

LBRIS

We know
books

Under Adoles

CHLOE BENJAMIN


TINDER
PRESS

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PART ONE

Laurel's first memories of soil – though at the time, she would have called it dirt – came from weeding in her mother's garden. She was five, or maybe six. Her mother pointed, and she tugged. Thistle, dandelion, chickweed: they trailed whole cities, tangled with life.

As the child of apple growers, she had known that roots existed, but not how far they roamed. One day, she crawled under a Golden Russet, which the family called octopus trees because they waved in all directions.

She looked at the base, which split into roots. 'Where do they go?'

Her father was pruning nearby. Laurel liked to follow as he worked. He wriggled into her position, so that they were both worms.

'It depends,' he said. 'Some go deep down. Others grow as wide as the branches.'

Recently, in school, Laurel had been told to draw a tree. Dutifully she had sketched trunk, branches, leaves. She realised now that she'd drawn only half of it. What she saw above ground was one part of the story. The second was below.

I

Terra Australis

The descent into Antarctica takes Laurel by surprise. There are no windows on the plane, so she can't see the ice rise to meet her.

The aircraft, a C-17, is taller than any commercial vessel; ten feet above her head, the ceiling curves like a spaceship. People sit along the perimeter, most wearing headphones, some sleeping in the Big Red jackets they received at the Clothing Distribution Centre in New Zealand. The newcomers keep their seat belts on. One of the old-timers – a man in Carhartts, sunglasses, and a short-sleeved shirt – unbuckles, ducks below chains, and lies down against a wooden cargo container, a novel tucked under his elbow.

Across from Laurel, a Black woman crosses her arms over her stomach, her short Afro behind a headband. A white man dozes into his scarf; little more than his brown curls are visible. He opens his eyes just before they touch down. During spring and summer – which take place, at the bottom of the world, from October to February – the Ross Sea is still eight feet thick, strong enough to serve as a runway.

Passengers shoulder into their jackets and begin to deplane: the old-timers sure-footed, the newcomers waddling in their government-issued boots. Cold sweeps over them in waves. The sky reminds Laurel less of Earth than of some gaseous planet, streams of indigo and violet and shocking pink, the setting sun layered between them. The mountain ranges glint behind a haze of blowing snow.

A giant red vehicle trundles towards them; *‘IVAN’ THE TERRA BUS* is painted on one side. Ivan’s driver, a cheerful man in a balaclava, tells them that the bus weighs seventy thousand pounds. Laurel takes a seat beside the woman who sat across from her on the plane. After fifteen minutes, the driver announces that they’ve crossed the transition point where ice gives way to solid rock, and Laurel’s hands unclench. Soon she sees the drab mid-century buildings that make up McMurdo Station.

The woman sitting next to Laurel snorts. ‘I didn’t think Antarctica would look like February in Wisconsin.’

Laurel smiles. ‘Crusty slush? Check. Giant Caterpillar machines?’

‘Check.’ The woman pushes her sunglasses on top of her head and holds out a hand. ‘Charlie Morrison, from Milwaukee.’

‘Laurel Salter, from Madison.’

‘We could have carpooled to O’Hare.’

‘Should have. I’d have been a lot less nervous,’ says Laurel. ‘Is it your first time, too?’

Charlie nods. She looks to be near Laurel’s age, thirty-six. Her eyes are perceptive, and her broad cheekbones taper to a delicate chin.

They walk together as the experts lead the newbies to the dorms. Laurel doesn’t ask what brought Charlie to McMurdo, and Charlie doesn’t ask her. Beyond the dirt roads of the base, the landscape is cratered, white, and endless. Pale yellow ribbons weave between clouds; mist swirls with the body of dust.

Laurel’s tendency is to observe. When foraging for fungi, she looks for aberration: fleshy folds against wood, roundness amid angles. Here, something interrupts the line of the horizon. A small dome of light appears to sit over the ocean. It reminds Laurel of a bubble cut in two: faintly pink and translucent, with an iridescent skin.

The sight pulls her. It looks not of this world. Even from miles away, it seems to make a sound: a crackle, low but generative, constant.

But when she blinks, it disappears.

‘Did you see that?’ Laurel asks, stopping. In its absence, the sky looks innocuous, like a theatre after a play.

‘See what?’ asks Charlie.

Laurel shakes her head. ‘I haven’t slept well in forty-eight hours. I think I’m losing my mind.’

‘You wouldn’t be the only one. Have you heard what they say around here? “When you shake the world,”’ Charlie says, ‘“the oddballs fall to the bottom.”’



It was Laurel’s mother, Clare, who told her about the job in Antarctica. In July, Laurel was describing her trouble at work – how she moved robotically through tasks; how even nature’s miracles were stripped, for her, of awe – when Clare put a hand on her wrist.

‘Do you know,’ she said, as if this were related, ‘where Julie Javurek is living at the moment?’

‘Jules?’ asked Laurel. They sat in folding chairs in Laurel’s backyard. She hadn’t spoken to Jules Javurek, her childhood neighbour, in fifteen years. ‘Where?’

‘Guess,’ said Clare.

Laurel had always thought of her mother as ruthlessly practical. During Laurel’s childhood, Clare had not allowed herself to sit until the entire kitchen had been cleaned, or the last apple tree pruned. In older age, though, she had adopted a playfulness that aggravated Laurel, if only because it had come after – and therefore seemed related to – the death of Pete Salter, Laurel’s father.

‘I don’t know,’ said Laurel. ‘Chicago?’

‘Chicago!’ Clare laughed. ‘No, a little further south. Antarctica.’

Laurel had brought an ice pack outside, to counter the heat, and now she put it behind her neck. ‘Antarctica? What’s she doing there?’

‘Washing dishes, apparently,’ said Clare. ‘Before that, she was

bartending in Buenos Aires. I suppose she's some kind of professional traveller.'

That night, unable to sleep, Laurel Googled 'dishwasher Antarctica'. The correct term, she learnt, was *kitchen steward*. Stewards at McMurdo Station were tasked with cooking and cleaning for the base's eclectic group of residents: scientists, construction workers, engineers, janitors, firefighters, administrators, employees at the world's southernmost post office. On shift six days per week, she would have little time to think. It was work she could do, might even enjoy doing – manual work, meditative in its way, and useful. Researchers on base studied solar physics and ocean systems, climate change and geology. She could support these efforts, even if she wasn't working as a scientist herself.

At three in the morning, she put the computer away. Crazy, she told herself.

But the next day, Laurel thought of Antarctica again. The landscape was nothing like the one she knew: she would trade Wisconsin's pastures and fertile prairie for volcanic rock and ice. There would be almost none of the fungi she studied, which associated with plant roots. Children weren't allowed on base. Even the light – six months of sun followed by six months of darkness – would fool her, make her think she was living someone else's life.

She found an old email address for Jules. One month later, Jules replied with the name of a recruiter to contact in the States. The tone of the email was friendly, but Jules asked no questions. Maybe she knew what had happened, and this was a gesture of kindness – a mercy, not making Laurel explain. Or maybe Jules was surrounded by the people Clare had described, these professional travellers. Maybe she wasn't surprised to hear from someone who wanted to escape.

Laurel told no one she was applying. It was a lark, a double life she was only fantasising about – until she received a call from the

recruiter. He was intrigued by her application, a scientist submitting to be a dishwasher. Had she applied for the right position? Laurel shut the door to her office. She babbled about the value of a break. He asked if she had experience living remotely, or communally. The conversation stalled. She imagined the recruiter tossing her résumé in favor of twenty-five-year-olds with restaurant experience, young people whose applications made sense.

‘The truth is,’ she said, ‘I need to change my life.’

Two days later, she received an email with an alternate contract. There was no guarantee of a job – those came with primary contracts – but Laurel should get physically qualified as soon as possible. There was a medical check, a dental check, shots. The recruiter wrote again: if Laurel completed additional work, she could be cleared for the winter season, too, when the population shrank and healthcare was scarce. She had an EKG and a gallbladder ultrasound. Her dentist removed two wisdom teeth. The next day – drifting on oxycodone, her mouth full of gauze – her cell phone rang. A steward had failed the physical qualification. Laurel could fly out in October, when the Antarctic summer began.

It was surprisingly easy to prepare. She applied for an extended leave of absence from the university; she had no spouse, no dependents. She had already begun the process of selling the house, which was too big for her alone. In late September, the Realtor called with an offer, young parents moving to town for professorships. Negotiations went quickly, and Laurel found herself packing the rest of her belongings, as well as the two suitcases she was allowed to take to Antarctica.

She sent three emails: one to her mother; the second to Maisie O’Brien, her best friend; and the third to Gloria Albert, the graduate school advisor who had become her mentor. The next morning, she found a package on her front stoop, wrapped in penguin-patterned paper. On top was a note in Gloria’s scrawl: *For some reason, I feel that you’re meant to have this. It belonged to my mother, Olga, and kept her warm on the opposite pole.*

Laurel uncovered a fur hat, Soviet in style, with ear flaps that could be fastened at the crown or the chin. The golden fur was impossibly soft, and the leather felt like butter. As she packed it in her duffel, her mother called twice.

‘Laurel?’ Clare said, in the breathless tone she used when talking about Walter. ‘I just wanted to tell you that Walter will be joining us for dinner.’

Clare had met Walter three months earlier on Our Time, a dating website for seniors. Since then, she had talked of little else. Almost everything reminded her of him: elevator music (‘Walter works for the orchestra’), the nonfiction book on Laurel’s couch (‘Walter prefers novels’), even a parked Mini Cooper (‘Walter – over six feet – ‘would never fit’). Laurel felt as though her mother were progressing in reverse – as though she’d become a teenager after seventy years on Earth.

Now she wedged the phone between her ear and shoulder. ‘But this is the last time we’ll see each other.’

‘I know. But you still haven’t met him, and we don’t know how long you’ll be gone. What if he asks me to marry him?’

‘I’ll be back by summer at the latest. Surely you won’t be engaged by then.’

‘You act like we have all the time in the world,’ Clare said.

At Walter’s favourite Italian restaurant, he and Clare were giddy. Laurel chastised herself: she was happy for her mother, and Walter seemed kind. It wasn’t his fault that he wasn’t Laurel’s father.

Maisie helped Laurel to transfer her belongings into storage. On her last night, they ate Chinese food on the floor of the empty living room. Laurel leant her head against Maisie’s shoulder, the way she had in high school. Maisie’s body was profoundly familiar: her freckles and slender fingers; her thick, copper-coloured hair. Laurel had no siblings, but Maisie came close. Even now, when something notable happened, they had the same instinct they did as teenagers: to grab each other and hold on. It was impossible

to re-create that physical comfort with the friends Laurel had met in adulthood. Before they had partners – and, in her case, after – Laurel and Maisie had each other.

‘I don’t want to be so far away from you,’ Laurel said.

‘Well,’ said Maisie, patting Laurel’s hair, ‘it’s your fault for going to the one place where I can’t visit.’

Only staff at research stations were permitted to stay on the continent.

‘You could take a cruise,’ suggested Laurel. ‘For just twenty thousand dollars.’

‘Sold!’ said Maisie, giggling.

Laurel hadn’t liked living by herself, despite Gloria’s encouragement. (‘Now, listen to me. There are benefits to being alone. You can live in your bathrobe, eating tangerines and fudge.’) Even after Eli moved out, he was everywhere: in the kitchen he’d painted yellow; in the dresser they’d shared, half of it now empty; in the apple trees that grew in the front yard. Eli had surprised her with the first, a *Prairie Spy* with dark, glossy leaves. He draped a sheet on top and tied a bow around the middle, walked Laurel outside with his hands over her eyes. When he removed them, she laughed, both in delight at his thoughtfulness and because he hadn’t known that they would need two trees – different varieties, cross-pollinated – to bear fruit. They drove back to the nursery, where she found a sturdy *Sweet Sixteen*.

Now Laurel put her suitcase in Maisie’s trunk. She would spend the night at Maisie and Noah’s before flying out of O’Hare. Quickly she picked the ripe apples and carried them next door.

‘*Prairie Spies*,’ Laurel said, when her neighbour, Beth, came to the porch. ‘Your favourite.’

‘Oh, Laurel,’ said Beth. ‘You’re sweet. I wish you could have stayed, but I understand. I do.’

Beth, an elementary school art teacher, was two decades older than Laurel. She lived with her mother, Helen, who had recently been diagnosed with cancer.

‘How are you doing?’ asked Laurel.

‘Coping, I guess. It’s funny: Mum turns eighty-eight next week, but that still doesn’t feel like enough time.’ Reversing, Beth covered her mouth. ‘Forgive me. I’m being greedy. She’s lived a good, long life.’



The scene at the dorm reminds Laurel of college move-in day. Residents leave their doors open, and every few minutes, she hears a shriek of recognition. Duffel bags slump in the doorways; cross-country skis lean against the walls. Laurel sees more than a handful of musical instruments, protected inside latched and shapely cases.

She has two roommates. Charlie is the first; the second is Nita Choudhury, a marine biologist who studies octopuses in the Southern Ocean. This is Nita’s sixth summer at McMurdo, ‘and no,’ she says, helping to lug their suitcases over the threshold, ‘I still don’t have a single, but neither does anyone else. I’ve been waiting for the two of you all day.’

Nita is tall, her thick hair secured in a silver clip. She wears a purple zip-up sweater with jeans and knitted slippers. A pendant necklace, also silver, hangs between her collarbones, and the room smells like her gardenia perfume. There are two bunk beds and a single; the desk and closet are shared. Nita maintains a steady stream of chatter (‘We’re lucky to be in the same building as the galley; most people have to gear up just to get their morning coffee’) while Laurel and Charlie unpack. They take the bunk beds out of respect for her seniority. It’s hard not to feel that Laurel has regressed. In Madison, her house wasn’t large, but all of it was hers.

Nita gives them a tour. ‘There’s a landline in every room for calls on base – cell phones don’t work, but you’ll know that already. Don’t bother with the television unless you want to watch the military satellite feed or you brought a video game hookup, which,

no judgement – a few years ago I roomed with an astrobiologist who was addicted to *The Legend of Zelda*, and by the end of the summer, I couldn't believe how much I cared about the two-handed Biggoron's Sword. Take a left at the chili pepper lights for the bathroom; there's no electrical ground here, so don't be surprised if you get shocked in the shower. This is the lounge – microwave, comfy couches, giant selection of VHS tapes if you want to travel back to 1995. Over here's the Skype computer, which is mostly for morale: we all get one thirty-minute session per week and cross our fingers that the internet is working.'

The wind picks up as Nita points them towards the Chalet for orientation ('Meet me in the galley afterwards; trust me, you'll be starving'). Charlie and Laurel trudge through snow eddies with scarves over their mouths. On the deck is a bust of Admiral Byrd, the first explorer to fly over the South Pole. Inside, orb-shaped light fixtures hang from a second-floor balcony, and flags from Antarctica's visiting nations rustle as people drop their coats over chairs. Laurel associates the Chalet's smell with libraries, or perhaps Gloria's house: old wood, old books. Layered over that is the welcome scent of coffee. Laurel pours two cups. She brings one back to Charlie as an administrator takes the lectern.

The presentation begins with trivia. Antarctica is not just the coldest and windiest continent on the planet, but also the driest, highest, and most isolated. (Two seats down, the curly-haired man from the plane begins to snore.) At over five million square miles, it makes up one tenth of the earth's surface. Almost all of that is covered by a permanent ice sheet that holds 70 per cent of the planet's fresh water and 90 per cent of its ice.

Antarctica was a hypothetical continent, the administrator adds, before it was ever a real one. Aristotle believed that a southern mass must have existed to balance the Arctic of the north. Marcus Tullius Cicero named it Terra Australis Incognita: the unknown land of the south. Twenty centuries later, a Russian

expedition glimpsed the Antarctic coast, but ninety years passed before Roald Amundsen's team reached the pole.

A map appears on the projector. Research stations from thirty-seven countries are scattered on either side of the Transantarctic Mountains that divide West Antarctica from East. The outposts on Maudlandia, the eastern continental coast, include China's Zhongshan Station, India's Bharati Station, and the American Amundsen-Scott Station, located in the bull's-eye of the South Pole. To the west, bases for Korea, Spain, Ukraine, Great Britain, Argentina, Chile, and the Czech Republic climb the Antarctic Peninsula. Below that, between Russia's Russkaya Station and New Zealand's Scott Base, McMurdo sprawls across volcanic Ross Island.

The administrator gestures to the flags. These countries have one thing in common: they all signed the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, which suspended territorial claims. Military activity, nuclear activity, and extraction are forbidden. Antarctica, the only continent without an Indigenous population, is to be used solely for scientific inquiry. Though they can study polar wildlife, human beings cannot interfere with their lives – or, if it happens, their deaths. Observations are to be shared freely with other countries, and all research stations are closed to the public. To Laurel, Antarctica seems to be the most functional place on Earth.

Nita was right: afterwards, they are starving. Disoriented, too, with no sense of how to find their way back to Building 155. They ask for directions from a woman standing under a streetlamp, smoking a cigarette in scuba gear. When they arrive, it's nine o'clock.

'There you are.' Nita sits at a round table with knitting in her lap. 'Don't worry about getting the lay of the land; just scarf something that looks decent and we'll get you to sleep. There's to-go food in the deli, but beware the pastrami – *Louis!*'

A furtive-looking man by the toaster oven falters, and a roll of bread drops dully to the floor.

'Jesus, Nita. I thought you were Waldrup.'

Nita sets her knitting down and skips towards him. 'Because I look like a sixty-year-old Texan with a handlebar moustache?'

'I haven't slept in thirty-six hours. Everyone looks like Waldrup.'

But his tone is fond, and he tolerates Nita's hug with cool affection.

'Waldrup runs food service,' Nita explains, waving Laurel and Charlie over. 'He claims to have run a chain of Ruby Tuesdays, but the rumour is—'

'—that he only sold beef jerky at a farmers' market.'

'You'll meet him,' Nita says.

'Weirdly interested in the hot dog roller station. Weirdly uninterested in flavour. And he hates when people use the appliances between shifts.' The man plugs in a panini press. 'Hi.'

His accent is British, and his eyes are bloodshot. Still, he's beautiful: rosy cheeks, rosy lips, and chestnut curls, like something out of a Renaissance painting. Laurel realises that he's the snorer from orientation and the sleeper from the plane, the one who opened his eyes right before they touched down.

'Louis Carroll – yes, like *Alice in Wonderland*, but with an *o-u* instead of the *e-w*. Stewards?' Laurel and Charlie nod. Louis licks mustard off his pointer finger. 'Same.'

'So you've been here before?' Laurel asks. 'I thought I saw you at orientation.'

'Seven times since 2010, including three winters,' Louis says, a little proudly. 'But they still make me go to the goddamn orientation.'

'Why's that?' Charlie asks.

'Because I'm a *disaster*,' says Louis, grinning, and Laurel decides she likes him.

Laurel and Charlie are assigned to the afternoon shift. Usually, they'll start at ten in the morning, but today they're due at eight thirty. The galley has the atmosphere of a high school cafeteria. On one side are the food stations: the main buffet, the deli, the