

Antarctica

by Stacy Bierlein

Tomorrow Marc and I leave for California. I'm starting a new job at UCLA and Marc is searching. Our things are boxed, in the middle of our living room, stacked, sealed, and labeled: *Neckties/Marc*.

Notebooks/Jody. Miscellaneous/Both.

Erin and Peter's home is also full of boxes. White boxes with handles, pictures of orange cows and purple pigs across them. Blue boxes, and yellow crates, with assembly instructions in thick red letters. Erin and Peter are eight months pregnant. Many are torn open, with strollers, blankets, rocking horses, and Styrofoam spilling out. Their home is baby-proofed, with rubber straps across cabinets and drawers. Their new rugs are sensible tan.

Erin has invited us for dinner to celebrate our last night in Chicago. And Melody—our friend the sculptor. Carlton, her husband, is home with a headache. He's had head pain since the Clinton impeachment. He sends his love, Melody says. He is not so good at good-byes.

Melody wears a sari, not because she is Hindu, but because she is in the mood. Erin wears Peter's blue shirt, and a skirt she has cut apart to remove the elastic from the waist. She thinks maternity clothes are a rip-off.

We take our seats at Erin and Peter's table, at green plates stacked with eggplant lasagna. The last rays of evening sun trail in through windows. Melody says she'll be moving too. We know what this means. She's leaving her job at the Art Institute. And Carlton.

It's complex, she says, in her easy Australian accent. She says that Carlton says the change in her during the past few months is unnerving.

Peter leaves the table and returns with a tray of steamed artichokes. This is—as Marc would say—typical Erin-fare, meals of big vegetables. Melody and I are vegetarian, but Erin avoids meats in the evening because she works with them all day.

Erin is a flavor broker. In the frozen dinners her clients produce, it is always the same piece of meat. Erin provides the flavor packages that turn the meat to Salisbury Steak, Birmingham Beef, or Pepper Delight. Her clients joke that her maternity leave could face Middle America with naked beef. They have to hold their stomachs at the thought.

Erin tries to convince Melody she hasn't changed. Melody says Carlton's too wealthy for her after all. We pretend to understand. Carlton holds the patent on a heated ice-scraper mitt. It allows people to de-ice their windshields and warm their fingers at the same time.

Already, Erin and Peter's home smells like baby powder.

We'd planned to catch one last concert on the lakefront, but it's humid, overcast, and I feel tired from packing. Erin and Melody look relieved when we say we'd rather watch *20/20: The Interview*. Barbara Walters sits down with Monica Lewinsky. Erin gestures us to the living room. She holds an artichoke heart in her mouth.

We drink tea in front of the television. Erin drinks Pregnancy Blend. She insists we should have drinky-drinks, real drinks, even if she can't. She has sworn off alcohol, sugar, coffee, seafood, soda, hair color, nail polish, computers, and convertibles. Erin says I look pale, then asks if I'm menstruating.

Since Erin has become pregnant, we have become the sort of people who discuss bodily functions. Erin tells us that her periods used to make her nipples huge. Now she doesn't recognize her nipples at all. It's like some other woman's breasts in the mirror.

As she goes on to something else, I stay fixated on nipples. I think, on most animals, nipples occur in even numbers. Possums are an exception, I've read. They have as many as twenty-five. Platypuses have none. The milk of a female platypus simply flows from her pores.

Marc moves closer to me on the sofa and nudges me with his elbow. He knows how easily I'm distracted. Earth to Jody, he says. My mind drifts. I'm a drifter.

There is something strange about horse nipples—I can't remember. I try to remember if Melody's sculpted bodies have defined nipples. Marc nudges me again.

Sorry, I tell him.

Then I wonder if Melody realizes that Carlton's friendship is the one Erin and Peter will keep if she goes through with a divorce. Damned, Erin says, I have to pee again.

Last year, when no one was moving, birthing, or leaving, we spent the fourth of July together on the beach. I took a book about Antarctica, a book I couldn't put down. Melody wore headphones, listened to The Cure. The rest of the group lounged on the sand, watched runners on the boardwalk, and took in the sunshine. Erin kept staring at me that day, looking to Marc, asking, Why does that old book fascinate her? Marc shook his head. I burned as I flipped pages. Carlton reached for the sunscreen and said, Because there will always be some amount of ice beneath us.

Melody moves the cradle swing that Peter had been assembling, and sits on the floor in front of us. The pink edges of her sari draw a circle around her. ABC begins a long line of teasers. Peter turns on a fan, which means we have to make the TV louder. The fan oscillates. A horn sounds outside the window, a sharp noise. A Chicago noise.

Melody sighs at the graphic on the television screen, an outline of the profiles of Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Sometimes your own neediness and desire eclipse the rest of the world, she says. With her accent, the sentence is a poem.

She sips her tea, and adds, I should have cheated on Carlton.

Marc looks at me to see if I react. He should have fooled around on me, she admits.

I catch Marc nodding. No one says anything for several beats, then Barbara Walters' voice fills the room. ABC has the real Monica Lewinsky in a sitting room, vibrant and doll-like. Her eyes are perfectly round. Sexuality simply flows from her pores.

Erin fidgets in her chair. Outside, the car horn sounds again.

I've had these dreams about Carlton. I climb on Carlton as if he were a tree. I work my body around him, then wait to see what he will do with me. Impatient, I jump to the ground. I dig into the earth around his feet looking for his root system. I lick his anklebones. In my dream life, I am vixen, sculpture, intern, possum, and explorer.

Marc and Peter glance at Melody's sari, then each other.

She's beautiful, I say, when Monica appears again on the screen. Melody agrees, but Erin looks startled. It's not the reaction she expected. We're not supposed to call the other woman beautiful. The other woman is supposed to be whale blubber. Adultery is an iceberg.

Icebergs are hazards that come in blocky, domed, pinnacled and wedged varieties.

She does light up a room, Melody says. That's what he said to her, you know. He said, You light up a room.

There is a song like that, I think. One of Melody's songs. A song that wonders at the way light attaches itself to a girl.

It's just a line, Erin says.

It's just a polite way of saying *you give me a hard-on*, Marc says.

Peter laughs. Peter is the only Republican in the room. Peter puts talc in his shoes.

The media thinks she's fat, Erin says.

I'm so sick of the fat thing, I say.

On the screen she looks porcelain, like Melody could have sculpted her. Her eyes are perfectly lined.

She sounds reasonably smart, Melody says, and looks at Peter, waiting for him to disagree. Peter's not sure. The little curls

around his temples are damp with humidity. Relative humidity-- that's how they say it here.

I'm trying not to think of Carlton. I'm thinking the Antarctic continent is shaped roughly like a cross-section of the human brain.

I don't understand how ... Peter begins.

Melody interrupts. He made her feel valuable.

Valuable, the way Melody says it, is a song, an anthem. There is no trace of ice in her voice. Later, I'll tell Marc the sari makes Melody look wise. Marc will say she looks silly.

I don't mean that, Peter says. But he forgets what he did mean.

Several years ago—before the Carlton dreams—Marc and I were at a dinner party and Marc said, *Adulterous dreams are adultery*. And I was astonished when everyone at the table agreed. No way, I said. But they all nodded yes.

Last night I told him, The human egg is bright orange, like a Southwestern sunset.

He nodded, and it killed me that he didn't say anything at all, that he didn't wonder why I'd brought it up, that we couldn't wonder together.

On the screen, Barbara Walters says, The President got a phone call from Congress while you were very closely together. Marc laughs at the way she says it; very closely together. So that's what they're calling it now, he says.

Peter shakes his head at us. And you voted for Clinton, he says. I'm not sure if he's scolding me, or the whole country. His head keeps shaking. Peter will calm when we leave, when Erin sleeps and he's here alone with leftover eggplant, assembling nursery decor. He'll check his blood pressure. Peter feels the intensity of things.

Explorers say that once you glimpse the Antarctic, it remains lodged in your mind's eye. The wind there is strong enough to lean on.

Marc opens his mouth to say something, then thinks better of it.

It feels hard to imagine real Carlton in the world without Melody. I wonder if dream Carlton will be with me in Los Angeles. It seems strange that the nights will be longer there. I wonder about the brightness—a lack of cloud cover with the persistence of light.

I'm still proud that I voted for him, I say, and I mean it.

But if you were married to him, you'd kick him in the groin, Marc says.

Or worse, Melody says.

Worse, I agree.

I can imagine Erin giving up her flavors and spending her days in this tan house with toddlers everywhere. On the television Barbara Walters says, Did the President know you were seeing other men? Marc looks disgusted. Monica Lewinsky smiles and says, I told him he had some competition. The car horn sounds again and Melody gets up to close the window. Erin smirks. Peter tenses.

He knew, Monica Lewinsky says, and Peter throws his arms into the air. His forehead goes red. I can't watch anymore, he says. You know, by watching this, we become part of the problem, he says. But no one else moves. Peter jumps away from the chair and he's gone. Melody takes his place.

The camera stays close-in on Monica Lewinsky's mouth. I think: we're all so strong, nervous, and vulnerable. Erin keeps her eyes on the screen and says, I have to have that lipstick. Erin takes a cordless phone to the next room while Marc, Melody, and I continue to watch.

The switchboard at Revlon is jammed, Erin announces a few minutes later, but I'm leaving messages at a few places. Oh, and I'll try Sephora.

Determination and a phone call, Melody says. It's Erin's motto.

Before Peter, Erin knew how to flirt. She will never cheat on him. When their future children are grown, they will move to the

country and buy horses. They are the sort of people who see their plans carried out.

Antarctica can be a love affair. Antarctica can be a cold hell.

I don't have the feelings of self-worth a young woman should have, Monica Lewinsky tells the nation. She seems to understand there will always be some amount of ice beneath her.

An explorer once said that going to Antarctica is like wiping your life away on a child's magic slate. It is the men, shocked by isolation, who invent Polar Madness. The silence, the snow white, the sleeping beauty—female explorers feel more familiar with the idea of being alone in the world.

Barbara Walters turns to the camera and the interview ends. Melody sighs. For now it seems, this drama is over. We listen as ABC calls Monica Lewinsky the Saga of the Year, but we're not so sure. There are more than 200 days left until the year ends.

A platypus has no external ears. She must rely on her own instinct and resourcefulness.

I think of fairy tales, the way Prince Charming kisses softly, always on the lips. Teenage girls inject cow fat into their lips to make them large and ready. A thundercloud breaks outside. In Chicago, this time of year, the rain is too hot to be refreshing.

Peter returns to the room with a new pitcher of iced tea.

Melody thinks she may take the extra artichoke for Carlton. I know it's idealistic, but in my mind's eye, Melody walks into her house, the edges of her sari dragging on the floor. She holds the artichoke like a bridal bouquet, and Carlton loves her all over again.

Erin walks into the room, smiling in pain. The baby is kicking. Marc turns the television off. We take turns touching Erin's stomach. Melody says male births used to be celebrated with pink, and female births with blue, and somehow we mixed it up. Erin and Peter will not let their obstetrician tell them the gender of their baby. They want to be surprised.

Marc and I finish our tea. We have to start to say good-bye.

We promise to call from the road. Restless spirits, Peter says. Escaping relative humidity. Moving to the edge.

I'll miss you, I tell my friends, one at a time. It should prove easier to keep people close to you. It should seem easier than telling a love story, than turning a piece of frozen meat to Salisbury steak. It seems strange, Melody says, that we'll no longer be part of this place. They'll miss us too, they say, and Erin tilts her head. They feel reluctant to set us adrift. Then the phone rings, and we laugh as Erin grabs a notepad.

It's a friend of a friend whose friend is a publicist for a cosmetics company called Urban Decay—Figures, Peter says—and yes, the color on Monica Lewinsky's lips is Glaze.

On the walk home, Marc and I say nothing. We take in humidity and drizzle and horns, think vaguely of the journey ahead. Later, lying in bed, watching Marc sleep next to me, I'll think of the ice that breaks off the Antarctic coast each year, the thousands of miles that crack off in pieces. When I fall to sleep, Carlton will appear. And I'll wake with my right arm stretched far, as if something was there, but out of my reach.

