

From *Charting the Land of Great Loneliness*

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On our last day in Antarctica we tromp through thick, granular snow up the steep hill above Paradise Bay, on the continent itself. A track made by another landing party runs from the top of the hill to the bottom. From the rocky peak, we look down on the small red buildings of the empty Argentine station, once purportedly set on fire by a doctor who couldn't face the thought of over-wintering here. True or not, there is, in the fierce resplendence of the landscape, a vastness that reduces the thought of a blazing building to something puny—a momentary flicker, like striking and extinguishing a match. The magnitude of Antarctica's indifference provides a strange, unexpected comfort. Human life, human suffering—what do they amount to here, so far from the human world?

Staggered banks of gray and white clouds hang heavy in the sky. Wind furrows the water. Below the cliff, brash ice foams against the shore. As far as I can see lie ice and snow and high black peaks capped and striated with white. A curving snowdrift sweeps along the low beach across from the research station, and beyond the beach, blue-white glaciers tumble toward the sea.

Everywhere, the white snow carries a hint of azure. The glaciers and the distant snowfields look thickly clumped over something blue and luminous. As I watch, the gray clouds open far beyond the choppy strait. A shaft of sunshine burnishes a distant valley, spotlighting it. The blazing yellow, tinged with gold, seems in that moment like a vision or a sign.

“I’m going to slide down,” Jemma announces, bringing me back to earth. Packed hard, the narrow track beside our footprints is as steep and high as a luge chute. I can’t see the bottom over the angle of the hill, but she’s undaunted and excited.

What can I tell her? She’s eager for adventure and the track was made for sliding.

“Okay.”

Jemma scoots away, holding her feet up off the ice to get as much speed as possible.

“Like this!” she calls over her shoulder, happily shrieking as she disappears over the long curve of the hill.

The urge to follow her is irresistible. One by one, the rest of us take our turn sliding down the high Antarctic slope: mothers and grandmothers, crew members in insulated coveralls, gray-haired men brandishing canes and photographers with expensive cameras, red parka after red parka, as if every one of us were ten years old again.