



Good Morning, Midnight

Lily BROOKS-DALTON

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Présentation de l'éditeur

" Ainsi prend fin le monde, non dans une explosion, mais dans un murmure. " T. S. Eliot

Augustin, un brillant astronome, est en mission dans l'Arctique lorsque sa base est évacuée. Alors que les militaires rapatrient ses collègues, il refuse de quitter l'Observatoire. Quel que soit le danger, il veut finir ses jours ici, les yeux dans les étoiles. La rencontre avec une fillette de huit ans change ses plans : il doit reprendre contact avec le monde pour qu'elle soit sauvée. Mais toutes ses tentatives restent sans réponse...

Alors qu'une jeune astronaute, Sully, quitte Jupiter pour regagner la Terre avec son équipage, elle perd tout contact avec Houston. Augustin capte son appel. Au fil des échanges, ils vont se découvrir et se rapprocher, malgré l'immense vide qui les sépare. Ensemble, ils affrontent leurs peurs et leur solitude, réfléchissent sur leurs choix passés et affrontent le futur qui les attend.

Extrait

One

When the sun finally returned to the Arctic Circle and stained the gray sky with blazing streaks of pink, Augustine was outside, waiting. He hadn't felt natural light on his face in months. The rosy glow spilled over the horizon and seeped into the icy blue of the tundra, casting indigo shadows across the snow. The dawn climbed like a wall of hungry fire, delicate pink deepening to orange, then crimson, consuming the thick layers of cloud one at a time until the entire sky was burning. He basked in its muted glow, his skin tingling. The overcast sky was unusual for the spring season. The observatory's site had been chosen for its clear weather, the thin polar atmosphere, and the elevation of the Cordillera Mountains. Augie left the concrete steps of the observatory and followed the path carved into the steep slope of the mountain—down to the cluster of outbuildings nestled against the mountain's incline, then beyond them. By the time he'd passed the last outbuilding the sun had already begun to sink, the color to fade. The day had come and gone in ten minutes—less, perhaps. Snow-covered peaks rolled all the way to the northern horizon. To the south, the low, smooth expanse of the tundra flowed into the distance. On his best days the blank canvas of the landscape set him at ease; on his worst he contemplated madness. The land did not care for him and there was nowhere else to go. He wasn't sure yet which sort of day today was.

In a different life he used to pack his soft leather suitcase whenever his environment rejected him, as it often did, and find another place to go. It wasn't even a very large suitcase, but it contained the essentials of his existence neatly, with a little room to spare. There was never a need for moving trucks, or bubble wrap, or farewell parties. When he decided to go, he was gone within the week. From a postgraduate fellowship in the Atacama Desert of northern Chile where he cut his teeth on dying stars, to South Africa, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, New Mexico, Australia—following the most advanced telescopes, the biggest satellite arrays, like bread crumbs scattered across the globe. The less earthly interference there was, the better. It had always been this way for Augustine.

Continents and countries meant nothing to him; it was only the sky that moved him, the happenings on the other side of the atmospheric window. His work ethic was strong, his ego engorged, his results groundbreaking, but he wasn't satisfied. He had never been satisfied and never would be. It wasn't success he craved, or even fame, it was history: he wanted to crack the universe open like a ripe watermelon, to arrange the mess of pulpy seeds before his dumbfounded colleagues. He wanted to take the dripping red fruit in his hands and quantify the guts of infinity, to look back into the dawn of time and glimpse the very

beginning. He wanted to be remembered.

Yet here he was, seventy--eight years old, at the top of the Arctic archipelago, on the rind of civilization—and, having come to the terminus of his life's work, all he could do was stare into the bleak face of his own ignorance.

The Barbeau Observatory was built as an extension of the mountain. The blunt fist of the telescope's dome rose defiantly higher than anything else for miles, surveying the rest of the mountain range like a warden. There was an airstrip and a hangar about a kilometer south, where the tundra had been packed and smoothed by a bulldozer airlifted from Greenland, marked with reflective orange flags and lined with lights that didn't work anymore. The hangar was empty, the strip neglected. The last planes to use them had come to collect the researchers from the outpost, and the last news from civilization, over a year ago, had been of war. The outpost was stocked to last a dozen researchers for nine months: barrels of fuel, nonperishable food, purified water, medical supplies, guns and fishing gear, cross--country skis and crampons and climbing ropes. There was more research equipment than Augie could use, more incoming data than he could process in a dozen lifetimes. He was more or less content with the way things were. The observatory was the focal point of the outpost, in the center of the scattered dorms, storage units, and rec buildings. Its structure was the most permanent thing about the base—after all, the massive telescope it housed was the reason everything else was there. The outbuildings that surrounded the observatory were hardly buildings at all, more like weatherproof tents for eating, drinking, sleeping, and storage. Barbeau's standard research fellowship lasted between six and nine months, but Augustine had stayed for almost two years before the evacuation. Now it was nearly three years that he'd been here. The program drew a collection of young, bold men, often fresh out of their PhD programs, impatient to shrug off the close quarters of academia, at least for a while, before they let it encircle them for good. Augustine had despised these bookbound researchers, all theory and little or no practical skill. Then again, he would have been hard-pressed to name someone he didn't despise.

Squinting at the horizon, he could just make out the sinking orb of the sun through the thick cloud cover, sliced in half by the jagged outline of the Cordillera Mountains. It was a little past noon, in late March. Polar night had finally passed over this desolate patch of earth, and now the day would gradually return. It would begin slowly, a few hours of light at a time, peeking over the skyline. But soon enough the midnight sun would rise and the stars would fade. By the end of summer's brightness he would welcome the twilight days of autumn, then the blue--black of winter, but for now he couldn't imagine a more comforting view than the melted outline of the sun, roosting close to the horizon, its light spilling down onto the low--lying tundra. In Michigan, where Augustine had grown up, winter came softly: the powder of the first snow, the pillowy drifts, icicles that grew long and sharp, then began to *drip drip pour* into a gush of spring. Here, everything was hard. Bleak. As unforgiving as the edge of a diamond, with great shelves of ice that never melted and the ground that never thawed. As the remaining light faded from the noon sky, he watched a polar bear lope across one of the mountain ridges, heading toward the sea to hunt. Augie wished he could climb into its thick skin and sew it shut behind him. He imagined what it would feel like: looking down a long snout at paws the size of serving platters, rolling onto his back and feeling a thousand pounds of muscle and fat and fur press into the frozen ground. Pulling a ringed seal from its breathing hole and killing it with one powerful swipe, burying his teeth in its flesh, ripping away steaming chunks of blubber and then falling asleep in a clean, white snowdrift: sated. No thoughts—just instincts. Just hunger and sleepiness. And desire, if it was the right time of year, but never love, never guilt, never hope. An animal built for survival, not reflection. The idea almost made him smile, but Augustine was not in the habit of bending his mouth in that direction. He didn't understand love any better than the bear did. He never had. In the past, he'd felt the nibble of a lesser emotion—shame or regret or resentment or envy—but whenever that happened, he would turn his gaze to the sky and let awe wash it away. Only the cosmos inspired great feeling in him. Perhaps what he felt was love, but he'd never consciously named it. His was an all--consuming one--directional romance with the emptiness and the fullness of the entire universe. There was no room to spare, no time to waste on a lesser

lover. He preferred it that way.

The closest he'd ever come to letting his adoration rest on human shoulders was a long time ago. He was in his thirties when he impregnated a beautiful woman with a razor--sharp mind at the research facility in Socorro, New Mexico. She was another scientist, a PhD candidate finishing her dissertation, and the first time he met her, Augustine thought she was extraordinary. He'd felt a warm spark for the idea of their baby when she told him the news, like the flicker of a newborn star six billion light-years away. Tangible, beautiful, but already dying by the time it reached him, an afterglow. It wasn't enough. He tried to persuade the woman to have an abortion, and he left the hemisphere when she refused. He kept to the other side of the equator for years, unable to bear the proximity of a child he didn't have the capacity to love. Time passed, and he eventually troubled himself to learn the child's name, her birthday. He sent an expensive amateur telescope when she turned five, a celestial sphere when she turned six, a signed first edition of *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan when she turned seven. He forgot her birthday the next year, but sent more books, advanced tomes on practical astronomy, for her ninth and tenth. Then he lost track of her—of them both. The chunk of moon rock intended for her next birthday, which he'd finagled from the geology department at one of his many research posts, was returned to him labeled *Invalid Address*. He shrugged it off and decided not to go looking again. This game with the gifts had been unwise, a sentimental stutter in an otherwise logical life. After that, he thought of the extraordinary woman and her child rarely, and eventually he forgot them altogether.

The polar bear ambled down the other side of the mountain and was lost to view, swallowed by the snow. Augie slouched deeper into the hood of his parka, cinching the drawstrings tighter around his neck. A frigid wind blasted through him. He closed his eyes, felt the crisp frost in his nostrils, the numb shuffle of his toes deep inside wool socks and heavy boots. His hair and beard had turned white thirty years ago, but a sprinkling of black hairs across his chin and neck persisted, as if he'd left the job of aging half--finished and moved on to another project. He had been old for years now, closer to death than to birth, unable to walk as far or stand as long as he used to, but that winter in particular he'd begun to feel very old. Ancient. As though he was beginning to shrink, his spine slowly curling in on itself, his bones huddling closer together. He began to lose track of time, which wasn't unusual in the endless dark of winter, but also of his own thoughts. He would come to, as though from a dream, uncertain what he'd been thinking a moment ago, where he'd been walking, what he'd been doing. He tried to imagine what would become of Iris when he was gone. Then he stopped himself. Instead, he tried not to care.

When he returned to the control tower the color in the sky had faded to a deep twilight blue. He shouldered open the heavy steel door with enormous effort. It was more difficult than it had been last year. With each season that passed, his body seemed more breakable. The wind slammed the door behind him. To save fuel he heated only the top floor of the observatory: one long room, where he kept all of his most prized instruments, and where he and Iris slept. A few comforts from the lower floors and the outbuildings had been relocated there: two induction hot plates, a nest made of sleeping bags and lumpy single mattresses, a scant assortment of dishes and pans and cutlery, an electric kettle. Augie had to rest on each step as he climbed. When he reached the third floor, he shut the stairwell door behind him to keep in the warmth. He shed his winter layers slowly, hanging every piece from a long row of hooks on the wall. Too many hooks for one man. He gave each mitten its own peg, unwrapped his scarf and hung that too, spreading his clothes along the coat rack. Perhaps this was to make the room seem less empty—filling the space around him with traces of himself so that the howling loneliness wasn't quite so obvious. A few flannels hung at the other end, a pair of long johns, some thick sweaters. He struggled with the toggles on his parka, then with the zipper. Hung that up too.

Iris was nowhere in sight. She spoke rarely, though she hummed quietly on occasion, melodies of her own composition that seemed to rise and fall with the sound of the wind against the dome above them: the environmental orchestra. He paused and listened for her, but there was nothing. More often than not, Augustine didn't see her because she wasn't moving, and so he scanned the room carefully, watching for the

subtle blink of an eye, listening for the slight sound of her breath. It was just the two of them at the observatory, and the telescope, and the tundra. The last of the civilian researchers had been flown back to the nearest military base almost a year ago, and from there had returned to wherever they belonged so that they might rejoin their families. Something catastrophic was happening in the outside world, but that was all anyone would say. The other researchers didn't question their rescuers—they packed in a hurry and did what the evac team told them to do, but Augustine didn't want to leave.

The Air Force unit that had arrived to transport the scientists home gathered everyone in the director's office before they started packing up the base. The captain read out the names of all the researchers and gave them instructions on when and how to board the Herc waiting on the runway.

"I won't be going," Augustine said when his name was called. One of the military personnel laughed. There were a few sighs from the scientists. No one took him seriously at first. But Augustine had no intention of budging. He wasn't going to be herded onto the plane like livestock—his work was here. His life was here. He would manage just fine without the others, and he would leave when he was good and ready.

"There won't be a return trip, sir," the captain said, already impatient. "Anyone left on this base will be marooned. You either come with us now, or you don't come at all."

"I understand," Augustine said. "And I'm not going."

The captain searched Augustine's face and saw only a crazy old man, crazy enough to mean what he was saying. He had the look of a wild animal: bared teeth, bristling facial hair, and an unblinking stare. The captain had too much to do as it was and no time for reasoning with the unreasonable. Too many other people to worry about, too much equipment to transport, not enough time. He ignored Augustine and finished the meeting, but as the other researchers disbanded, hurrying off to pack their things, the captain pulled him aside.

"Mr. Lofthouse," he said, his voice level but unmistakably hostile. "This is a mistake. I'm not going to force an old man onto an airplane, but believe you me, no one is kidding around about the consequences. There is no return trip."

"Captain," Augustine said, brushing the man's hand away from where it rested on his arm, "I understand. Now back the fuck off."

The captain shook his head and watched as Augustine stalked away, slamming the door to the director's office. Augie retreated to the top floor of the observatory and stood at the south-facing windows. Below, the other scientists scurried between tents and outbuildings, hauling packs and suitcases, their arms full of books and equipment and keepsakes. A few heavily loaded snowmobiles sped up and down the mountain to the hangar, and as Augie watched, the scientists began to trickle down to the runway until he was alone.

The plane rose from between the folds of the tundra where the hangar was nestled, just out of sight, and Augustine watched it disappear into the pale sky, the rumble of its engine fading into the moaning wind. He kept his post at the window for a long time, letting the loneliness of his situation settle into his consciousness. Eventually he turned his back on the window and surveyed the control room. He began pushing the remains of his colleagues' work to the side, readjusting the space to accommodate him and only him. The captain's words, "There will be no return trip," echoed in the sudden quiet. He tried to swallow the reality of that, to understand what it really meant, but the idea was a little too final, a little too drastic, to sit with for very long. The truth was that Augustine had no one to return to. At least here he didn't need to be reminded of it.

It was a day or two later that he found Iris—hiding out in one of the empty dormitories, curled up on a bare bottom-bunk mattress, left behind like a forgotten piece of luggage. He squinted at her for a while, unsure of his own eyes. She was small, maybe eight years old—Augie wasn't sure—with dark, almost black hair that fell to her narrow shoulders in a tangled mass. She had round hazel eyes that seemed to be looking everywhere at once, and there was an alert stillness about her, like a wary animal. She was so still, in fact, he could almost imagine that she was a trick of the light, but then she moved and the metal frame of the bunk groaned beneath her. Augustine massaged his temples.

"You've got to be kidding," he said to no one. "Come on, then." He turned to go and beckoned her with a

flick of his hand. She didn't speak, just followed him back to the control room. He tossed her a bag of dried fruit and nuts while he heated a pot of water, and she ate the whole thing. He made her a packet of instant oatmeal and she ate that too.

"This is ridiculous," he said to no one. Still she was silent. He handed her a book and she flipped through the pages—whether she was reading it, he couldn't tell. Augustine busied himself with his work and tried to ignore the inexplicable, inconvenient presence of a little girl he couldn't remember ever seeing before. She would be missed, of course—someone would be back to collect her any minute. Surely it was only the commotion of the exodus, a crossing of wires, that had resulted in her being left behind: "I thought she was with you," "Well, I thought she was with *you*." But evening fell and no one returned. The following day, he radioed the Alert military base, the northernmost year--round settlement on Ellesmere Island. There was no answer. He scanned the other frequencies—all of them—and as he flipped through the bands a surge of dread washed over him. The amateur waves were silent; the emergency communication satellites hummed an empty tune; even the military aviation channels were mute. It was as if there were no radio transmitters left in the world, or perhaps no souls to use them. He kept scanning. There was nothing. Only static. He told himself it was a glitch. A storm. He would try again tomorrow.

But the girl—he didn't know what to do with her. When he asked her questions she stared at him with detached curiosity, as if she were on the other side of a soundproof window. As if she were empty: a hollow girl with wild hair and solemn eyes and no voice. He treated her like a pet because he didn't know what else to do—with clumsy kindness, but as a specimen of a different species. He fed her when he fed himself. Talked to her when he felt like talking. Took her for walks. Gave her things to play with or look at: a walkie-talkie, a constellation map, a musty sachet of potpourri he'd found in an empty drawer, an Arctic field guide. He did his best, which he knew wasn't very good, but—she didn't belong to him and he wasn't the sort of man who adopted strays.

That dark afternoon, just after the sun had risen and then sunk once more, Augustine looked for her in all the usual places: buried beneath the sleeping bags like a lazy cat; twirling in one of the wheeled chairs; sitting at the table, prodding the insides of a broken DVD player with a screwdriver; gazing out the thick, dirty pane of glass at the never--ending Cordillera Mountains. She was nowhere to be seen, but Augustine wasn't worried. Sometimes she hid, but she never wandered far without him and she always revealed herself before too long. He let her keep her hiding places, her secrets. There were no dolls, no picture books, no swing sets, nothing she could call her own. It was only fair. And besides, he reminded himself, he didn't really care.

During the long polar night, after several weeks of total darkness and nearly two months after the evacuation, Iris broke her silence to ask Augustine a question.

"How long till morning?" she said.

It was the first time he'd heard her make a sound, other than the eerie humming he'd grown accustomed to—that aria of long, trembling notes deep in her throat as she looked out the control tower windows, as if she were narrating the subtle movements of their barren landscape in another tongue. When she finally did speak that day, her voice came out in a throaty whisper. It was deeper than he expected, and more confident. He had begun to wonder if she was capable of speech, or if perhaps she spoke another language, but those first words fell easily from her mouth, enunciated in an American, or perhaps a Canadian, accent.

"We're about halfway there," he told her, with no indication that she'd done anything unusual, and she nodded, similarly unsurprised. She continued to chew the jerky they were eating for dinner, holding the strip of meat with both hands and ripping away a mouthful like a baby carnivore just learning to use her teeth. He passed her a bottle of water and began thinking of all the questions he had for her, only to realize he actually had very few. He asked her name.

"Iris," she said, without turning away from the darkened window.

"That's pretty," he remarked, and she frowned at her reflection on the glass. Wasn't that something he used to say to lovely young women? Didn't they usually like hearing it?

"Who are your parents?" he ventured after a moment, a question he had of course already asked and couldn't

help asking again. Maybe he would finally solve the mystery of her presence here and figure out which of the other researchers she belonged to. She kept her gaze on the window, chewing. She didn't speak any more that day, or the next.

As time wore on, Augustine began to appreciate her silence. She was an intelligent creature, and he valued intelligence above everything else. He thought of his morbid rants in the beginning, just after he'd found her, when he was still scanning the RF bands and hoping someone would return for her, would emerge from the desolate silence to scoop her up and leave him in peace. Even then, while he'd been spinning through the hows and whys—the bands were empty, she was here, etc.—she had simply accepted the reality at hand and begun to acclimate. His irritation with her presence and then with her silence faded. A kernel of admiration took root and he let his unanswered questions go. While the long night blanketed their mountaintop, the only question that mattered was the one she'd asked: how long would this darkness last.

“What would you think if I told you that star was actually a planet?” his mother had asked him once, pointing up at the sky. “Would you believe me?” He'd answered eagerly, yes, yes he'd believe her, and she told him he was a good boy, a smart boy, because that burning white dot, just above the rooftops, was Jupiter.

Augustine had adored her when he was young, before he began to understand that she wasn't like the other mothers on his street. He was caught up with her excitement and brought down by her sadness—following her moods with fervent loyalty, like an eager dog. He closed his eyes and saw her frizzy brown hair shot with strands of gray, the sloppy line of her burgundy lipstick, applied without a mirror, the awestruck glow in her eyes as she pointed toward the brightest star, hovering above their Michigan neighborhood.

If that good, smart boy had found himself in this inhospitable place, alone except for an ancient, unfamiliar caretaker, he might have cried or screamed or stamped his feet. Augustine had never been a particularly brave child. He might have made a halfhearted attempt to run away—gathered some supplies and marched off into the desolate distance, headed for home, only to return in a few hours. And if little Augie had been told there was no home for him to return to, no mother to soothe his tantrum, no one else in the world left for him, what would he have done then?

Augustine considered his young companion carefully. Now, in his old age, he was trapped in memories. He never used to think of the past, but somehow the tundra brought it all back to him—experiences he thought he'd left behind long ago. He recalled the tropical observatories he'd worked in, women he'd held in his arms, papers he'd written, speeches he'd given. There had been a time when his lectures drew hundreds of people. Afterward, there would be a cluster of admirers waiting around to ask him for his autograph—*his autograph!* His accomplishments haunted him, specters of sex and triumph and discovery, all the things that had seemed so meaningful at the time. None of it mattered anymore. The world beyond the observatory was quiet, empty. The women were probably dead, the papers burned to ash, the auditoriums and observatories in ruins. He had always imagined his discoveries being taught in universities after he was gone, written about by generations of scholars not yet born. He'd imagined that what he left behind would endure for centuries. In this way his own mortality had seemed inconsequential.

He wondered if Iris thought about her earlier life. If she missed it. If she understood that it was gone. A house somewhere, maybe a brother or a sister, maybe both. Parents. Friends. School. He wondered what she missed the most. Toward the end of the long night they walked around the perimeter of the outpost together, shuffling through a layer of new powder that swirled on top of the hard--packed snow. A low moon lit their path. They were both wrapped in their warmest clothes, bundled into the thick folds of their parkas like snails in their shells. The scarf tied across her nose and mouth hid Iris's expression. Icicles had formed on Augustine's eyebrows and eyelashes, framing his view with a glittering blur. Iris stopped in her tracks suddenly and pointed an oversized mitten up at the sky, directly above their heads, where the North Star glimmered. He followed her gaze.

“Polaris,” she said, her voice muffled by the fabric.

He nodded, but she had already moved on. It wasn't a question; it was a statement. After a moment he joined

her. For the first time, he was truly glad of her company.

The work had seemed so important when Augie chose to stay behind at the observatory—keeping track of the data, logging the sequences of stars. After the exodus and the subsequent radio silence, he felt it was more vital than ever to continue observing, cataloging, cross--referencing. It was all that had stood between him and madness, a thin membrane of usefulness and importance. He struggled to keep his mind whirring in its accustomed track. The immensity of a civilization's end impressed upon his brain—a brain trained to absorb immensity—was almost too much for him. It was stranger and more colossal than anything he'd contemplated before. The demise of humanity. The erasure of his life's work. A recalibration of his own importance. He devoted himself instead to the cosmological data that continued rushing in from outer space. The world outside the observatory was silent, but the universe wasn't. In the beginning it was the technical upkeep of the telescope, the maintenance of the data archive programs, and the calm, indifferent anchor of Iris's presence that kept him from going mad. Iris seemed unaffected, easily lost in a book, a meal, the landscape. She was immune to his panic. Eventually he came to grips with the state of things and grew calmer. Accepted futility, then moved beyond it.

He paced himself—there was no deadline, no end in sight. The data was steady, unaffected. He reprogrammed the telescope's eye for his own curiosity and began to spend more time outdoors, wandering around the abandoned outpost buildings in the deep blue of the long night. He relocated everything he had use for to the top floor of the control building, one piece at a time. He dragged the mattresses through the snow, one by one, and up the stairs, one by one. Iris trailed behind him with a crate of cooking utensils. When he stopped for breath and looked back, he noticed that she carried it well. She was a strong little thing, and tough. Together they moved the essentials out of the dormitories and up to the third floor, where there were only desks, computers, and filing cabinets full of paper. They brought up stores of canned and freeze--dried food, bottled water, generator fuel, batteries. Iris pocketed a deck of playing cards. Augustine salvaged a sepia--tinted globe from one of the dorms and tucked it under his arm, the brass axis digging into his ribs through the thick down of his parka.

The third floor was plenty big for the two of them, but there was a shocking amount of clutter when they moved in: useless, anachronistic machines, outdated papers stating hypotheses that had long been disproved, dog--eared back issues of *Sky & Telescope*. Searching for an empty surface to display his new globe and finding none, Augustine set it on the floor, opened a heavy window with some difficulty, and unceremoniously shoved out an old, dusty computer monitor. Iris ran over from where she was plumping sleeping bags and regarded its remains below, a few dark pieces scattered across the bright snow, some still rolling down the mountain. She looked at him with a silent question in her eyes.

"Junk," Augie said, and set his sepia globe down in the space the monitor had occupied. It looked elegant there, a thing of beauty among the detritus of science. He would go out later, after the moon had risen, and collect the debris, but it felt good to send the monitor sailing out the window. A small release. He took the keyboard that went with it, the mouse cable coiled around it, and handed it to Iris. Without missing a beat, she threw it into the night like a Frisbee, and together they leaned their heads into the bitterly cold air and watched it disappear, spinning out into the dark.

After the sun returned, the two of them began walking down beyond the outbuildings to watch it rise and set. In the beginning this didn't take long. The sun would well up from beneath the horizon, casting a soft orange arc to herald its arrival, flooding the tundra with fiery pink, and as soon as it cleared the snowy peaks it would begin to sink again, sending sheets of violet and rose and cool blue into the sky like a pastel layer cake. In one of the nearby valleys, Augustine and Iris observed a herd of musk oxen returning daily, nuzzling the snow--covered ground. The grass they were eating was invisible from where he and Iris sat, but Augie knew it was there, strawlike stalks pushing up out of the snow, perhaps trapped just beneath it. The musk oxen were enormous, their shaggy coats riddled with thick dreadlocks that nearly brushed the ground. Their long, curved horns pointed skyward. They looked ancient, almost prehistoric—as if they'd been grazing

here long before humans had stood on two legs and would continue to graze long after the cities built by men and women crumbled back into the earth. Iris was transfixed by the herd. She persuaded Augustine to sit closer and closer as the days passed, tugging him silently forward.

After a while, when the sun had begun to linger in the sky for several hours at a time, Augustine considered the animals in a new context. He thought of the small armory at the observatory, the rack of shotguns he had never used. He thought of the taste of fresh meat after almost a year of timeless, tasteless food. He tried to picture himself butchering one of these woolly creatures, cutting away steaks and ribs, dissecting the organs and the bones from the meat, but even in his imagination he couldn't bear it. He was too squeamish, too weak to stomach the blood and the violence. But what about when their supplies waned—would he be able to bear it then?

He struggled to imagine Iris's future here, but it made him feel hopeless and useless and tired. And something else—angry. Angry that this responsibility had fallen to him, that he couldn't leave it behind or pass it off to someone else. Angry because he did care, despite his best efforts not to. The mess of survival was so distasteful. He preferred not to think about it. Instead he admired the gradual slope of the sun's path as it descended, then waited patiently as the stars emerged. A prick of silver, moving too quickly and shining too brightly to be a celestial body, rose from behind the mountains. Augie watched it climb forty degrees into the deepening blue. It took him a moment, but as it curved back down to the southwesterly skyline he realized it was the International Space Station, still orbiting, still reflecting the light of the sun down onto the darkened Earth. *Revue de presse*

Ambitious . . . Brooks-Dalton's prose lights up the page in great swathes, her dialogue sharp and insightful, and the high-concept plot drives a story of place, elusive love, and the inexorable yearning for human contact . . . Memorable characters explore complex questions that resonate with the urgency of a glimpse into the void (*Publishers Weekly*)

Beautiful descriptions create a sense of wonder and evoke feelings of desolation while Brooks-Dalton's heartfelt debut novel unfolds at a perfect pace as it asks readers what will be left when everything in the world is gone (*Booklist*)

What does it mean to be isolated from the ordinariness of the everyday world, yet to find the extraordinariness of being close to another human being? . . . Lily Brooks-Dalton takes us on an emotional journey in this beautiful debut (Yiyun Li, author of *THE VAGRANTS*)

A truly original novel, otherworldly and profoundly human . . . This beautiful story reminds us of our deep longing for connection—with those we love, with strangers, with ourselves (Keith Scribner)

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