



Burns for Pennies

Slade Wright

When I was nine years old, I had a nightlight. I never needed nor desired a nightlight, but I wanted an Ultimate Warrior action figure, and the Dollar Store version was all we could afford at the time. I kept it close by and played with it often. I also kept its packaging because I was learning to read and already had an insatiable hunger for the written word. Written there on the package, plain as day, were the words *Burns for days on end for pennies*. This puzzled me. I remember lying in bed, twirling the Warrior around in my hand, pondering what it could mean. I've always enjoyed thinking around corners, so eventually, I found my solution. I had a rusted metal coffee can, red Folgers, that I kept full to the brim



with pennies in a foolish child's attempt to save some money. One lazy Sunday afternoon, while everyone else was occupied, I pulled the Warrior out of the wall just enough for the prongs to be exposed but the light still on, and I dropped a penny behind him.

Sparks flew, and chaos ensued. The loud, jolting pop that exploded from the wall had rendered my prized possession to a smoldering chunk of melted green plastic. The wall itself was now marred with a streak of charred blackness. I listened as the footsteps thudded down the dark hallway to my bedroom, stoically prepared for the inevitable barrage of questions and eventual punishment. We didn't make it very far into the questioning before the laughter started. I'm sure that I also got into some kind of trouble, but I don't remember that part. I just remember the laughs. Hearty, full, unironic guffaws. My large, occasionally frightening father doubled over, wheezing against the wall. My serious, stern mother shaking her head, grinning. Even my sister, normally aloof about all things concerning her younger brother, got involved in the hilarity, positioning herself behind my parents and peeking over their shoulders. I remember how

that laughter seemed to consume all of the anger that I had expected. I should have been grateful. Only I didn't get the joke. It was like a door locked against me, and I didn't have the key.

I thought about that stupid night-light with annoying frequency over the years. I won't say that I thought about it of all the time, but it would pop up when I least expected it. When it did come up, it was like a popcorn kernel stuck in my teeth. I would spend that time furiously tonguing it, trying to notch it loose, desperate to understand. Eventually, I passed it off as something unknowable. This great mystery loomed in the dark corners of my everything, a stubbornly locked door. Sometimes, I went to it with the intention of tearing it down, breaking through the thick wood and tearing at the hinges. Sometimes, I went to it politely, curiously peeking through the keyhole and the crack at its base. But most of the time, it just sat neglected, collecting dust and memories and mysteries. It took longer than I care to admit, but I got to the point when I started to shrug it

off. An anomaly, that's all. A joke that I never got. Until the year I almost died.

When I was twenty-one, after a summer of building trust with Arkansas State University's energetic geochemist, Dr. Carolyn Dowling, I was chosen to go on a research expedition to Antarctica. Dangerous as it is, there is a lot of preparation that takes place before you can even leave. I had to have a full physical, involving everything that you would expect it to involve because the National

Science Foundation (NSF) doesn't want scientists to fall dead on their dime; a full dental work-up because there wasn't a dentist where

we would be stationed; a short psychological evaluation presumably because the NSF also doesn't want scientists snapping and killing someone on their dime; and I was instructed to make a will because, you know, just in case.

Once you get to the continent, which is not exactly an easy point A to point B flight, you are subjected to a two-day survival school. Here, they teach you every way that you could die while out in the field or what the long-timers affectionately refer to as "on the ice."

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This was where I learned how to navigate icy terrain, what to look for to keep myself safe, how to avoid unnecessary risks, and all about hypothermia. All of which is to say—I should have known better.

Antarctica has a nickname among researchers. It is spoken in an almost conspiratorial tone, half-joking, half-serious. They call it the Harsh Continent. It is that, for certain. It is also beautiful. The kind of untouchable beauty you know that no picture can ever do justice to. Deep valleys sweep up to massive glaciers and rugged, daunting mountains climbing out of a distant haze of storms. Those beautiful, massive glaciers carved those sweeping valleys and gouged out lakes that lay hidden beneath layers of ice of varying thickness. It is also a wasteland. Nothing grows there save a tiny film of purple slime which

grows in the rare ring of melted ice that forms around frozen lakes in the endless sunlight of the Antarctic summer. The colors are mostly gray, and when those storms roll in, there is little difference between the torrent of clouds in the sky and the harsh ice-covered land in the distance. It is a disorienting and harsh place in many ways.

Once freed from survival school, we were sent out onto the ice of Antarctica to do our research. My team's work was centered around drilling into glacial lakes and taking water samples. As the only undergrad in the group and the only semi-athletic person on the team, my job was to man the drill and the winch. We carved into the surface ice, adding flights onto our drills to eventually puncture the thick layer of ice and grant us access to the pristine water below. I would lower a tube down five meters

for a sample to be taken and then raise it up. I did this every five meters until we reached the bottom of the lake, rotating the handles with my hands like the pedals of a bicycle. This was cold, unforgiving work and for me, welcome.

Antarctica during its summer months, which is when we were there, has temperatures that dip down into the single digits. This,



Winch used for sampling. Photo courtesy of Slade Wright.

combined with gusts of wind down into the valley, often drives those temperatures into the negatives. The continent during the summer

also experiences twenty-four hours of sunlight daily. You can literally watch the sun circle you from up above throughout the day. The normal circadian rhythms that dictate your sleep schedule and let your body know that it is time to stop working so you can rest slowly start to fade after a few days on the ice. It isn't long until those signals leave you completely, and you find yourself simply working until the job is completed, not feeling any sort of fatigue until sheer exhaustion sets in. This appealed to me during my summer on the ice. The year leading up to it had been one of the worst in my life. My fiancé and I had broken up two months before I left, and one of my best friends passed away a few weeks before I flew out. I was looking for any and all distractions to push those emotions away. The constant work didn't bother me. The exhaustion led to



sleep, and I slept better for most of those two months than I had for the previous few years. The NSF provides you with gear, but your baggage is your own. This, I discovered, was quite common on the ice. My team was no exception.

Our lead researchers, the aforementioned Dr. Dowling and a gawky, awkward researcher from Rice University, Dr. Glen Snyder, fought in ways that only the best of friends can.

Knowing everything about each other from

their years of friendship which stretched back to their days at the University of Rochester, they had decades of built-up

frustrations, and all of the petty squabbles that they should have had over the years slowly started to spill out onto every lake we sampled. Aside from being incredibly bright, the two couldn't have been more different. Dr. Dowling was young, high-energy, and playfully mischievous while Dr. Snyder was older, more subdued, and often comically morose. The other member of our team, a grad student from Trinidad named Leo, took to sulking for days on end, missing home and her boyfriend

and abhorring the cold. Still, by the time we reached Lake Fryxell, we had sampled three lakes and had turned into a well-oiled machine.

I handled most of the manual labor and acted as the defuser of fights. Our leads handled their two separate projects with Leo, loading and labeling their respective samples. Everyone knew their roles and handled them with a growing sense of comfort and finesse. I'm still not sure why things turned around on Lake

Fryxell. I'm not sure if there was this growing

cavalcade of offenses that had slowly been building up over the previous month or if it was just the perfect storm of compounding

mistakes, long days, and poor moods, but the petty bickering ballooned into an all-out war. Dr. Dowling and Dr. Snyder sniped at each other from across the tent, firing barbs of increasing ferocity. My attempts to quell that rising fire were met with disdain, and some of the vitriol was pointed back at me. I can still see poor Leo trying to disappear into the corner of our tiny sampling tent, head down, covered with a large red hood, with a pen in her hand, writing away and humming songs that I had

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never heard. The war eventually gave way to a rigid sort of silence and unbroken tension. When we packed up our gear to leave, no one had spoken a word to anyone beyond calling out numbers of samples in well over two hours. I'm not blaming the fight or the fatigue or anyone on my team for what happened. But it does explain why I marched off on my own, putting as much distance as I could between myself and the rest of my team and why no one saw what happened until it was almost too late to do anything about it.

The team pushed everything in a large sled, and I took off with the fifty-pound winch set-up across my shoulders. I navigated the icy lakes better than the rest of them. Something about recognizing the patterns, combined with a twenty-one-year-old's bravado, made weaving my way across the ice almost a game.

Lake Fryxell is a well-traveled lake for researchers. There is a small, semi-permanent research base on its shore, and the navigation across it is well-known. It was not a pretty lake, its surface marred with pockmarks from where dirt had blown down from the valley walls. The surface, while mostly safe, seemed more like an apocalyptic wasteland than a lake. Icy



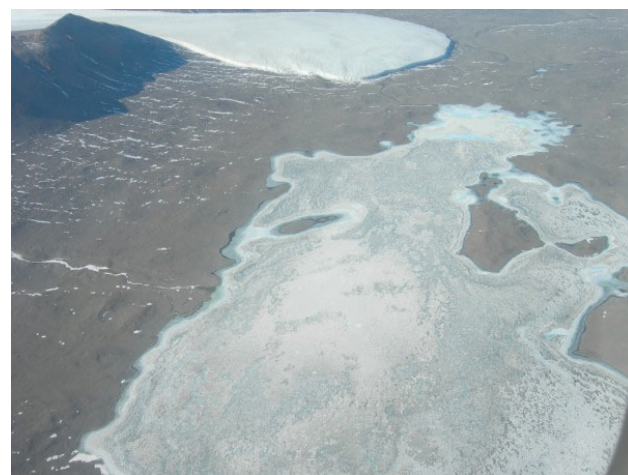


stalagmites rose from the surface in tan, craggy chunks carved and colored by dusty wind. This ice was called candle ice, which, despite a name evocative of something cozy, looked like the Norse version of Hell was fashioned from its design. The real kicker here was that these hazardous chunks of ice—sharp, jagged, uneven, and positioned to be tripped on and possibly stabbed by—were actually the only consistently safe places to walk on the lake.

By their very nature, the stalagmite-like structures had to be anchored into the true ice layer. Flat, shiny ice was often the result of melt pools that formed when the sun melted layers of dust down and the cold froze it back over. Most glacial lakes have such trapdoor melt pools. In almost all of them, when you bust through, the water comes up to the top of your boots at worst. Lake Fryxell, due to the large

amount of wind through that valley, produced melt pools that were far wider and deeper than any other lake we visited. Still, we had trained for this. I knew where to step and where not to step. I knew how to avoid taking unnecessary risks. I knew all the ways that the lake could kill me. So I churned on, weaving along the path that the craggy ice had laid out. Slowly, I put almost half a mile of distance between myself and my team, and then I hit a crossroads.

Lake Fryxell is unique among the lakes



Lake Fryxell. Photo courtesy of Slade Wright.

we sampled in that it has an extra-wide swath of liquid water separating it from its shore. Most lakes have this ring, but Fryxell's is so wide that it requires a canoe to get across. I was standing at a one-hundred-foot clearing of flat, white ice. I could see a path that would lead me around this clearing, a path that would take me on a winding, back-tracking journey. The safe path. But I could see the canoe, right on the other side of this potentially dangerous but possibly safe patch of ice. One hundred feet away at most versus probably a half-mile trek back through the safe but uneven and winding candle ice. I put the winch on the ground and stepped out onto the ice layer to test it out. I stepped out gingerly, easing my boots onto the surface one at a time. When it was holding my entire weight, I stomped down on it hard. When that held, I jumped and smashed both

feet down onto the ice. It held again, making not so much as a creak as it held my weight. Satisfied, I picked the winch back up, laid it across my shoulders, and began my uneasy trudge across the flat field of ice. Five steps in, I felt like a conquering hero, like I had solved the mysteries of Lake Fryxell and had emerged victorious. Then, without as much as the slightest sound of warning, the ice cracked and caved, and I fell.

A strange thing happens to you when you become certain that you are about to die. Time slows down to almost nothing, adrenaline kicks in, and your thoughts become clinical instead of fearful. The winch wrenched me down into the water in a backward bow before I dropped it to the bottom of the pool. The pool was even deeper than I thought it could be, and ice-cold water rushed upward into my cold-





weather gear, my boots, my pants, before finally pouring into the neck of my coat just under my chin. Even before the shock hit, I had time to think, in an almost dissociated way, “Huh . . . so this is how it ends.”

I sucked in breath in the involuntary way that cold water always makes you. My toes danced on the ice beneath me, sliding around desperately searching for purchase. That distant stoicism was quickly replaced with a growing terror as I became more and more aware of the ticking clock between myself and hypothermia. I tried to ease myself out of the water, but the top of the melt pool shattered with every attempt to pull myself up. I began crashing through the ice, slamming my fists in front of me, trying to find something solid to climb. About ten feet later, I found a layer that I could scramble up. As I got my footing and the fear started to really sink in, I also realized that I needed to dive down and grab the winch from the bottom of the melt pool. Now soaked from head to toe, I slithered up onto the sturdy ice. I remember looking at the canoe, so close now, as the rapid wind from the valley sliced through me. I remember shuddering. Then, for a while, I remember nothing at all.

When they found me, I had made it into the canoe and all the way to the shore. I was lying in the dirt in the sun in nothing but my underwear. There was a line of my clothes from where I had docked the canoe to where I was lying. I had done all of this in a blacked-out stupor, gone from my memory even now. I woke up in a helicopter with one of those ridiculous reflective blankets wrapped around me. I came to in fits and starts, eyes opening, incoherent sentences seeming to just fall out

of my mouth involuntarily. I remember the fear in my team’s eyes. I remember Dr. Dowling rubbing a hand across my back rapidly, trying to warm me. I remember the pilot saying that we were almost there, to hold on a bit longer. I remember looking out of the window and seeing a massive glacier below. I remember thinking that at least it was a nice view.

The next several hours were a blur. I was taken directly to the doctor. He was a tough, haggard man with a black beard highlighted with straggles of squiggly gray. I was slowly brought back to a proper temperature, though the random shivers wouldn’t subside for several

more weeks. He checked out my body to make sure there would be no lasting damage. My back, he warned me, would need to be checked out more fully when we got back to the States. But I was assured that I would live, and I was ordered to take it easy for a few days. This was supported by Dr. Dowling and Dr. Snyder, now in lockstep, who pushed back our next sampling trip and ordered me to stay in my dorm room at McMurdo Station.

It should come as no surprise that there is

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nothing to do in Antarctica when you can’t leave your dorm. The only leisure activities that I could do on base were drinking and

exploring, and I was strictly prohibited from doing either one. I was desperate to occupy my mind with anything other than the things I had tried to escape, the things I thought I had left safely behind, the things I was rapidly finding out had chased me all the way down to the edge of the world. I sat in the all-too-bright dorm room, twirling a pen in my hand, staring at an empty page in a brand-new notebook. Sitting there in that hard wooden chair, feeling my chest tighten and tears brim against the edge of





my eyes, I decided to let it all in. I tried to think about my dad, who had died a few years before that trip. I tried to pull an image of his tanned, craggy face framed by wisps of uncombed gray hair. I wondered what he would think of me as an adult, and I could almost see his dark, squinty eyes looking back at me, but it faded. I tried to think of my friend Eric, who had thrown a going-away party for me right before passing away suddenly. He had wanted to be a researcher long before I had wanted the same, but if he was ever jealous about my opportunity, he never showed it. He never showed anything but a certain magnanimous excitement at what I was getting to see and do. I almost had him as well, but it fizzled out. I tried to think about time and the end of the world and the brilliant, plain-faced girl who got away. Which felt even smaller but somehow

still necessary. I even tried to call her, but she never answered. No matter what I tried, every time I tried to pull those thoughts to the front of my mind, the things that should have been the most important, the only thing I could think of was a nine-year-old boy. He was holding a melted chunk of plastic that used to be his favorite toy, not understanding why everyone was laughing at him. My locked door.

Sitting at the edge of the world, wanting to finally think about all of the things that I had been ignoring and running from and hiding from, I was angry to be thinking of that stupid nightlight and how I never got the joke and how I never really understood what happened. I couldn't even get a clean, full breath because my chest was so tight, and the world was just filling me up with anything and everything except oxygen. It felt unfair that this

would come back now when everything else felt more important. But I was so tired. So I just stopped thinking and let it come. Finally, mercifully, the cylinder turned, the pins aligned with a soft click, and the door swung open.

The realization fell over me like a wave, burns for pennies, a stupid pun. The cathartic relief of that moment was everything. The weight left my shoulders, a weight that I didn't even know I had been carrying, weight that had simply become a part of me. But it wasn't just that stupid nightlight with the bad pun on the package; it was everything. Schools that I never attended, degree paths that I never took, the dissolution of a relationship, the death of a friend, and that never-ending, complicated relationship between a son and his father. And I laughed. I'm sure I cried too, but I just remember the laughter. The way you laugh

just after you've been scared. That half-startled relief. Joyful to be alive.

I carry it with me still, the memory of that moment. The mystery of the Warrior is long since buried in time, deep beneath the ice. But that moment of freedom, that great unburdening, sticks with me. I remember the relief of it. The relief to really feel and accept and endure and release. I still find it in the gloomiest corners of my life just when I need it most. A burned toy, a dumb joke, a crack in the ice, and the cold water rushing in, taking almost everything. A void and blackness. And then, a door with its thick, polished wood and strong, sturdy hinges and a lock, pins clicking, cylinder turning, opening itself against the dark.





Mountains in Antarctica. Photo courtesy of Slade Wright.

About the Author



Slade spent twenty years as a research scientist, political campaigner, restaurant manager, and Certified Cicerone, basically doing everything except the thing he actually wanted to do. At 41, he traded restaurant consulting for a return to the written word, realizing his two-decade detour was not a waste of time but a deep dive into the diverse perspectives he now brings to his work. A senior in the PTW program, Slade's writing explores the complexities of memory and the flimsiness of time. He lives in Little Rock with his partner, Hannah, and a borderline-irresponsible number of plants.

