otherwise keep out of my way as the body jerks and shudders with each shock. After the initial panic, I work smoothly. Apart from the mess Oates is in, it's textbook stuff. But the body gets looser and harder and the moment comes that has nothing to do with clinical judgment or the flat traces on the screen when I know there isn't anything left to fight.

History was right.

Captain Oates died in the Antarctic.

CLIMBING THROUGH RUINED CITIES of the ice pack and the Beardmore Glacier, the air inside the canhopper is appalling. The improvised body bag isn't much help, and the lowest temperature I can get Oates down to is 3 Celsius. Planning on bringing a live passenger back to Epsilon, we left all the cryogenic stuff back in the medical bay. He'll keep, of course, but that isn't really the point.

So this is it. The end, really, of everything. The whole point of our journey was this one big gamble, of doing what no one else had ever done and bringing a live human being back to our home time. The idea was daring, perfect. Not only that, but it would be Captain Oates! Our college would be rich again! The research grants would pour in! We'd get paid regularly! We could even start taking in students! It wouldn't matter then that the loans for the project were secured by dubious means, that we're breaking national law and international treaty. The glory, the fame, would eclipse any problems. All of England, all of Britain--Europe, even, as a whole--would stir from its poverty. Fearful and amazed Oriental eyes would turn toward us once again.

Flags of ice and cloud drift over the golden peaks. Janey hogs the canhopper's controls. Figgis breathes through his fingers. No one says a word. No one needs to; our failure is there in the blackened ruin fermenting behind us, it's there in every sickening breath. I can't sleep, and find it hard to even close my eyes. When I do, I get the feeling that the darkly reproachful ghost of the dead Captain is standing beside me.

The sensors finally detect Epsilon up ahead. Janey makes an uncharacteristic botch of docking the canhopper, giving the outer bay a dent. She curses. Figgis and I exchange hollow glances; there'll be an inquest about that when we get back to home time. Now that we're returning with a corpse, there'll be an inquest about everything.

In the medical bay, I finish off doing the things I should have done inside the canhopper. No point in actually tidying Captain Oates up, of course. Now that he's just an archaeological relic, the specialists will squeal if I do so much as wipe his diarrhetic arse. Looked at from this angle, old Doctor Woolley here has already done a lot of damage trying to save his life. They'll want every ounce of dirt, every drop of the fluid that is pattering through the stretcher to the floor. All of it will be worth something, and will help defray our costs. But a few preparations are necessary before I freeze him.

I've got a mask on, but the gas Oates is giving off is still enough to sting my eyes. Graywhite slashes of his body peek out through what my steels and the Antarctic have done to his clothing. The flesh over the ribcage looks like it's under suction, the arms belong on a burnt chicken. Only the penis and the bluish scrotum look anything like they should, jutting with jaunty irrelevance from a nest of hair. As I take a couple of blood samples (watery pink from the neck, clotted purple from the shriveled buttocks) to determine the exact stage of decay, Oates's narrow deepset eyes stare at me. His teeth are clenched, the wide lips drawn back through the beard like a grin. This sort of thing never used to bother Woolley when she did pathology, but that's many years off, and far away

from here.

Talking to the eyes of the cameras, I give him the necessary jabs to slow the formation of damaging ice crystals in the cells, one for each portion of each limb. Just like pricking a turkey for the oven, as my old pathology professor used to say. Then I stretch out the protective film, lock in the pumps and the cables. The film shrivels over him like shrinkwrap on cheese, pushing the bloated hands flat, smoothing the face and widening the eyes, catching the penis at a funny angle, leaving it sticking up like a tiny monument. I feel the cold breath on my skin. Goodbye, Captain Oates. The ice got you after all.

Janey's torpedo tube is open and empty: Figgis's is closed. As I flop down inside my own, I hear the fall of their voices over the faint scream of the wind. Sounds like Woolley this and Woolley that, but that's probably my paranoia. I did my best--I've been over it all a thousand times already. The one question mark hangs over the syringe gun, and the College experts had agreed that there was a margin of safety with Oates's probable level of morphine.

But I can't help wondering....

I see Oates's face staring out at me out from the balaclava. His lips moved, shaping words that were like time, home, move, hurry, love; something like that. Even then, I don't think I panicked. It just felt for a moment as if he understood, as if he had gone out of the tent expecting to be rescued. But that's impossible. So no (I'll tell the inevitable inquiries), I don't think Doctor Woolley panicked. No way.

When I awake in my torpedo tube, silence has frozen over Epsilon, settled soft and heavy. I climb out and stumble around the plastic floors in plimsolls and an old football jersey. I stow away the clean washing. I tidy up in the kitchen area. I wipe down the floors with disinfectant that smells like a forest of plastic Christmas trees. Everything is faintly but sickeningly pervaded by the smell of Oates, but I get childish satisfaction from putting things back where they belong, as if I'm making some kind of point about the state of this expedition. Stupid really, but I'd imagined that people would look at Woolley differently after Epsilon. Yes, Woolley had been kidding herself, just like Janey and Figgis. The only difference was, I didn't even realize I was doing so.

Epsilon needs to be clean and tidy. I don't want people to get the impression that we've let things slip when we Jump to home time. In the comms bay, I peel off Figgis's postcard of Interlaken. Beyond the portholes, I see that snow is falling, rare as rain in a desert. I smile as I look out, watching it flutter at the glass, dancing in graceful drifts. Then, suddenly, it's gone. Absolutely nothing takes its place.

Four hours later, Janey and Figgis and I are talking in that slow way that finally comes when your panic glands run dry. The air inside Epsilon is growing warmer and the smell of Oates seems to be getting worse--or maybe it's just us. They both thought Woolley had finally flipped when I hauled them out of their torpedo tube. I got a grim kind of satisfaction out of showing them the empty

buzz beyond the portholes, but that soon passed as Janey started to hug herself and say, So What Do We Do Now until the question became a meaningless sound.

She's calm as any of us are now after the jab I gave her and sits at the kitchen table with her arms folded tight. Emptiness surges at the triple glass behind her back. We're no longer in the Antarctic. We're no longer anywhere. I wish we could put some kind of curtain up over the porthole, but the idea seems comically domestic.

"There was no power surge, so this has nothing to do with Epsilon's own Jump engines," says Figgis, walking his fingers toward us across the table, then walking them back again. "It looks as though some natural force had intervened between us and, well, reality. Of course, " his fingers reach up to his beard, "I could be wildly wrong."

Behind us, the buzz goes on and on. It seems both dense and fragile. You keep expecting it to roar. There isn't any sound.

I decide to tell them about the mix-up with Oates's left and right boots. For once, they don't bother to argue. Any explanation is better than none at all. That, or something else we've overlooked, must have been enough for the universe to reject us as foreign matter.

It seems as if the non-state out there is slowly eating away at Epsilon. The electronic filters in the porthole glass are weakening, and there are signs that the outer coatings of camouflage are breaking up.

"There has to be a chance," Janey says as the angry grayish light-that isn't-light flickers. "Otherwise we'd be dead already. So if the computer could work out a pattern, we could probably Jump back to home time...maybe not to England, but at least to the Antarctic. Then, we just get in the canhopper and aim for the coast. You know what it's like there. We'd soon come across a mine or a rig or a garbage tanker."

"Are the sensors still working?" I ask.

Figgis shrugs. "They're not broken. But there's nothing out there to record. There isn't even a vacuum.... I mean, if there was, Epsilon would simply have burst. But I think Janey's right. We have to Jump. What else can we do?"

Janey nods, the movement notched by the trembling of her head. "That has to be it."

"How can we Jump when we don't know where we are?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"I have a simpler one," I say. "We could just step outside." Figgis and Janey stare at me. Now they know I'm mad.

"Like Captain Oates," I add.

"Jesus," Figgis whispers, "you mean you're expecting to be rescued?"

The sweat down my back feels cold even though the air is getting warmer by the minute. Epsilon generates heat--heat that it's designed to radiate into an atmosphere. But now there is no atmosphere, and the outer skin is getting warmer and warmer as it corrodes. We can't turn off the life supports, and even if we did, there would still be the heat the three of us are generating. I wonder how long it will take for poor old Oates to thaw...but we'd all be long dead by then.

"Look," Figgis says, "if you want to asphyxiate or fry or implode whatever else would happen outside, that's fine by me, Woolley, but don't expect us to follow. If we can time things right we might as well try a Jump..." His voice trails off uncertainly. I think he genuinely hasn't realized until that moment that we're really not discussing means of escape, but ways of ending our lives.

"If you want to get back to home time that badly..." I say, "...and assuming you'd recognize what you found."

"It's home." Janey grins and shivers.

Out of the window, I think for a moment that I glimpse something. But it's just Woolley's mind playing tricks, imposing order on chaos. It's just more static' more nothingness. On and on. It's a creepy sensation, like gazing into the eyes of God. I have to look away.

"Will you let me go?" I ask.

But Janey and Figgis are staring at each other. Figgis has already got the impossible equations of the Jump blurring his eyes and Janey's white and eager. They don't stand a chance, but then neither do I. That's our only hope.

I leave them and head for the medical bay, where a faint mist rises from the famous Captain Oates. Death and freezing have smoothed the suffering from his face. Under the grime and the beard, he's even faintly good-looking. The sort of large, deep-set features that look terrible on a woman, good on a man.

There's no porthole in here, but part of me can feel the emptiness outside anyway: it's there at the back of my jaw like the pain of wisdom teeth and beneath my fingernails, it's in the places where blood and bone corrode. The lights are dimming as the life support struggles to keep up. How funny, after the frozen Antarctic, that the most immediate threat to our lives is this increasing heat.

For now, Oates is still solid as a brick, looking up at me with unwavering pearly eyes. Even my old pathology professor would have to admit I've done a good job on him; pity no one's ever going to see it. Still, Woolley tells herself, there's always a chance. Everything you do in life is a race against

death and time, so why should this be any different"

I open a fresh steel. Fortunately, Oates's legs are spread wide enough for me to make a rough incision in the perineum below the scrotum. Through the film, into the frosty flesh. Crude stuff, but I'm not doing any damage to the cells that matter. It takes another steel to work my way up, avoiding the ridge of the pelvis. The sartorius, the vas deferens, the symphysis pubis...I'm sweating rivers but my hands are cold and clumsy. I slice through the woven scrap of a label. Burberry Mills--Empire Cotton--Size 34M.

The steel is blunting again. As I peel the scrotal sack away in its entirety, the frozen penis snaps like...like, well, a frozen penis. I let the whole lot clang into a bucket. Contrary to popular belief, whilst sperm are manufactured in the testicles, the live ones are stored in the seminal vesicle at the base of the bladder prior to ejaculation. It's that and the icy pink stone of the prostate below it that I eventually extract.

I have to be careful thawing the fluid, and even then I need to thin it out with plasma. Rather than chance the artificial stuff we have in store, I centrifuge a little out from my own blood, and then centrifuge the mixture again, to concentrate what little there is of Captain Oates's semen. Everything takes an age. Human reproduction is a messy process at the best of times, even when it doesn't involve a frozen and malnourished corpse. Messy--and chancy. But Mother Nature's profligate with her resources--even here, in this no-place. I risk the couple of extra minutes it takes to get a quick sample under the microscope, and I can't help smiling as I watch the meager few tens of millions of living sperm I've managed to filter jostle on the console screen. It's against all the odds, really, to have got even this far.

So at least there's a faint chance. I know I've hurried the thaw, and I've hardly stuck to professional clinical standards, but maybe if you break enough rules the odds eventually start to tumble back in your favor. I half expect Janey and FWs to walk in just at the most embarrassing moment, but it doesn't happen. The medical bay hatch stays gloriously shut.

My hands are trembling and the syringe feels a whole lot bigger than it should. And cold; like most doctors, Woolley doesn't spare much thought for the patient, least of all when it's herself. I draw in a shivering breath. But, pushing the syringe, I feel nothing at all. Not even lonely or afraid.

I'm sure the textbooks would say that I should lie down now with some soothing music. But even if all that were possible, I'm too keyed up. I just drop the junk into the chute and feel the heat of Epsilon break over me in a sudden wave. You had it easy, Mum, wandering though the glass doors at whatever clinic it was that you went to. The odds against conception must be phenomenal. But then, they always are--and I want to take something with me when I step out from Epsilon.

Figgis and Janey are still in the comms bay. They're sitting at the console, but their eyes are on Woolley as she clambers through the hatch. The screen on the right of Figgis glitters with some weird kind of graph-doubtless something to

reassure them when they finally find the courage to Jump--but the one on the left displays a fisheye view of the medical bay, where Oates's body lies with a half-thawed hole where the genitals should be. Of course--the cameras. Woolley was too busy worrying and watching the hatch to think straight. Should I need it, the look on their faces is confirmation that they've seen everything.

Incredibly, I find myself blushing. My dry throat clicks open and shut as I try to pull out some words. I give up with a kind of shrug; I just don't know what to say.

"What are you doing?" Janey finally asks, the buzz from the porthole behind her face seeming to swarm in around us.

I'm still dressed in my old football jersey and plimsolls. Worry and lack of sleep won't have done much to improve my looks either, and I get the impression that if Woolley takes too many steps toward Janey and Figgis they'll cringe or run away. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea to chase them, get an idea of how the alien felt in all those old movies set in places like this. Me and Mum, we always used to root for the monster.

"We're, er..." Figgis makes a clumsy wave toward his graph "We're working out the probabilities. This can't be entirely nowhere. For a start, there's the erosion of Epsilon's outer surface. That's happening at a measurable rate, which means that it must be governed by the some sort of external law. I think we've got a chance."

"Yeah," Janey nods. "We've got to risk it. You're not still thinking of, ah..." She pauses and studies her ragged fingernails for a moment "Just going through the hatch?"

Neither of them can look at me. But I can feel their thoughts fluttering against my face like hot breath. They want me to go outside. Even if I didn't feel this odd compulsion, their pressure might almost be enough. All it takes is a few steps. I look longingly at the handle of the inner hatch, but some instinct still holds me back. I have to say something...maybe words about time, hurry, home, not much. That kind of thing.

I clear my throat. It comes out as a phlegmy bark. I wipe my lips. For a moment, I thought I'd finally got to those words that Mum spoke to me when she came through the swing doors of that hospital corridor. But perhaps that's too much to hope for.

"I'm going outside for a while," I croak. "I may be some time."

It seems faintly illogical to go out dressed in a sleep-stained football jersey, but even more illogical to use an out-quit. My feet carry me. The inner hatch swings back without my realizing I've pushed the handle. Then it closes behind me. No conscious action seems to be involved anymore, which is a good thing because I'm not sure that I have the courage to go on. Silence buzzes beyond the porthole. Oates is a gray wraith at my shoulder in this tight space between



inside and out; it seems as if it's his hand that turns on the inner seal, even though part of me knows that it's probably Figgis doing it on remote from the comms bay, making sure that stupid ugly Woolley doesn't let the emptiness blast in.

Without thinking, I brace myself for a chill. But of course it doesn't happen. As the outer door swings out, it seems to turn some kind of corner and I lose sight of it entirely. The air stays put, neither drawn out nor compressed by whatever lies beyond. I understand more clearly now that there is no light out there, there's nothing that my senses can truly relate to. It's a bit like standing over a drop, looking down from the high board at the swimming pool. And then it's like nothing at all. There are colors there if I want to see them, shapes and sneering faces from the playground pushed close just before home time. Stupid Ugly Woolley. Everything tilts up and I feel myself sliding. Oates is a black mist that curls around me, some sort of atmospheric effect. I draw in one last breath. Then I let go.

I feel a rush, sparks in my eyes. It really is like the swimming pool, like diving, like falling asleep. I can hardly believe that it takes this long for my brain to dissolve; that I still have time for this particular thought. Then that I have time for this next one. The clinical part of me is amazed. There's even still a faint sensation of falling. Who'd have ever thought that death would be this interesting? Woolley should have done it instead of Osteoporosis Fractures for her thesis. But it's too late for all that now.

Then there's a jolt of pain. It's localized, my right leg. Feels like striking...something solid. I wait for the pain to spread. Bang. My other leg. Jesus, it hurts the way it does when you walk into something, a sharp reminder from your body to look where you're going. Then the palms of my hand slide across something sharp, they go hot and wet. Blood. Fingers to my mouth taste salt, my tongue touches...gravel. I pull in a breath that fills with the scent of litter bins and water, of fresh-cut municipal grass. For a moment, it feels as though hands other than my own are helping me up. But then they are gone. I open my eyes alone.

Hauling myself onto the bench, I look around through the green blotches in my eyes. It's a hot day. People are flirting with a benign sun. There's a little girl down the path staring, a Mr. Whippy ice cream dripping down her knuckles. Her mother takes one look at me and pulls her away. Woolley's still in this stained football jersey, but at least it's summer. People will just think I'm one of the local nutters.

Across the squinting water, lads in singlets are splashing and diving into the lake from the short wooden pier. It's so hot, I almost want to join them. And there's another part of me wants to go over and shout, wag my finger, tell them about the boys from other summers who drowned, were drawn down by the cold undertow to re-emerge in the lime pits miles outside town. But I just watch them and smile. And I feel this honeyed sunlight. Eventually, it's home time, when the younger children break out from school. They glance uneasily at this funny-looking woman as they run and chatter on their way to their old TVs and

their dinners and their future lives. I smile, frightening them by doing so.

Evening starts to grow. Streetlight trickles across the water. The park keeper stares. I realize that I must have been sitting here for a long time; relaxing, doing almost what the fertility manuals would recommend. But conception's a tricky process. It could still be hours ahead--or never. That's a chance I'll have to take.

As I walk up the streets toward my home, I start to wonder if I ever really left it that morning. After all, there are still a great many things that I don't understand. Of course, there's hope now there's time, there's time now there's hope. At least twelve happy years lie between me and that morning at the hospital, coming through the swing doors with the results of the biopsy buzzing in my head to find little Woolley swinging her legs on that itchy seat, looking happy, bored, uncertain as she waits for her mother. I'll have to talk to her, express something about hope, love, home, time, make the most; something like that. I have no idea what it is. But when the time comes, I think I'll know what to say.