

Ice

by E.S. Strout

The Great Ice Age was the last major ice sheet to spread across the North American continent. It reached its maximum extent around 20,000 years in our past, with the last remnants melting in Canada about 6,000 years ago. Geologists believe another one is possible. U.S. Department of the Interior/Geological Survey

1.

Monday 14 May, 2012. 0835 hours:

Dr. Thomas Adams was a 52 year-old Professor, Head of the Geology Department at University of Minnesota, Duluth Branch. He was tall and thin with sandy brown hair showing early graying at the temples. He wore a brown denim shirt, blue Levis and tan loafers.

He slurped tepid coffee from a Styrofoam cup as he glanced out the open window. There a cool late spring breeze rustled the blossoms on the hedge of lilac bushes below. He turned to view the CRT screen of his MacBook Pro laptop computer. "Are our boundaries stable, Allison?" He asked.

Allison Guilbert, a 24-year-old graduate student and Fellow in Geology, had an attractive face, was blue-eyed and wore her auburn hair long, over her shoulders. She was dressed in dark slacks, a maroon U. of M. Duluth sweatshirt and white Reebok running shoes.

"Sharp and clear, Professor," she affirmed. "All tachyon relays are on line. Transfer field localized and stable. Fifteen thousand years, plus or minus a hundred. French River site clear for receipt."

Adams crushed the empty coffee cup in a fist and sank a two-pointer in the circular file. He nodded. "Okay, let's make some history."

His student pressed ENTER on the keyboard of the complex electronic device that occupied most of a Formica-topped lab bench. There was a sudden flicker of the overhead fluorescents. The power outage lasted only a millisecond.

"The enclosure is empty," Professor Adams said with an alarmed gasp at the computer screen. "Where's our piece of glacier?"

Graduate student Fellow Guilbert tapped computer keys. "I don't understand, Professor. The capture sequence is complete, but the homing signal is lost." She brushed stray wisps of hair from her face and tucked them behind an ear. "Enclosure location was pinpointed within ten meters. We should have a one-eighth mile wide chunk of Wisconsinan glaciation under that dome."

Dr. Adams scrolled data. "Oh no. Check this out."

Allison viewed the screen with a skeptical eye. "This can't be right. My figures are accurate."

A red trouble light blinked its ominous disclosure from the transmission device's control panel. "Damn," Adams said. "Surge protector's blown. Show me our original numbers, please."

She ran a printout, grabbed it from the HP printer tray and handed it over. "Bottom of the page, sir. 46° 53' 12" north latitude, 91° 53' 16" west longitude. French River site on the nose."

Dr. Adams massaged his temples with his fingertips. He could feel the tentacles of an impending migraine writhing behind his eyeballs. He gaped at the CRT screen. The bleak numbers stared back: 44° 55' 22" north latitude, 93° 35' 18" west longitude. "Somewhere south southwest. Break out a geodetic survey map please, Allison."

They flattened out the large detail map of Northern Minnesota on a desktop. Adams traced longitude with a fingertip. Guilbert followed latitude with a straight ruler. "West Minneapolis suburbs. Excelsior, little town near Lake Minnetonka."

Allison grabbed the phone. "I'm calling the Geology office at the Minneapolis campus. We're missing a cube of glacier, 660 feet on a side."

2.

0930 hours:

The eastern shore of Excelsior Bay was hidden in solid swirling wind driven sheets of snow. "Can't see a damn thing," 38 year-old Village of Deep Haven cop Martin Bjorklund complained. "Glad I brought cold weather gear."

"Me too," his 40-year-old Wayzata contemporary Ben Kimberly agreed. "It's May already. Lotta boats in St. Albans Bay." He pointed over his shoulder where unhappy owners dressed in heavy parkas and snow boots chopped at fresh ice clogging the slips. The howling frigid wind drowned out their curses.

“I phoned Fred Miller at Excelsior P.D. half hour ago. He’s snowed in and on emergency power. He said there was a sonic boom, then the storm came,” Officer Bjorklund said, stamping his booted feet to combat the numbing cold.

“Lotta ice on Minnetonka Boulevard. Almost hit a tree. Sure wasn’t like this yesterday. When I drove into town I couldn’t get past Lake Street. Zero visibility,” Kimberly affirmed. “Couple of stalled cars on Excelsior Boulevard had a foot of snow on top and iced up windshields.”

“Must be some freak Alaskan storm front,” Bjorklund guessed.

Kimberly keyed his voice-activated microphone. “I’m checking with Minneapolis dispatch,”

“Weird, Marty. They say Minneapolis is sixty-seven degrees, skies bright and clear. But also a big storm front is moving in from the west. They want more info.”

“Let’s ask Hopkins P.D. for a flyover.”

3.

1020 hours:

“What the heck is this?” the helicopter pilot asked. “I’m at a hundred fifty feet. Lousy visibility and weird radar return. I’ll try to go higher.”

“Copy,” Kimberly affirmed. “Watch yourself, Hopkins. Something very weird goin’ on.”

“Roger that. Wait one. Got something. Turning north. Damn. Looks like a big green wall stuck right in the middle of Excelsior Bay. Six, seven hundred feet long. Fog and snow all around. Can’t fly over, too high and much turbulence. Rotor blades icing up. Gotta return to base. Sorry, Marty.”

“Copy, Hopkins. Gonna ask Minneapolis P.D. for some help.”

4.

“You were right, Professor,” Allison said as she closed her Smart Phone. “Folks are mobilizing at Excelsior Bay. Joe Fredricksen from Geology at the Minneapolis campus wants our asses down there right now, his words.”

Dr. Adams squinted at the unnatural brilliance of the laboratory lighting as the migraine announced its approach. “You explained our problem?”

“I tried, sir He hung up on me.”

“I’m not surprised, Allison. Joe believes tachyon-enhanced matter transfer technology is witchcraft. Thinks I’m a wacko. Hmpf. He has no idea of how large a sample we can move, from any time to any place.”

She stared at the floor. “My fault, Professor.”

“Nonsense. Your premise is brilliant. How soon can we . . .?”

She brushed recalcitrant tresses from her face and punched computer keys. “Northwest Airlines flight 3154, arrives Minneapolis ten-thirty. Got us two economy class seats. We can just make it.”

“We’ll need cold weather gear and climbing equipment, Allison.”

“Got it covered, sir.”

5.

1235 hours:

The I-94 interchange with westbound State Route Seven was blocked by a Minnesota State Trooper car. “We’re from U. of M. Duluth,” Allison explained. Dr. Adams is Professor of Geology. I’m his Geology Fellow. Dr. Fredrickson from the U. of M. campus told us to shag ass.”

The cop focused a doubtful eyeball. “You’re a graduate student? You can’t be more than sixteen.”

Allison pushed more unruly locks under her ski cap. “Yeah, I get that a lot. I’m twenty-four.” She gave the officer a bright grin. “Would you please contact Officer Martin Bjorklund at the scene?”

“Marty? Oh sure. Transmissions have been garbled west of here,” the trooper said. “But he came through clear about ten minutes ago. He’s expecting you folks. Go ahead, but take it slow. Some kind of weird weather condition, he said.” The cop gestured toward the ominous approaching overcast.

6.

1305 hours:

“Allison Guilbert. U. M. Duluth Branch graduate student in Geology. Guy with me is Tom Adams, my prof.”

Bjorklund winked as he shook her proffered hand. “I’m Marty. This fella with me is Ben Kimberly. I’m Deep Haven, he’s Wayzata. Graduate student? You can’t be more than . . .”

“Allison is a Ph.D candidate, Officers,” Dr. Adams explained. “Tell us what’s happening here, please.”

“Sure, Doc,” Officer Bjorklund said. “I was on routine patrol through Cottagewood, ‘bout a mile northeast of here. Couldn’t figure out why the road had iced up. My thermometer pegged at minus forty. Asked Ben to help me check it out.”

“We found Excelsior Bay like this,” Officer Kimberly said. “Frozen solid, visibility less than fifty feet. Look behind you. St. Alban’s bay is freezing over too. Couple hundred-thou worth of boats wrecked,”

“Hopkins helicopter pilot did a flyover and said he saw a green wall. He was at a hundred fifty feet but couldn’t go any higher because of the storm.” Marty said.

“When did you first notice the weather change?” Adams asked.

“Eight-thirty, quarter of nine,” Officer Kimberly guessed. “Came on real sudden like.”

“It fits,” Allison said. “Out outage was at eight thirty-seven A.M. exactly.”

“Anything else, Officers?” Dr. Adams asked.

“Really weird, Professor.” Bjorklund said. “Couple of miles west of here it’s bright and clear, but traffic coming east on Route Seven is diverting south to avoid the storm. A local phenomenon, we think. Very strange.”

“And awfully cold for Minnesota,” Allison added.

“More like Canada, you ask me,” Bjorklund said.

Allison covered her mouth with a mitten to stifle a giggle. “Canada is colder.”

“How would you know?” Officer Bjorklund asked.

“Come on guys,” Allison said with a contrived pout. “I’m from Thunder Bay, Ontario.”

“All right, Canada, you’re okay. Hot coffee over in the prowler.”

“Thanks. Any doughnuts?”

7.

“Ah, there you are. Professor Adams?” an approaching figure clad in cold weather gear and ski mask asked.

Dr. Adams squinted through glare-reflective goggles. “Tom Adams. And you are?”

Allison cupped a mittened hand to Adams’s muffler bundled ear and shouted to combat the knifing wind. “Professor Fredricksen, sir.”

“The nonbeliever. Thank you, Allison. He turned to the bundled shape. “Good of you to join us, Joe”

“your damn experiment splashed down in Lake Minnetonka,” Fredricksen blustered. “Excelsior and St. Alban’s bays are frozen over. The city is snowed in with no power.”

“That was certainly not our intention,” Allison retorted., leveling a cool eyeball at Professor Fredricksen. “Our computer models were letter perfect. I told you about the blown surge protector, but you must not have heard me.”

Fredricksen gave her an agitated shake of his head. “Reckless experiment. Your Board of Regents will hear . . .”

“Excuse me, folks,” Officer Kimberly said. “My guys in Wayzata say their bay is freezing over,”

“Show me.”

“GPS locator in the prowler, Prof.” Officer Bjorklund said.

Dr. Adams picked up a loose ice fragment and rubbed it across his forehead to combat the migraine’s assault, then stared in disbelief at the dashboard CRT image. “That’s six and a half miles from here.”

“Why is it expanding?” Professor Fredricksen raged.

“It’s not,” Allison responded. “The lake water is reacting to a supercooled fragment of ancient glacier.”

“I don’t understand ,” Dr. Adams said. “Local weather reports predict temps in the low seventies. Warm for May. It should be melting.”

“Maybe we entrapped part of the Pleistocene atmosphere along with it,” Allison ventured. “Ambient temps then must have been like Antarctica now. What if . . .?”

8.

They were interrupted by an odd sound. “What the heck was that?” Officer Bjorklund asked.

“I heard it too,” Allison said. “The wind?”

“No, different,” Ben Kimberly said. “Low pitched. From up there.” He pointed a gloved finger upward into the raging blizzard.

“Maybe ice shifting,” Bjorklund said.

Allison’s eyes grew wide. “Like an avalanche?”

Dr. Adams lifted his ski cap, cocked an ear. “It’s gone now.”

“We’d better check it out. You people bring climbing gear?” Joe Fredricksen asked.

“Glad you asked,” Allison said.

“Good.” His booted footsteps crunched across the ice crusted snowbound surface.

“Hold on, Joe,” Dr. Adams said. “That’s fresh ice. We don’t know if it’s safe. Let me cut a sample.”

9.

Allison measured the clear blue-green ice cylinder the core borer had deposited. She blinked in amazement. “Four feet, six inches.”

“Impossible,” Dr. Fredricksen said. “Even in January it can’t freeze that deep around here.”

Adams pressed a handful of snow against his forehead and grimaced. “Perhaps Allison is right, Joe. A fifteen thousand year old fragment of Wisconsinan glacier accompanied by its unique weather system, with self-perpetuating properties, due somehow to the temporal and spatial shift required to transfer it here from the past.”

“Junk science,” Fredricksen grouched.

“Or we may have initiated a new glacial period,” Dr. Adams said.

Allison exhaled a cloud of frosty vapor. “The global warming folks won’t like it very much.”

10.

1425 hours:

Officer Bjorklund stared at the vertical expanse of translucent blue-green ice. “The ‘copter pilot was right. A wall.”

“Ready to climb, people?” Fredricksen hammered a steel piton into place.

“Wait one. Listen.”

“Not like before,” Allison said. “Different. Know what I mean?”

“I hear it,” Ben Kimberly affirmed. “Kind of wild.”

“Gone now,” Dr. Fredricksen said as he threaded climbing ropes through metallic rings. “Let’s go. It’s getting a little lighter up above. Visibility’s improving.”

The ice wall ended in wind-sculpted snow creations. The climbers collapsed in drifts to take a grateful five. “I can see a little better,” Allison said, sitting up and brushing snow from her ski goggles. “Something over there.”

“Wow,” Officer Bjorklund said. “Looks like tracks.”

“Human?” Fredricksen asked.

A closer strange sound split the swirling snow. “Animal for sure” Dr. Adams said. “We’ve got wolves and bear up around Lake Superior, but this is different.”

Officer Bjorklund swiped a glove across his brow. “Sounds pissed off.”

“There’s more tracks ahead,” Dr. Fredricksen said. “Stopped and retreated. I think we scares it.”

“It’s big,” Officer Bjorklund said. “Look at the length of the stride when it took off. And look at the size of those paw prints.”

Fredricksen shaded his eyes with a gloved hand. “There’s movement. I’ve gotta see this.” He headed off, tramping through knee-high drifts.

“Better watch yourself,” Allison shouted over the wind. “We know there’s Pleistocene wild life . . .”

Her warning was cut off by an angry snarl. A huge white form sprang from the snowstorm as Fredricksen raised his arms in defense. An answering roar came from the 9mm Beretta automatics of Officers Kimberly and Bjorklund.

11.

“You were lucky, sir,” Allison said as she helped the U. of M. Prof crawl from under the huge white sabertooth tiger’s body. “Didn’t see this one on the tachyon setup. Its camouflage was perfect. There could be more.”

“More for certain,” Dr. Adams said, giving a nervous glance into the swirling snow. “They may be with us for a while.”

“Your Board of Regents is going to hear of this,” Fredricksen grumbled, rising to his wobbly feet, “You, Miss Guilbert, will be flipping burgers at a White Castle.” He aimed a trembling finger at Dr. Adams. “And as for you, sir, I’ll be recommending demotion and loss of tenure.”

Adams massaged his throbbing temples with more snow. “I think you are in for a big surprise, Joe. You’re going to like it.” He turned to Allison and smiled. “My migraine is gone.”

12.

Ten months later.:

“Just about finished, Dr. Adams,” Associate Professor Allison Guilbert said as she downloaded fresh data and photos from her Smart Phone. “Flew in from St. Louis Ice Station an hour ago. “Just need to finish my report on Pleistocene fauna.”

The Professor looked over her shoulder at the screen. “Nice photos. “Woolly Mammoths, bison and Dr. Fredricksen’s friend, the sabertooth tiger. All seem to be acclimatizing nicely.”

Allison gave him a worried glance. “And Professor Fredricksen?”

Adams grinned as he entered longitudes and latitudes to the transfer device. “Joe, his Geology laboratory, office and library will be joining us in just a sec. Is the field clear?”

She glanced out the open window as a clear twenty square acres of clearance surrounded by semitropical flora of the new campus, University of Minnesota, Baja California Branch. She smiled. “All clear for transit.”

The End