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Written by Dan Simmons

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The

ABOMINABLE



A Novel

DAN SIMMONS

sphere

SPHERE

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This book is dedicated, with respect,
to the memory of
Jacob "Jake" William Perry
April 2, 1902—May 28, 1992

Great things are done when men and mountains meet.
— William Blake

INTRODUCTION

I met Jake Perry in the summer of 1991.

I'd had a longtime interest—in Antarctic exploration and explorers—actually since the International Geophysical Year in 1957–58, when the U.S. established permanent bases down there, which really grabbed my 10-year-old's imagination—and around 1990 I had a vague hunch that there might be an idea for a novel set in Antarctica. It was to be another fifteen years before I actually wrote and published a book about a doomed Arctic (not Antarctic) expedition—my 2007 novel *The Terror*—but in the summer of 1991 it was that time again when I had to suggest a package of three new books to my publisher. My interest was in Antarctica, not the North Polar expeditions, which never interested me very much (but which I eventually ended up writing about), and that interest was fueled by many more years of reading about the adventures of Ernest Shackleton, Robert Falcon Scott, Apsley Cherry-Garrard, and other heroes and martyrs of the Antarctic.

Then, during that summer of 1991, a friend of my wife's said that she knew an actual Antarctic explorer. This old guy—who had moved into an assisted living home for the elderly in the little town of Delta on the Western Slope of Colorado—had actually been with Rear Admiral Richard Byrd during American expeditions to Antarctica in the 1930s.

At least Karen said that this is what Mary had told her. Personally, I suspected Alzheimer's, lying, an inveterate teller of tall tales, or all three.

But according to Mary, this eighty-nine-year-old gentleman named Jacob Perry had been on the 1934 U.S. Antarctic expedition. That was

the clusterboink expedition in which Admiral Byrd, always eager for a bit more solo fame, had spent five winter months alone in a hole in the ice at an advanced meteorological station where he almost died from carbon monoxide poisoning due to a poorly ventilated stove. (Byrd was to write his best-selling book about this experience, a book titled, obviously enough, *Alone.*)

According to what Mary said to my wife, Karen, this elderly Jacob Perry had been one of four men who'd crossed a hundred miles of Antarctica in the total darkness and howling storms of the 1934 South Polar winter to rescue Admiral Byrd. Then the whole group had to wait until October and the advent of the Antarctic summer to be rescued themselves. "It sounds like he'd be perfect to give you information about the South Pole," said Karen. "You might write the whole book about this Mr. Perry. Maybe he's the Admiral Perry who also was the first to reach the *North Pole*!"

"Perry," I said. "Perry of the Antarctic. But he's not the Rear Admiral Robert Peary who claimed to be the first man to reach the North Pole in nineteen oh-nine."

"Why not?" said Karen. "It could be."

"Well, first of all, there's the difference in spelling of their names," I said, mildly irritated at being poked into action, or perhaps irritated in the way I always am when someone else, anyone else, suggests what I should be writing about. I spelled the difference between "Admiral Peary" and Mary's little old man in Delta, Mr. "Perry."

"Also," I said, "Rear Admiral Peary would be about a hundred and thirty–some years old now . . ."

"All right, all right," said Karen, holding up her hands in a signal we've worked out over decades of marriage—a signal that theoretically keeps either party from going for the jugular. "I stand corrected. But this Mr. Perry might still have a wonderful story to tell and . . ."

"Also," I interrupted, being somewhat of a jerk, "Admiral Robert Peary died in nineteen twenty."

"Well, this Jacob *Perry* is still alive in Delta," said Karen. "Barely."

"Barely? You mean because of his age?" To me, anyone who's eighty-nine or ninety falls into the category of "barely alive." Hell, to me in 1991, anyone over *sixty* was circling the drain. (In the interests of full

disclosure, I admit that I'm now sixty-three years old as I write this preface in 2011.)

"No, not just his age," said Karen. "In the e-mail, Mary also mentioned that he has cancer. He still gets around evidently, but . . ."

I'd been at my computer, just fiddling around with ideas for books—typing in possible titles—when Karen had come in. Now I turned the computer off.

"Mary really says he was with Byrd in Antarctica in 'thirty-four?" I said.

"Yeah, *really,*" said Karen. "I knew you'd be interested in him." Somehow my wife manages not to sound smug even when she's correct. "It'd be good for you to get out of the office for a few days. That'd be a five- or six-hour ride, even staying on the interstate all the way to Grand Junction. You can stay overnight with Guy and Mary in Delta."

I shook my head. "I'll take the Miata. And get off I-seventy to go through Carbondale and then up and over McClure Pass."

"Can the Miata get over McClure Pass?"

"You just watch it," I said. I was thinking of what clothes I'd throw in my duffel for the two-day trip, assuming I'd talk to Mr. Perry the morning of the second day and then head home. I had a little North Face soft duffel that fit perfectly in the Miata's tiny trunk. I made a mental note to bring my Nikon camera. (These were pre-digital days for me, at least when it came to photography.)

And so, because of my urge to drive my new 1991 Mazda Miata in the mountains, I met Mr. Jacob Perry.

Delta, Colorado, was a town of about six thousand people. Coming at it the way I did—turning south off I-70 from Glenwood Springs, then turning onto Highway 65 at Carbondale, following that narrow two-lane road over the high passes and past the remote outposts of Marble and Paonia—one gets a sense of how surrounded by mountains the little town really is. Delta is in a wide river basin south of the Grand Mesa, which locals describe as "one of the largest flat-top mountains in the world."

The place where Jake Perry lived in Delta certainly didn't *look* like an old folks' home, much less one where nursing help was available twenty-

four hours a day. With the assistance of several federal grants, Mary had renovated a once grand but now run-down hotel and merged it with an empty store next door. The result was a space that felt more like a four-star hotel from, say, 1900 than an assisted living facility.

I found that Jacob Perry had his own room on the third floor. (Part of Mary's renovation was putting in elevators.) After Mary's introductions and explanations again of why I wanted to talk to him—Dan was a novelist doing research on a possible book set at the South Pole and he'd heard of Jake, she said—Mr. Perry invited me in.

The room and the man seemed to complement each other. I was surprised how large Perry's room was—a double bed, neatly made, near one of three windows that looked out and over the roofs of the lower downtown stores toward the mountains and Grand Mesa to the north. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with hardcover books—many of them, I noticed, about mountain ranges around the world—and mementos: coils of old-style climbing rope, Crooke's glass goggles such as Arctic explorers used to wear, a worn leather motorcycle helmet, an ancient Kodak camera, an old ice axe with a wooden staff much longer than modern ice axes would have.

As for Jacob Perry—I couldn't believe the man was eighty-nine years old.

Age and gravity had taken their toll: some curvature and compression of the spine over nine decades had robbed the man of an inch or two of height, but he was still over 6 feet tall; he was wearing a short-sleeved denim shirt, and I could see where his biceps had withered some with age, but his muscles were still sculpted, his forearms especially formidable; the upper part of his body was, even after time's robberies, triangular with power and shaped from a lifetime of exertion.

It was several minutes before I noticed that two fingers of his left hand, the smallest finger and the one next to it, were missing. It seemed to be an old wound—the flesh over the stubs of bone just above the knuckles was brown and as weathered as the rest of the skin on his hands and forearms. And the missing fingers didn't seem to bother his dexterity. Later, while we were talking, Mr. Perry fiddled with two thin pieces of leather shoestring, each about eighteen inches long, and I was amazed to see that he could tie complicated knots, one with each hand, using

both hands to tie the knots at the same time. The knots must have been nautical or technical climbing knots, because I couldn't have tied any of them using both of my hands and the assistance of a Boy Scout troop. Mr. Perry, without looking, idly tied such knots, each hand working individually, and then absentmindedly untied them, with only the two fingers and thumb of his left hand. It seemed to be an old habit—perhaps one to calm him—and he paid little attention to either the finished knots or the process.

When we shook hands I felt my fingers disappear in his larger and still more powerful grip. But he was making no small-town-bully effort to squeeze; the strength was simply still there. Mr. Perry's face showed too many years in the sunlight—in high-altitude and thin-air sunlight, where UV had had its way with his epidermal cells—and between the permanent brown patches there were scars where he'd had small surgeries for possible melanomas.

The old man still had hair and kept it cut quite short. I could see browned scalp through the thinning gray. When he smiled, he showed his own teeth save perhaps for two or three missing on the lower sides and back.

It was Mr. Perry's blue eyes which I've remembered the most clearly. They were startlingly blue and, it seemed to me, ageless. These were not the rheumy, distracted eyes of a man in his late eighties. Perry's bright blue gaze was curious, attentive, bold, almost . . . childlike. When I work with beginning writers of any age, I warn them against describing their characters by comparing them with movie stars or famous people; it's lazy, it's time-bound, and it's a cliché. Still, fifteen years later my wife Karen and I were watching the movie *Casino Royale,* the first of the new James Bond films with Daniel Craig as James Bond, and I whispered excitedly, "There! Those are the kind of bluer-than-blue blue eyes that Mr. Perry had. In fact, Daniel Craig looks a lot like a young version of my late Mr. Perry."

Karen looked at me a moment in the darkened theater and then said, "Shush."

Back in 1991 at the assisted living home in Delta and somewhat at a loss for words, I'd spent a few minutes admiring the handful of artifacts on Perry's shelves and desk top—the tall, wooden-staffed ice axe

propped in a corner, some examples of stone which he later told me were taken from the summits of various peaks, and black-and-white photographs gone sepia with age. The small camera on the shelf—a Kodak of the kind one unfolded before snapping a picture—was ancient but unrusted, and it looked well maintained.

"It has film in it from . . . quite a few years ago," said Mr. Perry. "Never developed."

I touched the small camera and turned toward the older man. "Aren't you curious to see how your snaps turned out?"

Mr. Perry shook his head. "I didn't take the pictures. In fact, the camera's not mine. But the druggist here in Delta told me that the film would probably still develop. Someday I'll see if the pictures turned out." He waved me to a chair next to the built-in desk. Scattered around the desk I could see careful drawings of plants, rocks, trees.

"It's been a long, long time since I've been interviewed," said Mr. Perry with what might have been an ironic smile. "And even then, many decades ago, I had almost nothing to say to the press."

I assumed that he was talking about the 1934 Byrd Expedition. I was stupidly wrong on that and also too stupid to clarify it at the time. My life, and this book, would have been quite different if I'd had even the most basic journalist's instinct to follow up on such an answer.

Instead, I brought the conversation back to myself and said modestly (for an egoist), "I've rarely interviewed anyone. Most of the research I do for my books is in libraries, including research libraries. Do you mind if I take notes?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Perry. "So it's just my time with Byrd's 'thirty-three to 'thirty-five Antarctic expeditions that you're interested in?"

"I think so," I said. "You see, I have a kernel of an idea of writing a suspense thriller set in Antarctica. Anything you tell me about South Polar expeditions would be helpful. Especially if it's scary."

"Scary?" Perry smiled again. "A thriller? Would there be some evil entity other than the cold and dark and isolation trying to do in your characters?"

I returned his smile but realized I was a little embarrassed. Book plots often sound silly when removed from their wordy context. Let's face it; sometimes they're silly *in* context. And, indeed, I *had* been thinking of

some giant scary thing to chase and kill and eat my characters. I just had no idea at the time what it might be.

"Sort of," I admitted. "Something really big and threatening trying to get at our heroes—something out in the dark and cold. Something clawing to get in their Antarctic hut or frozen-in ship or whatever. Something not human and very hungry."

"A killer penguin?" suggested Mr. Perry.

I managed to laugh with him even though my wife, agent, and editor had asked the same thing each and every time I'd suggested an Antarctic thriller—*So, what, Dan? Is this monster of yours going to be some sort of giant mutant killer penguin?* Wry minds work alike. (And I've never admitted until now that I *had* considered a giant mutant killer penguin as my Antarctic threat.)

"Actually," said Perry, probably seeing my blush, "penguins can kill just from the guano stench of their rookeries."

"So you've actually visited some rookeries?" I asked, pen poised over the skinny notebook I used for my research notes. I felt like Jimmy Olsen.

Mr. Perry nodded and smiled again, but this time that bright blue gaze seemed to be turned inward to some memory. "I spent my third and last winter and spring there at the Cape Royds hut . . . supposedly to be studying the nearby rookery and penguin behavior there."

"Cape Royds hut . . . ," I said, amazed. "Shackleton's hut?"

"Yes."

"I thought that Ernest Shackleton's hut was a museum—closed to all visitors," I said. My voice was tentative. I'd been too surprised to write anything down.

"It is . . . ," said Mr. Perry. *"Now."*

I felt like an idiot and hid my new blush by bending my head to write.

Jacob Perry spoke quickly, as if to relieve me of any embarrassment I might be feeling. "Shackleton was such a national hero to the Brits that the hut was already a museum of sorts when Admiral Byrd sent me there to observe the rookeries in the Antarctic winter of nineteen thirty-five. The British used the hut from time to time, occasionally sending ornithologists there to observe the rookery, and there were provisions stored there all the time so that Americans from the nearby base or oth-

ers in trouble could use the hut in an emergency. But at the time I was ordered there, no one had wintered over in the hut for many years."

"I'm surprised that the British granted permission for an American to spend months in Shackleton's hut," I said.

Mr. Perry grinned. "They didn't. They almost certainly wouldn't have. Admiral Byrd never asked permission of the Brits. He just sent me there with seven months of my own supplies on two sledges—the guys took the sledges and their dogs back to Byrd's base the day after they dropped me off—oh, and a crowbar to pry the door and shuttered windows open. I could really have used some of those dogs as company that winter. Truth was, the admiral didn't want me in his sight. So Byrd sent me as far away as he could where I might still have a chance of surviving the winter. The admiral liked to play at doing science, but in truth he didn't give a single penguin turd about observing or studying penguins."

I wrote all this down, not really understanding it but sensing that this might be important for some reason. I had no idea how I could use Shackleton's hut in my vaguely conceived suspense novel with no title.

"Shackleton and his men built the hut in nineteen oh-six," continued Mr. Perry. His voice was soft and slightly husky, the rasp due—I learned from him later in the conversation—to the loss of part of his left lung in surgery the previous winter. But even with the rasp his voice was still a pleasant tenor. Before the surgery, I guessed, Mr. Perry would have had an almost perfect voice for storytelling.

"Shackleton's people abandoned it in nineteen oh-eight . . . there was still the hulk of a motorcar they'd left behind when I got there," he was saying. "It's probably still there, the way things rust and decay so slowly down there. I doubt if the darned thing ever traveled ten feet in the deep snow Shackleton kept encountering, but the Brits did like their gadgets. So did Admiral Byrd, for that matter. Anyway, I was dropped off at the old hut early in the Antarctic autumn. That was March of nineteen thirty-five. I was picked up at the beginning of the Antarctic spring—early October—of the same year. My job was to report on the Adélie penguins in the large rookery at Cape Royds."

"But that's the Antarctic winter," I said, pausing, sure that I was going to say something unutterably stupid. "I thought that the Adélie

penguins didn't . . . I mean, you know . . . didn't winter over. I thought that they arrived sometime in October and left with their chicks — those little ones that survived — in early March. Am I wrong? I must be wrong."

Jacob Perry was smiling again. "You're exactly right, Mr. Simmons. I was dropped off there just in time to see the last two or three penguins waddle and then paddle out to sea — the water was just preparing to freeze over again there at Cape Royds in early March, so that open water would soon be dozens of miles from the hut — and I was picked up in spring, October, before any of the Adélie penguins returned again to mate and raise their young there at the rookery. I didn't get to see any penguin action."

I shook my head. "I don't get it. You were ordered there for . . . my God, more than seven months, almost eight months . . . to observe the rookeries on the Cape when there were no penguins. And no sunlight much of the time. Are you a biologist or some sort of scientist, Mr. Perry?"

"Nope," said Mr. Perry with that lopsided smile again. "I'd been an English major at Harvard — eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature with a lot of English Lit thrown in. Henry James was hot stuff when I graduated in nineteen twenty-three. James Joyce had published *Ulysses* just the year before — 'twenty-two — and his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* six years earlier. Already in Europe for a year of skiing and mountain scrambling — I had a small inheritance that came due when I turned twenty-one — in nineteen twenty-four I read a story in Ford Madox Ford's *transatlantic review* and decided I immediately had to leave Switzerland and travel to Paris to meet the young man named Hemingway who'd written such a story and show him some of my own writing."

"Did you?" I asked.

"Yep," said Mr. Perry, smiling. "Hemingway was working from time to time as the French-based European correspondent for the *Toronto Star* then and he had this neat trick to get rid of pains in the ass like me. I met him in his office — a grubby little place — and he immediately asked me downstairs to a café for some coffee. Then after a few minutes, with me and so many others, he'd glance at his watch, say he had to get back to work, and leave the would-be writer sitting there alone in the café."

"Did you show him your stories?"

"Sure. He glanced at the first pages of three of them and said that I should stick with my day job. But that's all a different story, isn't it? We old men tend to maunder and meander."

"It's interesting" was all I murmured, but I was thinking—*Jesus, to meet Ernest Hemingway and be told by him that you weren't a writer. What would that feel like? Or is Perry just bullshitting me?*

"So to return to what you're interested in, Mr. Simmons—Antarctica in 'thirty-three to 'thirty-five—I was hired by Admiral Byrd as a roustabout and because I had experience as a mountain climber. You see, the scientists in the group had plans to do some research on various peaks during that expedition. I didn't know a damned thing about science or about penguins then and not much more now, despite all the nature documentary channels our cable TV gets here at the home. But it didn't really matter in nineteen thirty-five because the point was to get me out of Admiral Byrd's sight until the Antarctic spring, when we'd all be leaving the continent."

"So you were alone there in the dark and cold for seven months," I said stupidly. "What did you do that made him dislike you so much?"

Mr. Perry was cutting an apple with a short but very sharp folding knife, and now he offered me a slice. I took it.

"I rescued him," he said softly, speaking around his own chunk of apple.

"Yeah, Mary said that you were part of the small group that rescued Admiral Byrd from his solo Advance Base in nineteen thirty-four," I said.

"Correct," said Mr. Perry.

"So because he was embarrassed having one of his rescuers around, he exiled you to Shackleton's hut on Cape Royds to experience the same solitude he had?" It made no sense to me.

"Something like that," said Perry. "Except that I didn't poison myself with carbon monoxide like the admiral did . . . or require rescue the way he did. And he had a radio to contact with our base, Little America, every day. I didn't have a radio. Or any contact with the base."

"When you were part of the group that rescued Byrd that previous August," I said, looking at the notes I'd taken from talking to Mary

and looking things up in reference books (1991 being pre-Google), "you and three others drove a hundred miles through the South Polar winter—with the few warning flags for the maze of crevasses blown away or covered by snow—a hundred miles in near-absolute darkness on a snow tractor that wasn't much more than a Model T with a metal roof. Just you and three others from the Little America Base."

Mr. Perry nodded. "Dr. Poulter and Mr. Waite and my direct boss in charge of the snow tractors, E. J. Demas. It was Demas who insisted that I come along to drive the tractor."

"That was your job in the expedition? Thanks." Perry had given me another delicious slice of apple.

"As roustabout, I did a lot of work on those damned tractors and ended up driving them in the summer for the various scientists who had to do things away from Little America," said the older man. "I guess Mr. Demas thought I had the best chance of keeping us all out of a crevasse, even in the dark. We had to turn back once after we learned that most of the crevasse warning flags were gone, but tried again right away—even though the weather had grown worse."

"It still sounds as if Admiral Byrd was punishing you," I said, the taste of apple clean and fresh in my mouth. "Sending you into solitary confinement for seven months."

Jake Perry shrugged. "The admiral's 'rescue'—he hated anyone using that word to describe it—embarrassed him. He couldn't do anything about Dr. Poulter or Mr. Waite—they were bigwigs in the expedition—but he assigned Demas to jobs where he, Admiral Byrd, would rarely see him. And he sent me out on the summer's expeditions and then assigned me to Cape Royds for the entire Antarctic winter. In the end, Admiral Byrd didn't even mention me in the report about his . . . rescue. My name's not in most of the history books about Antarctica."

I was astounded at the meanness and pettiness of such an action on Admiral Byrd's part. "Being sent to spend the winter alone at Cape Royds was the equivalent of you being put in solitary confinement," I said, letting my anger come through in my tone. "And no radio? Admiral Byrd went nuts after three months of being alone—and he had daily radio contact with Little America."

Mr. Perry grinned. "No radio."

I tried to understand this but could not. "Was there any purpose—any reason at all—for you to spend seven months of isolation and five months of absolute darkness in Shackleton's hut on Cape Royds?"

Mr. Perry shook his head, but neither his expression nor his voice showed any anger or resentment. "As I said, I was hired on the expedition to climb mountains. After we'd rescued Byrd—which required the four of us staying with him in that little underground cell he'd created at Advance Base from August eleven, when we arrived, to October twelve, when Byrd and Dr. Poulter were flown out in the *Pilgrim*—I finally did get to go on some summer expeditions where I could help the scientists with my climbing skills."

"The *Pilgrim* was a plane?" I said.

Mr. Perry had every right to say something like *What else could it be if they* flew *out in it? An oversized albatross?* but he only nodded politely and said, "They started the expedition there with three planes—the big Fokker . . ." He paused and smiled. "That's 'Fokker,' Mr. Simmons. F-o-k . . ." He spelled it for me.

I grinned. "Got it. But call me Dan."

"If you'll call me Jake," he said.

I was surprised that I couldn't—easily call him Jake, that is. I'm rarely impressed when I find myself with people known for their fame or title or supposed authority, but I found that I was *deeply* impressed in the presence of Mr. Jacob Perry. To me, even after I'd managed to say "Jake" a few times, he stayed "Mr. Perry" in my mind.

"Anyway," he continued, "they had the big Fokker, named *Blue Blade . . .* but it crashed the first time they tried to get it off the ground—or ice, really—after we arrived in Antarctica. And they had an even bigger seaplane, named the *William Horlick,* but it always seemed down for maintenance. So the little monoplane, *Pilgrim,* was sent to fetch Admiral Byrd and Dr. Poulter as soon as the weather stabilized in October after we'd reached him and fixed the ventilation in his little subterranean hidey-hole in the ice. I remember that during the weeks we were waiting, Dr. Poulter did a lot of the star sightings, meteor watching, and barometric work that Byrd was too ill and befuddled to carry out. The carbon monoxide buildup hadn't exactly sharpened the admiral's brain cells. Then, after the *Pilgrim* flew Admiral Byrd and Dr.

Poulter out in August, Waite, Demas, and I took the tractor back to Little America . . . just in time for me to join some of the expeditions heading out to the Haines Mountains."

"Had you joined the expedition in order to climb mountains in Antarctica?" Mary had knocked and come in with lemonade for both of us, but it was a brief interruption. And the lemonade was homemade and excellent.

Mr. Perry nodded. "That was my one real skill. My one real reason for being on that expedition. Climbing. Oh, I could handle motors and fiddle with equipment well enough . . . that's how I ended up working with the snow tractors for Demas during the winter, when there was no climbing . . . but I went to Antarctica for its mountains."

"Did you get to climb many?" I asked.

Perry grinned and again his blue gaze grew ruminative. "McKinley Peak that summer of 'thirty-four . . . not *the* Mount McKinley, of course, but the peak near the South Pole with the same name. Several of the unnamed peaks in the Haines range . . . the scientists were looking for moss and lichens there, and after I got them safely situated on their ledges, I'd just bag the summit before coming back down to help them with their equipment. I summited Mount Woodward in the Ford range during that summer of 'thirty-four, then Mount Rea, Mount Cooper, then Saunders Mountain. None of them very interesting from a technical perspective. Lots of snow and ice work. Lots of crevasses, ice cliffs, and avalanches. Jean-Claude would have enjoyed it."

"Who's Jean-Claude?" I asked. "Someone else on the Byrd Expedition?"

Mr. Perry's eyes had been at their most ruminative, but now they came back into focus and he looked at me and smiled. "No, no. Just a climber I knew a long time ago. Someone who loved any problem involving snow, ice, glaciers, or crevasses. Oh, I climbed Mount Erebus and Terror."

"Those last two are volcanoes," I said, trying to show that I wasn't totally ignorant of all things relating to the South Pole. "Named after British ships, weren't they?"

Mr. Perry nodded. "They were named in eighteen forty-one by James Clark Ross—he was credited for actually finding Antarctica, although they never really set foot on the continent—and the HMS *Erebus* was

his flagship, while the HMS *Terror* was captained by Ross's second-in-command, a certain Francis Crozier."

I scribbled all this down, not knowing what use it might be for my possible book about giant mutant killer penguins attacking Shackleton's hut in Antarctica.

"Crozier was second-in-command a few years later on Sir John Franklin's expedition, where both *Erebus* and *Terror* were lost in the northern ice fields," Mr. Perry said almost absently, as if finishing a thought. "The British icebreaker ships, that is," he said with a smile. "Not the volcanoes. *They're* still there."

I looked up. "They sank? The two ships the volcanoes were named after, *Erebus* and *Terror*. . . they sank a few years later?"

"Worse than that, Dan. They totally *disappeared.* Sir John Franklin, Francis Moira Crozier, and a hundred and twenty-seven men. They were trying to force the Northwest Passage, and somewhere north of Canada the two ships and all the men just . . . disappeared. Some graves and a few bones of the men have been found here and there on empty islands up there, but there's been no sign of the ships or the majority of the crew's remains to this day."

I scribbled madly. I'd had no interest in writing about the North Pole and its expeditions, but more than a hundred men and two ships just . . . gone? I asked for this Captain Crozier's full name and the spelling of it and Mr. Perry gave it to me, spelling it out as patiently as if I were a child.

"Anyway," concluded Mr. Perry, "since Admiral Byrd wasn't all that happy seeing me around—I guess I reminded him of his near-criminal negligence for gassing himself up at his much-ballyhooed 'Advanced Base' and making other men risk their lives to save his behind—for my next and last winter there, instead of my wintering on the main base with the other men, Admiral Byrd ordered me to 'observe the penguins' while staying alone in Shackleton's hut on Cape Royds. March to October nineteen thirty-five."

"Observe the penguins that had already left," I said.

"Yes." Mr. Perry folded his arms as he chuckled, and again I could see how powerful his forearms still were. They also showed several livid scars. Old scars. "But in the autumn, before it got too ungodly cold, I

could smell the overpowering guano stench of their rookeries every day. But one gets used to bad smells."

"It must have felt like real punishment," I said to him again, still feeling the horror of such isolation and moved to real anger at Admiral Byrd's pettiness. "Not the guano, I mean. The sense of solitary confinement."

Perry only smiled at me. "I loved it," he said. "Those winter months at Shackleton's hut were some of the most wonderful days I've ever spent. Dark and cold, yes . . . very cold at times, since the Cape Royds hut wasn't really designed to heat for just one person, and the wind found its way in through a thousand cracks and crevices every dark day there . . . but wonderful. I used canvas and Shackleton's old crates to create a little cubby near the door where I could stay a little warm, although some mornings the wolverine fur around the opening of my sleeping bag was almost covered with frost. But the experience itself . . . wonderful. Absolutely wonderful."

"Did you climb any mountains that winter?" I asked. I realized it was a stupid question as soon as I asked it. Who can climb mountains in the dark when it's sixty or seventy degrees below zero?

Amazingly, he nodded again. "Shackleton's men climbed Mount Erebus—at least to the rim of the volcano—in nineteen oh-eight," he said. "But I climbed it solo three times, by different routes. Once at night. Oh, and although they credit the first winter climb of Erebus to a British climber, Roger Mear, just six years ago in nineteen eighty-five, I climbed Erebus twice in the winter of 'thirty-five. I don't think that's in any record book. I guess I just never bothered to mention it to anyone who might have written it down."

He fell silent and I also stayed silent, wondering again if this nice old man was bullshitting me. Then he stood, lifted his old wooden-staff ice axe, and said, "Just a few months ago . . . this past January . . . an ironworker at McMurdo Station, a guy named Charles Blackmer, did a solo ascent of Mount Erebus in seventeen hours. It was in various alpine journals because it set an official record. Beating the older recorded times by hours and hours."

"Did you pay attention to your time climbing the mountain fifty-six years earlier?" I asked.

Mr. Perry grinned. "Thirteen hours, ten minutes. But then, I'd done it before." He laughed and shook his head. "But this doesn't help you with your research, Dan. What do you want to hear about South Polar exploration?"

I sighed, realizing how unprepared I was as an interviewer. (And, in some ways, as a man.) "What can you tell me?" I said. "I mean something that I might not get from books."

Perry rubbed his chin. Some white bristles there scraped audibly. "Well," he said softly, "when you look at the stars near the horizon . . . especially when it's really cold . . . they tend to jitter around. Jumping left, then right . . . all while they jiggle up and down at the same time. I think it has something to do with masses of super-cold air lying over the land or frozen sea acting like a lens that's being moved . . ."

I was scribbling madly.

Mr. Perry chuckled. "Can this trivia possibly be of help in writing a novel?"

"You never know," I said, still writing.

As it turned out, the jiggling stars near the horizon appeared in a sentence that spanned the bottom of the first page and top of the second page of my novel *The Terror,* which came out sixteen years later and which was about Sir John Franklin's Northwest Passage debacle, not about Antarctica at all.

But Mr. Perry had died of his cancer long before *The Terror* was published.

I found out later that Mr. Perry had been on several famous climbing expeditions, and various Alaskan and South American expeditions, and to K2 as well as the three-year South Polar expedition with Admiral Byrd we discussed that summer day in 1991. Our "interview"—mostly wonderful conversation about travel, courage, friendship, life, death, and fate—lasted about four hours. And I never asked one right question the whole time: a question that could have told me about his amazing Himalayan experience in 1925.

I could tell that Mr. Perry was tiring by the end of our long talk. He was also speaking with more of a wheeze in his voice.

Noticing me noticing, he said, "They removed a chunk of one of my

lungs last winter. Cancer. The other's probably packing up, too, but the cancer's metastasizing elsewhere so probably the lung won't be what gets me."

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling the absolute inadequacy of the words.

Mr. Perry shrugged. "Hey, if I reach ninety, I'll have beaten a lot of odds, Dan. More than you know." He chuckled. "The pisser is that I have lung cancer but I never smoked. Never. Not once."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"The added irony is that I moved to Delta so that I would be just minutes away from the mountains," added Mr. Perry. "But now I end up wheezing and gasping if I climb a low hill. Just climbing a few hundred feet of pasture at the edge of town now reminds me of trying to climb and breathe above twenty-eight thousand feet."

I still didn't know what to say—the loss of a lung to cancer must be a terrible thing—and I was too dull-witted to ask him where and when he might have climbed above 28,000 feet. The region above 8,000 meters, around 25,000 feet, is called the Death Zone for good reason: every minute a climber is at such altitude, his body is becoming weaker, he is coughing, gasping, always short of breath, and the climber is unable to recharge energy even by sleeping (which is all but impossible at such altitude anyway). I later wondered if Mr. Perry was just using that altitude—28,000 feet—as an example of how hard it was for him to breathe now or if he'd actually ever ventured that high. I knew that Mount Vinson, the tallest mountain in Antarctica, was just a little over 16,000 feet high.

Before I got around to asking an intelligent question, Mr. Perry clapped my shoulder. "I'm not complaining. I just love irony. If there is a God of this poor, sad mess of a universe it's got to be Bitch Irony. Say . . . you're a published writer."

"Yes," I said. My voice may have sounded wary. The most common thing that published writers are approached for by new acquaintances is to be invited to help that would-be writer either (a) find an agent, (b) get published, or (c) both of the above.

"You have a literary agent and all that?" said Perry.

"Yes?" I was even more tentative now. After just four hours I admired the man greatly, but amateur writing is amateur writing. Almost impossible to get published.

"I've been thinking of writing something . . ."

There it was. In a way, I regretted hearing those familiar words. They were the punch line of too many conversations with new acquaintances. But I also felt a sense of relief. If he hadn't already written his book or whatever, what were the chances that he could do so now, almost ninety years old and dying of cancer?

Mr. Perry saw my face, read my thoughts, and laughed loudly. "Don't worry, Dan. I'm not going to ask you to get something of mine published. I'm not sure I'd want it published."

"What then?" I asked.

He rubbed his cheek and chin again. "I want to write something and I want someone to read it. Does that make sense?"

"I think so. It's why I write."

He shook his head, almost impatiently I thought. "No, you write for thousands or tens of thousands of people to read your thoughts. I'm hunting for just one reader. One person who might understand it. One person who might believe it."

"Family, maybe?" I suggested.

Again he shook his head. I sensed that it was hard for him to make this request.

"The only family I know about is a grandniece or great-grandniece or whatever the hell she is in Baltimore or somewhere," he said softly. "I've never met her. But Mary and the home here have her address written down somewhere . . . as a place to send my things when I check out. No, Dan, if I manage to write this thing, I want someone to read it who would understand it."

"Is it fiction?"

He grinned. "No, but I'm sure it'll read like fiction. Bad fiction, probably."

"Have you started writing it?"

He shook his head again. "No, I've been waiting all these decades . . . hell, I don't know *what* I've been waiting for. For Death to bang on my door, I guess, to give me some motivation. Well, he's banging."

"I'd be honored to read anything you'd choose to share with me, Mr. Perry," I said. I surprised myself with the emotion and sincerity of my offer. Usually I approached reading amateurs' efforts as if their manuscripts were coated with the plague bacillus. But I realized I'd be excited to read

anything this man wanted to write, although I assumed at the time it would probably be about Byrd's South Polar expedition in the thirties.

Jacob Perry sat motionless and looked at me for a long moment. Those blue eyes seemed to touch me somehow—as though the eight blunt, scarred fingers of his were pressing hard against my forehead. It was not altogether a pleasant sensation. But it *was* intimate.

"All right," he said at last. "If I ever get the thing written, I'll send it your way."

I'd already given him my card with my address and other information on it.

"One problem, though," he said.

"What?"

He held up his two hands, so dexterous, even with the left hand missing most of the last two fingers. "I can't type worth a damn," he said.

I laughed. "If you were submitting a manuscript to a publisher," I said, "we'd find a typist who could type things up for you. Or I'd do it myself. But in the meantime . . ."

From my battered briefcase, I produced a Moleskine blank book journal—its 240 creamy blank pages never touched. The blank journal was wrapped in a soft leather "skin" that had a leather double loop to hold a pen or pencil. I'd already slipped a sharpened pencil into the loop.

Mr. Perry touched the leather. "This is too dear . . . ," he began, moving to hand it back.

I loved hearing the archaic use of the word "dear," but I shook my head and pressed the leather-wrapped blank journal back into his hands.

"This is mere token payment for the hours you spent talking to me," I said. I'd wanted to add "Jake," but still couldn't manage calling him by his first name. "Seriously, I want you to have it. And when you write something you want to share with me, I look forward to reading it. And I promise you that I'll give you my honest assessment of it."

Still turning the leather journal over and over in his gnarled hands, Mr. Perry flashed a grin. "I'll probably be dead when you get the book . . . or books . . . Dan, so be as honest as you want in your critique. It won't hurt my feelings a bit."

I didn't know what to say to that.

* * *

I talked to Jacob Perry in July 1991, twenty years ago as I write this foreword to his manuscript in the late summer of 2011.

In late May 1992, Mary phoned to tell us that Mr. Perry had passed away in the Delta hospital. The cancer had won.

When I asked Mary if Mr. Perry had left anything for me, she seemed surprised. Everything he'd left behind—and it wasn't much, his books and artifacts—had been packed up and shipped to his grandniece in Baltimore. Mary hadn't been at the hospice at the time—she'd been in a hospital in Denver. Her assistant had mailed the packages.

Then, nine weeks ago, in the late spring of 2011, almost twenty years after my trip to Delta, I received a UPS package from someone named Richard A. Durbage (Jr.) in Lutherville-Timonium, Maryland. Assuming that it was a batch of my old books that someone wanted signed—something that really irritates me when the reader hasn't asked permission of me to send the books—I was tempted to return the package to the sender, unopened. Instead, I used a box cutter to slash the package open with more than necessary energy. Karen looked at the shipping information and made me laugh by saying that we'd never had books for signing sent from Lutherville-Timonium and she immediately went to look it up online. (Karen does love her geography.)

But they weren't old books of mine to be signed.

In the package were twelve Moleskine notebooks. I flipped through and saw that each page, front and back, was filled with small, precise cursive handwriting in a man's strong hand.

Even then I stupidly didn't think of Mr. Perry until I got to the last journal at the bottom.

The leather cover was wrapped around it, still holding the stub of a #2 pencil, but the leather was now weathered and worn and darkened by the oils transmitted through the repeated touch of Mr. Perry's hands. He'd obviously transferred the leather cover to each volume during his ten months of effort at writing this single, long tale.

There was a typed note.

Dear Mr. Simmons:

My mother, Lydia Durbage, passed away this April. She was 71 years old. In going through her things, I found this box. It had been sent to her

in 1992 by the nursing home where a distant relative of hers, a Mr. Jacob Perry, had lived his last years and where he died. Not really knowing and never having met her grand-uncle, it seems that my mother only glanced at the contents of the box, chose one or two items for sale at her weekly garage sale, and left the rest untouched. I don't believe she ever opened the notebooks I have included in this package.

On page one of the top notebook there was a note, not to my mother but evidently to a certain "Mary" who ran the assisted living facility in Delta, that asked that these notebooks and a certain Vest Pocket Kodak camera be sent to you. Your address was given, which was how I knew where to send this much-belated package.

If these items were something you anticipated receiving twenty years ago, I apologize for the delay. My mother was absent-minded, even in her middle years.

Since the notebooks were meant to be sent to you, I've decided not to read them. I did skim through and noticed that my mother's relative was an accomplished artist: the maps, drawings of mountains, and other sketches seem to be of professional quality.

Again, I apologize for the inadvertent and accidental delay that kept you from receiving this package in the timely manner that I'm sure Mr. Jacob Perry had hoped for.

Sincerely yours,
Richard A. Durbage, Jr.

I carried the box to my study and lifted out the stack of notebooks and began reading that afternoon and read straight through the night, finishing about nine the next morning.

After pondering his wishes for months, I've decided to publish two versions of Jacob Perry's final (and only) manuscript. In the end, I've decided that publication is what he would have wanted after spending the last ten months of his life laboring over the effort. I also believe it's why he chose me as his primary reader. He knew that I could judge whether a manuscript deserved publication or not. I believe with all my heart that Jacob Perry's manuscript—this book—does deserve that publication.

A second and very limited edition will show Mr. Perry's own hand-

writing and will include the scores of sketches, portrait drawings, carefully done maps, mountain landscapes, old photographs, and other elements that Mr. Perry had added to the text. This version will be of text alone. I think it succeeds in telling the story that Jacob Perry, 1902–1992, wanted me to hear. Wanted *us* to hear. As his editor, I've made only a few spelling corrections and added a very few explanatory notes to his text. I can only trust and hope that, in allowing me to be his first reader and editor, Mr. Perry understands my own hunger to allow others to read this strange and oddly beautiful testament.

I *do* think this is what he wanted.

I can only hope to God that it was.