

# THE MIDNIGHT SUMMER

## JOURNAL OF A SOUTH POLE WINTER

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### March 10, 2002

We are three and a half weeks into the winter and the sun is low in the sky. He moves along a track mere fingers above the horizon and parallel to the Earth, like a hairline on a monk's head. Like 9 p.m. on a summer's day. The shadows are amazingly long and feel foreboding, sending word of the coming dark and cold. Soon the sun will die, and then the real winter will begin.

Ending the summer was unexpectedly emotional. Each day of that last week a plane took more of our comrades. We would all gather on the flight deck to hug and say goodbye. We'd eaten together, partied together, worked and functioned in the same small spaces for four months. Once you've lived so closely to someone they are part of your world, and now they were going away, leaving little holes in your heart.

The day the station began its winter isolation the last flight of the season circled overhead, bidding us farewell. That night we gathered in the big heavy-machinery garage and watched both versions of "The Thing" projected onto several large sheets sewn together and hung from the ceiling. The first version takes place in the Arctic and is extremely silly. The second version takes place in Antarctica and is even more ridiculous. We were wondering who the consultant was for that movie, or if John Carpenter even thought he needed one... I mean, who would know whether his facts were correct or not? Who actually goes to Antarctica? We got a pretty good laugh out of it. It was a great way to start a winter. Now we're ready for anything... We just need to find the flame-throwers.

The temps are around minus 50, and I



to continue work on the new elevated station and fulfill my duties as the construction materials person. She's a beast whose tracks clack and bang their way across the polar plateau, but I love her. There's a peace in trundling across "the long, flat white" alone with my thoughts and the nighttime sky.

The atmosphere is more relaxed now. The community is jelling and we often laugh together when we gather for meals or parties. A settling-in is taking place. As one of my fellow winterers said, "The winter is the reward for living through the summer." Amen.

### May 14, 2002

The sun set March 20. We had our sun-down party in the new elevated station so we could look out the windows as the evening went on and see the giant yolk, sitting on its vast white, sinking lower and lower. It looked like a radioactive egg glowing sunny-side up. The clouds were pink around the edges as they nestled in the darkening blue, much like a Georgia O'Keefe painting. A month later, it's as though we've never seen the sun at all. I feel I've lived half my life here already and I still have six months to go.

The temps have been minus 80 or colder. Urrrrrr. Breathing is like sucking in

Photos by Jonathan Berry

baby bee stings. I frostnipped my tongue (no joke). Everything fogs up at those temps and I find it easiest to get around without eyewear. I pull my hat low and my neck gaiter up to my eyes, leaving a slit to look through, then put one foot in front of the other and hope for the best. I fall once in a while but with 50 pounds of clothing on I barely feel it. Getting back up is the hard part.

Sometimes as I walk out to get materials I wonder at how lucky I am to be here, despite the hardship of moving around outdoors. Other times it seems so incredibly difficult, this life, and I want to shake my fist at the gods for this place. So I do. And it all snowballs into bigger questions of life and pain and hunger in the world, and children born into unloving situations and mean people and, and, and...

And what could I possibly do about it all from here? Those were the times I sat on my knees and wept, frustrated I couldn't overcome this place. Broken-hearted at not just the pain of the world, but the pain in my own heart. Will I ever find my answers? Is the healing in learning not to want them anymore?

We see auroras now almost daily - sometimes they are painted across the sky as if with a broad sweep of God's paintbrush. Sometimes they are the smoke curling off a giant cigar and they shimmer high up in the heavens. Other times they drip down on us like animated chandelier crystals, dipping so low I feel I could reach up and grab one. And if I could grab one would I touch the face of this southern God who challenges me so?

The moon rose this month and came up full. I wasn't expecting it, but coming out of the dome that day there she was. Full, big and low on the horizon with her light

## Winter From page 13

was a mess and everyone was happily chatting or dancing in it.

### June 27, 2002

We're still here. It's still dark.

We just passed the solstice, our half-way mark. Four months down, four more to go. It's tempting to start counting days. Must resist.

Mid-winter is a time of reflection and celebration. We've received mid-winter greeting cards via e-mail from probably every station in Antarctica with a picture of their winter crew and good wishes for safe travels home. We took our mid-winter picture just outside the dome entrance. It was minus 84. When it was time for the flash to go off we all held our breath so faces wouldn't be obscured by the fog from breathing.

Our mid-winter dinner was an elegant affair. We brought out the linen, china and



wine glasses. We dined on Beef Wellington, chicken Florentine, homemade rolls and a real salad, thanks to the greenhouse staff. It was an evening of memories and plenty of warm and sincere toasts. A reminder that we are in this together and we're doing fine. What a wonderful group of people I am here with. After dinner many of us sprawled out in the library like a happy litter of puppies to watch *The Shining*. There were plenty of jokes about Jack Nicholson losing it due to a little cold and isolation. Weenie.

Temps are in the minus 90s and, despite

come and go that nothing would be a surprise, it all simply was. Sometimes I feel like the gods are walking beside me. This beautiful and isolated place is showing me how to crawl around inside my own head and find comfort there.

The low temps are cooling off the polar plateau to the point that we're getting little "ice quakes." The ice contracts due to the colder temps and makes noises like rail cars slamming into each other. Usually it sounds like the rail yard is about a mile away, but sometimes it can shake a building.

The frost-cicles that fascinated me in October are once again hanging off the dome. The ceiling is full of fuzzy stalactites. They don't have a strong hold and as they fall from 50 feet up they break up. What falls on your head is akin to snow-fall. South Pole: the only place where it snows inside, but not out.

The barometric pressure altitude jumps around quite a bit and last week it leapt to

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11,400 feet (physically we're at 9,600). Breathing was difficult, and everyone was moving slow. This place continues to challenge and amaze me. I wonder if life won't be boringly easy when I leave here. What will I do when simply getting around won't feel like I'm trying to function under water?

### August 20, 2002

We have light on the horizon and it's not aliens. It's the sun coming back for us! It was beginning to feel that nothing would

everywhere... people forgetting the names of their family members, why they walked into a room, etc. And what was so important that it couldn't be left till tomorrow? Nothing. Life boiled down to a very simple existence for me: put one foot in front of the other. Now do it again. Scientists call it T-3 syndrome and it has to do with the lack of a hormone that is produced with the help of sunlight. Or something like that. It was explained to me at one point, but of course I promptly forgot it. What was interesting is the lack of motivation and focus didn't really bother anyone. It was as though we were all drugged and that was fine with us. Nothing was worth getting worked up over. It was all getting very dreamy.

We had a July 4 BBQ that felt weird in the cold and dark. What made more sense was the "Christmas in July" party. We decorated the galley and bar and had a nice sit-down dinner. We made a snowman



that's six feet tall. The snow here is so incredibly dry that it took six hours of heating and wetting the snow and then packing it onto our snowman. But he's gorgeous and now sits under the dome next to one of the housing buildings. That was July for the most part, or what I remember of it.

Earlier in August we hit minus 100. Time for the 300 Club induction ceremony. First heat sauna to 200 degrees. Sit in said sauna until eyeballs are just about to boil. Drop towel and walk naked (running not recommended) to geological pole marker, whoop and holler. Hobble back

# Winter

From page 14

## September 27, 2002

Sunglasses.

Today I needed sunglasses for the first time in six months. The sun has been up for a few days, but under clouds most of the time. Today the clouds cleared and there he was in all his glory several fingers above the horizon. Not a meek orange ball just barely waking up, still groggy and blinking from his long sleep, but a wide-awake bright yellow, powerful and glowing force that filled up more of the sky than I can remember a sun ever doing. Was it always this amazingly captivating and beautiful? Has it really been so long for me that I again can be completely enchanted with the sun? Wow. I stared at it for far too long, but seeing spots for the next hour was worth the price. Warmth and light and shadows and yellow on the snow and... "we're outta the woods, we're outta the dark, we're outta the night..." It feels like heaven on my face. I tilt my head toward the glow and drink it in.

Although, funny thing... I'm loving the sunlight and the fact that my winter is almost over, but I have this place in my heart, a soft area very close to me, that holds a deep fondness for the dark and all I gained from it. How it brought my world right up to the tip of my nose... there was nothing to see beyond it. I struggled with all that came into focus as I wandered around in the dark and found the darkness a soft place to land. Sometimes literally as I sat on my knees and wept out that which needed to go. I'm finding it harder in some ways to get around outside now that I can see. The light is flat, goggles fog and it's distracting. In the dark I went by feel. I think I understand blindness a little more.

We had our second coffee house and it was as much fun as the first. We had cappuccino drinks and Bailey's made from scratch (we ran out of the bottled version

several months ago.) There were also homemade chocolate-almond biscotti and treats people donated from their private stashes. We enjoyed music, poetry and one-act plays. The talent in this small community of 51 is impressive. I found myself appreciating people so much more once I'd seen their creative side.

We had a sunrise party in the new station building. It marked something for us to view the return of the sun through the same windows we'd watched him go down six months ago. The band played and we were on track and tight on every song except one....When the drummer's girlfriend came out onto the dance floor in a sexy red dress he completely forgot what he was doing and started playing the drum part to a different song. I will miss playing music with these people. Rehearsals were usually a time of creativity and silliness and drinking a mixture of Crown Royal and brown sugar we dubbed "the elixir of life" (good for the throat). What a great balance to the chores of everyday life.

I helped launch weather balloons this month. We would float the filled balloon outside carefully so as not to puncture it, attach the sonde (the data collection device) and gently let it slip towards the heavens. It's really cool to hold onto a giant balloon and then release it to its own destiny. The first time I launched one I couldn't stop holding on. I was attached to that big white gentle floaty orb. Let it go? I'd watched it grow up! But then I did and whoooosh, up she went bee-lining for the heavens, never once looking back.

## November 2, 2002

This morning was the last time I will have to put on my South Pole work clothes: heavy duty long underwear, giant gray socks, two poly-pro shirts, turtleneck, sweater, insulated Carhartt bibs, bunny boots, coat, hat, neck gaiter, goggles, hand liners, mittens. Whew. I'm due to fly out of here on Nov. 4. A day after that I will wake up and put on this: tank top, shorts, sandals.

The first plane arrived Oct. 26. We were all at the flight line fuel pits waiting and



many more new faces pouring off the plane, and it struck me - the cocoon had been split wide open. The dark and familiar nest of our winter was gone.

It's been a busy week since the station population grew from 51 to 138 in one day. The methodical routines have been replaced by projects and busier schedules. It's also been an adjustment having so many people in our spaces. The galley is usually full and there is more often a wait for the bathroom. I miss our old routines and the pleasure of seeing only familiar friends in their usual places. But it's hard to feel the loss too deeply when I know in a few days I'll be gone and what I'll take with me is what matters the most.

I leave behind many of the old griefs, sadnesses and disappointments, along with the deep gratitude that this wonderful place was willing to take it from me and dispose of it. I leave behind my love for this experience. I take with me the strength from this year, the confidence and pride in myself, the joys of comfortable friendships and wonderful memories. I leave here happier and less judgmental, more grateful and calmer.

It struck me most one night in the galley