Ice blue

Escape from your cells.

Paula R. Stiles

Doing the Antarctic cryosphere slides is addictive. I take one out and click it into my headset. It's from Lake Vostok, two miles under the ice at the bottom of the world. Instantly, I'm in blue darkness. I'm a tiny single-celled organism, made up of protoplasm and primitive cellular structures — nucleus, mitochondria, cytoplasm, cell wall. I extend the latter into a tentacle to explore turgid water and flakes of ice that feel like icebergs to my microscopic size. I give off a small glow that illuminates my surroundings. I see some other glows far off. Not sure if they're friend or foe, but I'm hungry, so I go after them.

"Jethro ... hey, Jethro, wake up."

Blinking automatically clicks me out of the slide. The slide ejects itself, sticking out of the side of my headset. I remove it and lay it on the table next to me. I look up at my labmate, Sandra, still blinking. My eyes feel dry.

"What?" I say. It takes time to gear up from a single-celled organism to one with too many cells to count.

"You all right?" Sandra asks.

"Sure, fine." I sit up and start typing my observations into my computer. You can plug a slide into a machine and get all the data, but the human brain is still the best way to filter that experience. One good thing about living on the Moon is that it makes it easier to feel as if you're under water. One-sixth of Earth gravity is like that. I undo my headset and gently push myself to my feet.

"You've been acting funny ever since those new slides came in from Antarctica. I have to tell you, Jethro, I'm a little worried."

"I don't see why. I'm just doing my job."

She shakes her head. As I look around, I try to see blues in the colour scheme of the lab. But everything is orange and pink, the better to keep us happy and energized. "It's more than a job for you," she says. "You're getting lost in there."

I shrug that off. "Would you rather I did an oxygen high or went outside without a spacesuit? Seems to me that doing my job

and enjoying it isn't the worst thing out there."

"Yes, but you're really hogging the slides." Now that I'm getting a closer look at her, she doesn't seem so much obsessed with the rules as something else. In fact, she looks downright pinched, like an oxygen addict. Oxygen is rationed here on the Moon. You have to pay for it and boy, is it expensive. The poor (the government likes to call them "more frugal") are chronically anoxic.

She glances towards the slide lying innocently on the table.

"What's ... it like?"

"You haven't tried it yet?"

She shakes her head. "No, I've got the Lake Baikal project." Too bad. That water is overloaded with ugly organisms and pollution — not much fun. "So, what's it like?"

"Blue. Quiet."

Her eyes glaze over. Oh, my, Sandra. Are you a solitude junkie, too? "That sounds ... nice."

"I'm not complaining." This is my cue to leave. Sandra's staring at that slide like a starving zoo lion at meat, but she's too shy to get acquainted with it until I'm safely gone.

"Anyway, I gotta get home. There's a new holo on tonight and I'm not sure my recorder's working..." This is a total lie. No holo out there can replace that cool blue. Still, share and share alike.

Sandra's attention is no longer on me; it's

on that slide. So much for worrying about my welfare. She's already sitting down and plugging it in as I slip out of the room.

The main office is a honeycomb of cubicles inhabited by plugged-in workers who look like termite grubs — all oblivious to me as I get into the elevator and head for the surface living quarters in the city. Moon buildings extend down, not up. The good thing about working in an office is that they circulate the air more regularly, to keep our efficiency up. It smells sharp and citrusy like air-conditioning chemicals, oxygen but not real air.

Earth is worse. Twenty billion people crawl across its face. Any remaining 'wilderness' hides underneath the ice of Antarctica and in the bottom of ocean trenches. I came to the Moon because I heard there was open space. They don't tell you that most of it isn't habitable, that you'll end up living in hives. Just like home.

I try to keep a bubble of ice-blue water in my head as I pass out into the main conduit of the city, a highway of people shoving, bumping, passing over each other. And the smell of stale air ... every belch, fart, cast-off skin flake, perfume, deodorant and hair oil.

I last about five minutes.

Back in the lab, Sandra is deep in Lake Vostok, eyes closed, head leaning back against her chair. We don't usually do it, except for team jobs, but you can 'share' a chip. I pull out the extra headset and plug in. Sandra won't like the intrusion, but she'll get over it. I need me some ice.

The water in the lake isn't water, exactly — more like fluid ice, warmed by the weight of two miles of continental ice sheet and geothermal heat from Earth's mantle. I oscillate to increase my bioluminescence. In the distance, I sense another organism, its pseudopod probing the icy lake ceiling. It senses me as well. Pausing, the organism waves its pseudopod at me in a human gesture no one-celled organism would make — Sandra. I wave back.

We go in opposite directions in the dark.

Paula Stiles has sold SF, fantasy and horror stories to *Strange Horizons* and *Writers of the Future* among others. Her online home is www.geocities.com/rpcv.geo/other.html.

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