

FICTION

ICE MAN

by HARUKI MURAKAMI

Issue of 2003-02-10

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I married an ice man. I first met him in a hotel at a ski resort, which is probably the perfect place to meet an ice man. The hotel lobby was crowded with animated young people, but the ice man was sitting by himself on a chair in the corner farthest from the fireplace, quietly reading a book. Although it was nearly noon, the clear, chilly light of an early-winter morning seemed to linger around him.

"Look, that's an ice man," my friend whispered.

At the time, though, I had absolutely no idea what an ice man was. My friend didn't, either. "He must be made of ice. That's why they call him an ice man." She said this to me with a serious expression, as if she were talking about a ghost or someone with a contagious disease.

The ice man was tall, and he seemed to be young, but his stubby, wirelike hair had patches of white in it, like pockets of unmelted snow. His cheekbones stood out sharply, like frozen stone, and his fingers were rimed with a white frost that looked as if it would never melt. Otherwise, though, the ice man seemed like an ordinary man. He wasn't what you'd call handsome, but you could see that he might be very attractive, depending on how you looked at him. In any case, something about him pierced me to the heart, and I felt this, more than anywhere, in his eyes. His gaze was as silent and transparent as the splinters of light that pass through icicles on a winter morning. It was like the single glint of life in an artificial body.

I stood there for a while and watched the ice man from a distance. He didn't look up. He just sat without moving, reading his book as though there were no one else around him.

The next morning, the ice man was in the same place again, reading a book in exactly the same way. When I went to the dining room for lunch, and when I came back from skiing with my friends that evening, he was still there, directing the same gaze onto the pages of the same book. The same thing happened the day after that. Even when the sun sank low, and the hour grew late, he sat in his chair, as quiet as the winter scene outside the window.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, I made up some excuse not to go out on the slopes. I stayed in the hotel by myself and loitered for a while in the lobby, which was as empty as a ghost town. The air there was warm and moist, and the room had a strangely dejected smell—the smell of snow that had been tracked in on the soles of people's shoes and was now melting in front of the fireplace. I

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looked out the windows, rustled through the pages of a newspaper or two, and then went over to the ice man, gathered my nerve, and spoke.

I tend to be shy with strangers and, unless I have a very good reason, I don't usually talk to people I don't know. But I felt compelled to talk to the ice man no matter what. It was my last night at the hotel, and if I let this chance go by I feared I would never get to talk with an ice man again.

"Don't you ski?" I asked him, as casually as I could.

He turned his face toward me slowly, as if he'd heard a noise in the distance, and he stared at me with those eyes. Then he calmly shook his head. "I don't ski," he said. "I just like to sit here and read and look at the snow." His words formed white clouds above him, like comic-strip captions. I could actually see the words in the air, until he rubbed them away with a frost-rimed finger.

I had no idea what to say next. I just blushed and stood there. The ice man looked into my eyes and seemed to smile slightly.

"Would you like to sit down?" he asked. "You're interested in me, aren't you? You want to know what an ice man is." Then he laughed. "Relax, there's nothing to worry about. You won't catch a cold just by talking to me."

We sat side by side on a sofa in the corner of the lobby and watched the snowflakes dance outside the window. I ordered a hot cocoa and drank it, but the ice man didn't drink anything. He didn't seem to be any better at conversation than I was. Not only that, but we didn't seem to have anything in common to talk about. At first, we talked about the weather. Then we talked about the hotel. "Are you here by yourself?" I asked the ice man. "Yes," he answered. He asked me if I liked skiing. "Not very much," I said. "I only came because my friends insisted. I actually rarely ski at all."

There were so many things I wanted to know. Was his body really made of ice? What did he eat?

Where did he live in the summer? Did he have a family? Things like that. But the ice man didn't talk about himself, and I held back from asking personal questions.

Instead, the ice man talked about me. I know it's hard to believe, but he somehow knew all about me. He knew about the members of my family; he knew my age, my likes and dislikes, the state of my health, the school I was attending, and the friends I was seeing. He even knew things that had happened to me so far in the past that I had long since forgotten them.

"I don't understand," I said, flustered. I felt as if I were naked in front of a stranger. "How do you know so much about me? Can you read people's minds?"

"No, I can't read minds or anything like that. I just know," the ice man said. "I just know. It's as if I were looking deep into ice, and, when I look at you like this, things about you become clearly visible to me."

I asked him, "Can you see my future?"

"I can't see the future," he said slowly. "I can't take any interest in the future at all. More precisely, I have no conception of a future. That's because ice has no future. All it has is the past enclosed within it. Ice is able to preserve things that way—very cleanly and distinctly and as vividly as 2 of 7

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though they were still alive. That's the essence of ice."

"That's nice," I said and smiled. "I'm relieved to hear that. After all, I don't really want to know what my future is."

We met again a number of times once we were back in the city. Eventually, we started dating. We didn't go to movies, though, or to coffee shops. We didn't even go to restaurants. The ice man rarely ate anything to speak of. Instead, we always sat on a bench in the park and talked about things—anything except the ice man himself.

"Why is that?" I asked him once. "Why don't you talk about yourself? I want to know more about you. Where were you born? What are your parents like? How did you happen to become an ice man?"

The ice man looked at me for a while, and then he shook his head. "I don't know," he said quietly and clearly, exhaling a puff of white words into the air. "I know the past of everything else. But I myself have no past. I don't know where I was born, or what my parents looked like. I don't even know if I had parents. I have no idea how old I am. I don't know if I have an age at all."

The ice man was as lonely as an iceberg in the dark night.

I fell seriously in love with this ice man. The ice man loved me just as I was—in the present, without any future. In turn, I loved the ice man just as he was—in the present, without any past. We even started to talk about getting married.

I had just turned twenty, and the ice man was the first person I had really loved. At the time, I couldn't begin to imagine what it meant to love an ice man. But even if I'd fallen in love with a normal man I doubt I'd have had a clearer idea of what love meant.

My mother and my older sister were strongly opposed to my marrying the ice man. "You're too young to get married," they said. "Besides, you don't know a thing about his background. You don't even know where he was born or when. How could we possibly tell our relatives that you're marrying someone like that? Plus, this is an ice man we're talking about, and what are you going to do if he suddenly melts away? You don't seem to understand that marriage requires a real commitment."

Their worries were unfounded, though. After all, an ice man isn't really made of ice. He isn't going to melt, no matter how warm it gets. He's called an ice man because his body is as cold as ice, but what he's made of is different from ice, and it's not the kind of cold that takes away other people's heat.

So we got married. Nobody blessed the wedding, and no friends or relatives were happy for us. We didn't hold a ceremony, and, when it came to having my name entered in his family register, well, the ice man didn't even have one. We just decided, the two of us, that we were married. We bought a 3 of 7

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little cake and ate it together, and that was our modest wedding.

We rented a tiny apartment, and the ice man made a living by working at a cold-storage meat facility.

He could take any amount of cold, and he never felt tired, no matter how hard he worked. So the ice man's employer liked him very much, and paid him a better salary than the other employees. The two of us lived a happy life together, without bothering or being bothered by anyone.

When the ice man made love to me, I saw in my mind a piece of ice that I was sure existed somewhere in quiet solitude. I thought that the ice man probably knew where that piece of ice was.

It was frozen hard, so hard that I thought nothing could be harder. It was the biggest piece of ice in the world. It was somewhere very far away, and the ice man was passing on the memories of that ice to me and to the world. At first, I felt confused when the ice man made love to me. But, after a while, I got used to it. I even started to love having sex with the ice man. In the night, we silently shared that enormous piece of ice, in which hundreds of millions of years—all the pasts of the world—were stored.

There were no problems to speak of in our married life. We loved each other deeply, and nothing came between us. We wanted to have a child, but that didn't seem to be possible. It may have been that human genes and ice-man genes didn't combine easily. In any case, it was partly because we didn't have children that I found myself with time on my hands. I would finish up all the housework in the morning, and then have nothing to do. I didn't have any friends to talk to or go out with, and I didn't have much to do with the people in our neighborhood, either. My

mother and sister were still angry with me for marrying the ice man and showed no sign of ever wanting to see me again. And although, as the months passed, the people around us started talking to him from time to time, deep in their hearts they still hadn't accepted the ice man or me, who had married him. We were different from them, and no amount of time could bridge the gap between us.

So, while the ice man was working, I stayed at home by myself, reading books and listening to music. I tend to prefer staying at home, anyway, and I don't especially mind being alone. But I was still young, and doing the same thing day after day eventually began to bother me. It wasn't the boredom that hurt. It was the repetition.

That was why I said to my husband one day, "How would it be if the two of us went away on a trip somewhere, just for a change?"

"A trip?" the ice man said. He narrowed his eyes and stared at me. "What on earth would we take a trip for? Aren't you happy being here with me?"

"It's not that," I said. "I am happy. But I'm bored. I feel like travelling somewhere far away and seeing things that I've never seen before. I want to see what it's like to breathe new air. Do you understand? Besides, we haven't even had our honeymoon yet. We have some savings, and you have plenty of vacation days coming to you. Isn't it about time that we got away somewhere and took it easy for a while?"

The ice man heaved a deep frozen sigh. It crystallized in midair with a ringing sound. He laced his 4 of 7

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long fingers together on his knees. "Well, if you really want to go on a trip so badly, I don't have anything against it. I'll go anywhere if it'll make you happy. But do you know where you want to go?"

"How about visiting the South Pole?" I said. I chose the South Pole because I was sure that the ice man would be interested in going somewhere cold. And, to be honest, I had always wanted to travel there. I wanted to wear a fur coat with a hood, and I wanted to see the aurora australis and a flock of penguins.

When I said this, my husband looked straight into my eyes, without blinking, and I felt as if a pointed icicle were piercing all the way through to the back of my head. He was silent for a while, and finally he said, in a glinting voice, "All right, if that's what you want, then let's go to the South Pole. You're really sure that this is what you want?"

I wasn't able to answer right away. The ice man's stare had been on me so long that the inside of my head felt numb. Then I nodded.

As time passed, though, I came to regret ever having brought up the idea of going to the South Pole. I don't know why, but it seemed that as soon as I spoke the words "South Pole" to my husband something changed inside him. His eyes became sharper, his breath came out whiter, and his fingers were frostier. He hardly talked to me anymore, and he stopped eating entirely. All of this made me feel very insecure.

Five days before we were supposed to leave, I got up my nerve and said, "Let's forget about going to the South Pole. When I think about it now, I realize that it's going to be terribly cold there, and it might not be good for our health. I'm starting to think that it might be better for us to go someplace more ordinary. How about Europe? Let's go have a real vacation in Spain. We can drink wine, eat paella, and see a bullfight or something."

But my husband paid no attention to what I was saying. He stared off into space for a few minutes.

Then he declared, "No, I don't particularly want to go to Spain. Spain is too hot for me. It's too dusty, and the food is too spicy. Besides, I've already bought tickets for the South Pole. And we've got a fur coat and fur-lined boots for

you. We can't let all that go to waste. Now that we've come this far, we can't not go."

The truth is that I was scared. I had a premonition that if we went to the South Pole something would happen to us that we might not be able to undo. I was having this bad dream over and over again. It was always the same. I'd be out taking a walk and I'd fall into a deep crevasse that had opened up in the ground. Nobody would find me, and I'd freeze down there. Shut up inside the ice, I'd stare up at the sky. I'd be conscious, but I wouldn't be able to move, not even a finger. I'd realize that moment by moment I was becoming the past. As people looked at me, at what I'd become, they were looking at the past. I was a scene moving backward, away from them.

Then I'd wake up and find the ice man sleeping beside me. He always slept without breathing, like a dead man.

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But I loved the ice man. I cried, and my tears dripped onto his cheek and he woke up and held me in his arms. "I had a bad dream," I told him.

"It was only a dream," he said. "Dreams come from the past, not the future. You aren't bound by them. The dreams are bound by you. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," I said, though I wasn't convinced.

I couldn't find a good reason to cancel the trip, so in the end my husband and I boarded a plane for the South Pole. The stewardesses were all taciturn. I wanted to look at the view out the window, but the clouds were so thick that I couldn't see anything. After a while, the window was covered with a layer of ice. My husband sat silently reading a book. I felt none of the excitement of heading off on a vacation. I was just going through the motions and doing things that had already been decided on.

When we went down the stairs and stepped off onto the ground of the South Pole, I felt my husband's body lurch. It lasted less than a blink of an eye, just half a second, and his expression didn't change at all, but I saw it happen. Something inside the ice man had been secretly, violently shaken. He stopped and looked at the sky, then at his hands. He heaved a huge breath. Then he looked at me and grinned. He said, "Is this the place you wanted to visit?"

"Yes," I said. "It is."

The South Pole was lonely beyond anything I had expected. Almost no one lived there. There was just one small, featureless town, and in that town there was one hotel, which was, of course, also small and featureless. The South Pole was not a tourist destination. There wasn't a single penguin.

And you couldn't see the aurora australis. There were no trees, flowers, rivers, or ponds.

Everywhere I went, there was only ice. Everywhere, as far as I could see, the wasteland of ice stretched on and on.

My husband, though, walked enthusiastically from place to place as if he couldn't get enough of it.

He learned the local language quickly, and spoke with the townspeople in a voice that had the hard rumble of an avalanche. He conversed with them for hours with a serious expression on his face, but I had no way of knowing what they were talking about. I felt as though my husband had betrayed me and left me to care for myself.

There, in that wordless world surrounded by thick ice, I eventually lost all my strength. Bit by bit, bit by bit. In the end, I didn't even have the energy to feel irritated anymore. It was as though I had lost the compass of my emotions somewhere. I had lost track of where I was heading, I had lost track of time, and I had lost all sense of my own self.

I don't know when this started or when it ended, but when I regained consciousness I was in a world of ice, an eternal winter drained of all color, closed in alone.

Even after most of my sensation had gone, I still knew this much. My husband at the South Pole was not the same man as before. He looked out for me just as he had always done, and he spoke to me kindly. I could tell that he truly meant the things he said to me. But I also knew that he was no 6 of 7

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longer the ice man I had met in the hotel at the ski resort.

There was no way I could bring this to anybody's attention, though. Everyone at the South Pole liked him, and, anyway, they couldn't understand a word I said. Puffing out their white breath, they would tell jokes and argue and sing songs in their own language while I sat by myself in our room, looking out at a gray sky that was unlikely to clear for months to come. The airplane that had brought us there had long since gone, and after a while the runway was covered with a hard layer of ice, just like my heart.

"Winter has come," my husband said. "It's going to be a very long winter, and there will be no more planes, or ships, either. Everything has frozen over. It looks as though we'll have to stay here until next spring."

About three months after we arrived at the South Pole, I realized that I was pregnant. The child that I gave birth to would be a little ice man—I knew this. My womb had frozen over, and my amniotic fluid was slush. I could feel its chill inside me. My child would be just like his father, with eyes like icicles and frost-rimed fingers. And our new family would never again set foot outside the South Pole. The eternal past, heavy beyond all comprehension, had us in its grasp. We would never shake it off.

Now there's almost no heart left in me. My warmth has gone very far away. Sometimes I forget that warmth ever existed. In this place, I am lonelier than anyone else in the world. When I cry, the ice man kisses my cheek, and my tears turn to ice. He takes those frozen teardrops in his hand and puts them on his tongue. "See how I love you," he says. He is telling the truth. But a wind sweeping in from nowhere blows his white words back and back into the past.

(*Translated, from the Japanese, by Richard L. Peterson.*) 7 of 7

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