The Ice Man

By

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I married the Ice Man.

I first met the Ice Man at this ski resort hotel. I guess that’s the kind of place one ought to meet an Ice Man. In the boisterous hotel lobby, crowded with young people, the Ice Man was sitting in a chair at the furthest possible remove from the fireplace, silently reading a book. Though it was approaching high noon, it seemed to me that the cool, fresh light of the winter morning still lingered around him. Hey, that’s the Ice Man, my friend informed me in a low voice. But at that time, I had no idea what in the world an Ice Man was. My friend didn’t really know, either. She just knew that he existed and was called the Ice Man. She’s sure he’s made out of ice. That’s why he’s called the Ice Man, she said to me with a serious expression. It was like she was talking about a ghost or somebody with a contagious disease or something.

The Ice Man was tall, and from looking at him, his hair seemed bristly. When I saw his face, he looked fairly young still, but that thick, wiry hair was white, like it had been mixed with melted snow. He had high cheek-bones that appeared to have been chiseled out of cold, hard rock, and there was a slight coating of unmelted white frost on his fingers, but other than that the Ice Man’s appearance wasn’t much different from a normal person. While he probably couldn’t have been called handsome, there was undeniably something charming in his bearing. There are some people that just jab you sharply in the heart. It was especially this way with him, so he really stood out. He had a shy, transparent look, like an icicle on a winter morning. There was something in the way his body was put together that made his whole being seem to sparkle. I stood there for a moment and gazed at the Ice Man from afar. But the Ice Man didn’t lift his face from his book even once. Without moving so much as a muscle, he continued reading. It was as if he was trying to persuade himself that there wasn’t anybody at all around him.

The next day, the Ice Man was in the same place, reading a book exactly the same way. When I went to the cafeteria to get lunch, and again when I came back in the evening from skiing with everybody else, he was sitting in the same chair as the day before, pouring over the top of a page of the same book with the same expression on his face. And the next day was the same. The day passed, the night grew late, and he sat there as quietly as the winter outside the window, reading his book alone.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, I fashioned an appropriate excuse and didn’t go out to the slopes. Staying behind alone in the hotel, I wandered around the lobby for a while. Since everyone had gone out for an afternoon skiing, the lobby was deserted like a ghost town. The air in the lobby was unnecessarily warm and moist, and there was a strange, dank smell mixed in with it. It was the smell of people tracking snow into the hotel on the bottom of their boots and then carelessly sitting by the fireplace, where it slowly melted off. I stared vacantly out the various windows, and flipped through the newspaper. Then, bravely walking up to the Ice Man, I boldly started a conversation. I’m normally a very shy person, and not at all in the habit of talking to total strangers. But at that time, I really wanted to talk to the Ice Man, no matter what. It was our last night in that hotel, and I thought that if I let it slip away, I might never have another chance to talk to an Ice Man.

Don’t you ski? I asked the Ice Man, trying to sound as casual as possible. He slowly raised his head. He had an expression on his face like he could a hear the sound of wind blowing from incredibly far away. He looked at my face with eyes like that. He silently shook his head. I don’t ski. I’m fine just reading a book and watching the snow fall, he said. His words made little white clouds in the air, like when you breathe on a TV screen. I could literally see his words with my own eyes. He gently brushed off the frost that had accumulated on his fingers.

I didn’t know what to say after that. I just stood there blushing. The Ice Man looked in my eyes. Then he seemed to smile a little. But I wasn’t really sure. Did he really smile? Or was it just a feeling? Won’t you sit down? the Ice Man said. Let’s have a little conversation. You’re curious about me, right? You want to know what an Ice Man is, right? Then he really did laugh a little. It’s OK. There’s nothing to worry about. You won’t catch a cold or anything talking to me.

This is how I came to talk to the Ice Man. Sitting side-by-side on the sofa in the corner of the lobby, watching the snow flakes dance on the other side of the window, our conversation proceeded haltingly. I ordered some cocoa and drank it. The Ice Man didn’t have anything. He was just as bad a conversationalist as me. In addition, we didn’t really have anything in common to talk about. At first, we talked about the weather. Then, how cozy the hotel was. Did you come here alone? I asked the Ice Man. Yes, the Ice Man replied. The Ice Man asked me whether I liked to ski. Not really, I responded. My girlfriends invited me to go skiing with them for some reason, but I’m not very good at it. I really wanted to know what kind of thing the Ice Man was: whether he was really made out of ice or not; what he ate; where he spent the summer; whether he had a family–that type of thing. But the Ice Man didn’t seem to want to talk about himself. I didn’t dare to broach the subject either. He probably just doesn’t like to talk about stuff like that, I thought.

Instead, we talked about me as a human being. I really couldn’t believe it, but, for whatever reason, the Ice Man knew all kinds of things about me: the make up of my family, my age, my hobbies, my health, the school I attended, the friends I hung out with–he knew it all from beginning to end. He knew things about me that had happened so long ago that I had forgotten about them.

I don’t understand, I said, blushing. I had this feeling like I was naked in public. How do you know so much about me? I asked. Can you read people’s minds?

No, it is not possible for me to read people’s minds. But I know. I just know, he said. It’s just like seeing something frozen in ice. So, when I looked at you, I could see all kinds of things about you clearly.

Can you see my future? I asked.

I can’t see the future, the Ice Man said expressionlessly. And he shook his head slowly. I’m not interested in the future at all. To speak more precisely, I have no concept of the future. Ice has no future. It just captures the past. It captures everything just as it was in life, fresh, and preserves it that way. Ice can preserve all kinds of things in this way. Totally freshly, totally clearly. Just as it is. That’s the purpose of ice, it’s true quality.

Good, I said. I laughed a little. I’m relieved to hear it. I don’t want to know anything about my future.

After we had returned to Tokyo, we got together frequently. Eventually, we were going out on dates nearly every weekend. But we didn’t go out to movies together, or to coffee shops. We didn’t even have dinner. We’d always go to parks together, sit on a bench, and talk about stuff. We really talked about a lot of different stuff. But as always, the Ice Man wouldn’t say anything about himself. Why is that? I asked him. How come you never talk about yourself? I want to know more about you–where you were born, what kind of people your parents were, and how you got to be an Ice Man. The Ice Man looked at my face for a moment. Then he slowly shook his head. I don’t know either, the Ice Man said, his voice barely above a whisper. Then he exhaled a hard, white breath into the air. I don’t have a past. I know all things past. I preserve all things past. But I myself don’t have a past. I don’t know where I was born. I wouldn’t recognize my parents if I saw them. I don’t even know whether or not I have parents. I don’t even know how old I am. I don’t even know whether I have an age or not. The Ice Man was as isolated as an iceberg in the mist.

And gradually I came to love the Ice Man very deeply. Having no past and no future, he loved just the me of the present. And I loved just the present Ice Man, without a past and without a future. This seemed a splendid thing to me. We even began to speak of marriage. I had just turned twenty years old. And the Ice Man was the first person to inspire such feelings in me. I couldn’t imagine then what in the world it meant to love the Ice Man. But if, hypothetically, the Ice Man hadn’t been my partner, but someone else instead, I wouldn’t have known anything then either, I guess.

My mother and my sister were strongly opposed to me marrying the Ice Man. You’re too young to get married, they said. You don’t even know clearly what kind of person he is, or what his family is like. Or where he was born, or when. As your family, we can’t consent to you marrying such a person. And, besides, he’s an Ice Man. What happens if he melts? they said. I know you don’t really understand it, but marriage is a big responsibility. Do you really think that you’re capable of the responsibility of marrying this Ice Man?

But their fears were needless. It wasn’t like the Ice Man was actually made out of ice. He was just cool like ice. He doesn’t melt if he gets too warm. That chilliness really was like ice, but his body was different from ice. And while he was incredibly cold, it wasn’t the kind of coldness that robs other people of their body heat.

So we got married. No one celebrated our wedding, though. Not my friends, or my parents, or my sisters: no one was happy about it. We didn’t have a ceremony. Since the Ice Man didn’t have a family register, we didn’t even apply for a marriage license. We just jointly decided that we were married. We bought a small cake and ate it together. That was the extent of our meager wedding. We rented a little apartment, and the Ice Man got a job at a meat storehouse to cover our expenses. He liked the cold a lot, and no matter how hard he worked, he never got tired. He didn’t even stop much to eat. Naturally, he quickly caught the boss’s eye, and was rewarded with a higher salary than anybody else. We didn’t bother anybody and nobody bothered us; and we had a quiet, happy life together.

Whenever the Ice Man embraced me, I always thought of this quiet, still iceberg that existed in some far off place. I thought that the Ice Man probably knew where that iceberg was. The ice was hard, harder than anything I could think of. It was the biggest iceberg in the world. But it was in some incredibly far away place. He was telling the secret of that ice to the world. At first, the Ice Man’s embraces made me feel disoriented, but after a while I got used to it. I even came to love it. As always, he didn’t talk about himself at all. Not even why he became the Ice Man. And I didn’t ask anything. Embracing in the silence, we shared that huge, still iceberg. The entirety of past events of the whole world for billions of years was stored pristinely, just as it was, inside that ice.

In our married life, there weren’t really any problems that could properly be called problems. We loved each other deeply, and nothing impeded that. While the neighbors seemed as if they were quite unfamiliar with the existence of Ice Men, as time passed, little by little they began to talk to him. Even though he’s an Ice Man, he’s no different than anybody else, they came to say. But in the depths of their hearts they never really accepted him, and so they never really accepted that I was married to him. We were a different type of human being from them, and no matter how much time passed, that chasm could never be filled.

The two of us were unable to have children. Perhaps the result of mixing human and Ice Man genes was problematic. In any event, since we didn’t have any children, I had an abundance of free time. I’d take care of the house work fairly quickly in the morning, but after that there was nothing to do. I didn’t have any friends to talk to, or to go somewhere with, and I didn’t have much to do with the neighbors. My mother and sisters, still mad that I had married the Ice Man, weren’t speaking to me. They were ashamed of my household. There wasn’t even anyone to call on the telephone. While the Ice Man was working at the storehouse, I stayed at home all alone, reading books or listening to music. I generally prefer staying at home to going out anyway, and I’m not the kind of person for whom being alone is a trial. But in spite of this, I was still young, and the endless daily repetition without any variation began to get me down. It wasn’t the boredom that got to me. The thing I couldn’t bear was the repetition. In the midst of that endless repetition, I felt kind of like my own shadow.

So one day, I made a proposal to my husband. Why don’t we go on a trip together somewhere, for a change of pace. Trip? he said. He narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. Why in the world should we take a trip? Aren’t you happy living here with me?

It’s not that, I said. I’m perfectly happy. There are no problems between us. It’s just that I’m bored. I want to go somewhere far away and see things I’ve never seen before. I want to breath air I’ve never breathed before. Do you understand? And anyway, we never went on a honeymoon. We have plenty of money in the bank, and taking a few days off shouldn’t be a problem. I just think a relaxing trip somewhere would be nice.

The Ice Man heaved a deep, frozen sigh. The sigh made a crisp sound as the air crystallized. He brought his long, frost-covered fingers together on his knee. I guess so. If you want to go on a trip so badly, I’m not particularly opposed to it. I don’t think it’s such a good idea to take a trip, but if it will make you happy, I’ll do whatever you want, go wherever you want to go. Taking a vacation should be OK since I always work really hard when I’m there. I don’t think there will be any problem. But where do you want to go?

How about the South Pole? I ventured. I chose the South Pole because I thought the Ice Man would be interested in a cold place. And besides, I’ve always wanted to go to the South Pole sometime. I wanted to see the Northern Lights, and penguins. I imagined myself wearing a fur coat with an attached hood, playing with a flock of penguins under a sky lit up by the aurora borealis.

When I said this, my husband the Ice Man looked straight into my eyes. He didn’t blink even once. His gaze like sharp icicles, it pierced through my eyes to the back of my head. He pondered it silently for a moment, and finally said It’s fine, with a twinkle. Fine, if that’s what you want to do, we’ll go to the South Pole. That’s what you want to do?

I agreed.

In about two weeks I think I can take a long vacation. We can probably make all the preparations before then. Really, it won’t be a problem.

I couldn’t respond right away. When the Ice Man had looked at me with that icicle gaze, it had numbed the inside of my head.

However, with the passage of time, I came to regret that I had ever brought up the idea of going to the South Pole with my husband. I don’t know why this was so. Before the words ‘South Pole’ came out of my mouth, I had this feeling that something had changed in him. His gaze had become even sharper and more icicle-like than before; his breath had become even whiter than before; and even more frost accumulated on his fingers than before. He became even more stubborn and reticent. Now, he wasn’t eating anything at all. All of these things made me terribly uneasy. Five days before we were due to depart, I boldly made a proposal to my husband. Let’s call off the South Pole trip, I said. I’ve thought about it a little, and it’s so cold, it will probably be bad for me.

It just seems like it would be a better idea to go somewhere a little more normal. I bet Europe is really nice; why don’t we go to Spain instead? We could drink wine, and eat paella, and watch bullfights. But my husband didn’t respond. For a little while, he just stared at some place far away. Then he looked at my face. He peered deeply into my eyes. That look, was so deep that I felt as if my body, just as it was, had evaporated into nothing. No, I don’t want to go to Spain, my husband, the Ice Man, said plainly. I know it’s not fair to you, but Spain is too hot and dusty for me. And the food is too spicy. Anyway, we’ve already bought to tickets for the South Pole. We’ve already bought a fur coat for you, and a pair of fur-lined boots. We can’t afford to waste all that. At this point, we have to go.

The way he said it scared me. I had this sense of foreboding that, if we went to the South Pole, something would happen and we would lose something that we would never be able to recover. I had terrible nightmares over and over. It was the same dream each time. In the dream, I was taking a walk, and I fell in a deep hole in the ground, but no one discovered me and I ended up being frozen there. Trapped inside that ice, I could see the sky clearly. I was conscious, but I couldn’t move even a single finger. It was a terribly strange feeling. I understood as moment by moment the present changed into the past. I had no future. The past kept piling up irreversibly. And everyone kept staring at me. They were looking at the past. I was looking backwards at passing scenes.

And then I would wake up. The Ice Man was sleeping next to me. He slept without breathing at all. Just like he had died and frozen that way or something. But I loved the Ice Man. I’d start to cry. My tears would land on his cheek. Then he’d wake up and hold me in his arms. I had a bad dream, I’d say. He’d shake his head silently in the darkness. It was just a dream, he’d say. Dreams are things from the past. They aren’t from the future. That wasn’t you imprisoned there. You imprison your dreams. You understand?

Yeah, I’d say. But I wasn’t convinced.

Eventually, my husband and I boarded the plane for the South Pole. There just wasn’t a good enough reason to cancel it. The pilot and the stewardesses on the plane to the South Pole were all totally silent. I really wanted to look at the scenery outside the window, but the clouds were thick and I couldn’t see anything. After a while, they were completely covered with ice anyway. My husband just silently read a book all the while. I didn’t have the excitement or sense of anticipation that usually accompanies going on a trip. I was just going through a set of pre-determined motions.

When I first stepped off the gangway and onto the surface of the South Pole, I could feel my husband’s whole body tremble violently. It was quicker than a wink, maybe half the time that it takes to blink, so no one noticed; and my husband didn’t so much as bat an eyelash, but I couldn’t miss it. Something deep inside my husband’s body had shuddered violently, although in secret. He stopped there, looked at the sky, then stared at his hands, and finally took a deep breath. Then he looked me in the eye and beamed merrily. So, this is the land of your dreams, he said. Yeah, I said.

The gloominess of the South Pole exceeded even the worst of my premonitions. Almost no one lived there. There is just one little featureless town there. In the town, there is just one little featureless hotel. There are no sights to see. There aren’t even any penguins. You can’t see the Northern Lights. Occasionally, I’d set about trying to ask people where I might be able to see penguins, but they would just shake their heads silently. They couldn’t comprehend my speech. I would try to draw a picture of a penguin on a piece of paper. But of course, they would just shake their heads silently. I was all alone. If you took one step outside of town, there was nothing beyond but ice. There weren’t any trees; there weren’t any flowers; no rivers, no ponds, no nothing. Wherever you went, there was nothing but ice. Frozen wasteland stretched out as far as the eye could see in every direction.

And yet my husband, breathing his white breath, frost growing on his fingers, his eyes, as ever, glaring icicle-like, walked around from place to place vigorously, as if knowing no satiation. The native speech of that land quickly returned to him, and he had conversations with the people of the town, in a voice that rang as hard as ice. They talked together for hours at a time, with serious expressions on their faces. I couldn’t understand at all what in the world they were talking about so earnestly. My husband was completely delirious in that place. There was something there that entranced him. At first, this really irritated me. I felt as though I had been left behind by myself. I felt neglected and betrayed by my husband.

Eventually, though, I lost all of my strength, in the midst of that desert world, hemmed in by thick ice. Slowly, gradually. I even lost the power to be upset. It was like I had misplaced the compass of my senses. Direction vanished, time vanished, even my awareness of my own existence vanished. I don’t know when this process began or when it ended. I came to realize, though, that I was imprisoned all alone, senseless, in the midst of that world of ice, in the midst of that color-starved eternal winter. After my senses were almost all gone, I understood only this. My husband in the South Pole was not my former husband. It wasn’t that his behavior toward me had changed. He was as concerned about me as ever, and his speech was always kind. And I’m sure that he meant everything that he said. He was simply a different Ice Man than the one that I met at the ski lodge. But there wasn’t anyone there who I could ask about it. All of the South Poleans were friends with him, and besides, they couldn’t understand my speech. They all breathed their white breaths, frost grew on their faces, and they told their jokes, debated their debates, and sang their songs in South Pole-ese. I ended up locking myself in my room alone, staring blankly at the never-changing gray sky, and pouring over the impossibly complicated mystery of South Pole-ese grammar, even though I had no hope of ever mastering it.

There were no planes at the airstrip. After the plane that had brought us here promptly took off again, there hadn’t been even one single arrival. The runway had eventually become buried in a thick layer of ice. Just like my heart.

Winter has come, my husband said. It’s a very long winter. No planes will come, no ships will come. Everything is frozen. We’ll just have to wait here for the spring, he said.

After we had been in the South Pole for about three months, I realized that I was pregnant. I knew right away: the child to whom I would give birth was a little Ice Man. My uterus was covered with ice, and the amniotic fluid was mingled with slush. I could feel the chill growing in my abdomen. I just knew. The child would have his father’s icicle gaze, and frost would grow on his little fingers. And I just knew: our new family would never again leave the South Pole. Our feet would surely catch on the insensate mass of the eternal past. No matter how hard we tried, we would never shake it off.

Now, there is almost nothing left of my former self. My natural warmth has been displaced far, far away. Sometimes I forget that I ever even had it. And yet somehow I can still cry. I am truly alone. I am in a colder, lonelier place than anyone in the whole world. When I cry, the Ice Man kisses my cheek. His kisses turn my tears to ice. Then he takes these ice tears in his hand and sets them on his tongue. I love you, he says. It’s not a lie. I understand this well. The Ice Man loves me. But then, from some far-off place, a wind stirs and blows his white, frozen words away, away, into the past. I cry. Icy tears stream down my face. In our far away, frozen home at the South Pole.