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“Icy Cold”

It is icy cold. There are no plants growing here, and there are no houses, and I do not see any animals. We are walking and walking. I know that I am in a large group, a long line of people walking and walking in the cold, but I do not know anyone else in the group. I can not see ahead of me any of the people, and when I wait, when I stop and wait in the cold for the person in line behind me to catch up, he does not catch up or else I am too cold to wait long enough.

There is no snow on the ground, but there is much ice. The ground is covered with a thick, slippery sheet of ice and I must walk very carefully so that I don't fall. It seems easy to slip and fall and get hurt here. There are many jagged edges, jagged icicles hanging from dead gray branches. If they were to fall down, if a wind were to come and blow them off the trees, if they were to fall on someone, the person would be hurt badly. The icicle could pierce someone's skull and draw blood. The blood would instantly freeze right down through the brain. It is very dangerous here, and I must be careful.

Another dangerous thing is that there is no path. I think I am following the footprints of the people ahead of me, but there are no markings on the ice. No real footprints like there would be on snow. I do not know how it is that I know I am following them, but I know it. I can not hear them. I stop very still to listen every once in a while and wait for the person behind me. It is very still and silent. There are no animals. There do not seem to be any birds either. It is odd that there are no birds. I used to watch on television: birds of the far north, birds of the tropics, birds of the cities, birds of the marshes. Everywhere, no matter what the climate, there are birds, and that is what makes this place so strange. There are not even any birds to make this seem real.

When I look behind me, I do not see the next person and I think that I might have gotten lost. Lost from the group of people I am with. I look for landmarks, references I might remember if I have to walk back this way in case I have gotten lost and must retrace my steps. There are no landmarks or reference points. All the trees are exactly the same and are exactly the same distance apart in every direction. I

can sight along any row of them. I can sight along the rows of space between them horizontally, laterally or diagonally. Everything is gray, everything is an icy blue-gray. Each of the trees has exactly the same icicles. I do not understand this. We were not in the forest at the beginning of our walk. Somehow we must have entered the forest gradually while we were walking, while perhaps I was daydreaming or thinking of somewhere else, somewhere perhaps not so frozen as this. I realize that because the trees are in a straight line, I could follow my path back to the next person behind me.

I follow the trees back for a while. It is very cold and very silent. The ice is very slippery and so I must be careful. My boots are very slippery on the soles. The soles of my boots are made of glass. A thin piece of orange glass, glued to the bottom of my boots. I had better not walk in these boots any longer or they will make me fall soon. The rubber has turned to glass. It was not rubber, it must have been plastic. The plastic has turned to glass because of the cold. I remember a television program about plastic turning to glass because of the cold. Or maybe it was rubber. It must be very cold now to do such a thing.

I take my boots off very carefully and lay them down on the ice so that the orange soles are showing. These boots will be a marker, a notice to anyone who comes looking for me, to tell them that I have been here, and they will find me soon. I am not worried. I am being very practical, neat. My feet are very cold. My feet become numb and soon I do not feel the cold. My feet are becoming warmer and warmer. Good. I keep walking back along the same line of trees.

I do not find the person behind me, and although I have followed along the same line of trees, I do not think that anything looks familiar. The trees must have been planted along a curve! Along the curve of the earth! They looked straight, in a straight line, but they weren't! If the group had been walking in a straight line, but the trees had been planted along a curve, I could not meet any one by walking along the curve of the trees. I must return to my boots and then keep going forward. Perhaps, with the time I have lost, the other members of the group will come looking for me and perhaps they will be waiting where I left my boots. I begin walking back along the straight, curved line of the trees. I think, oh, I think I see someone standing near my boots! I try to shout to them, "Wait, wait for me. Here I am! Here I am!" But no sound comes out of me. No sound comes out of my mouth. The person is still standing there and I am trying to run along the gray trees to reach him before he runs away. The man is standing still. He is not motioning back to me. Man? Is it a woman? I can not tell. I do not care. I want to reach them before it is too late and they leave.

I look at my wristwatch as I run but I can't seem to see the hands. There is a fog in front of my watch. A fog has entered the forest of ice. I can not see the trees anymore. I can not follow along the line of trees to find the person standing near my boots. I try to grope towards the nearest tree, but it is so hard to

find anything in the white-out. I try to find one tree with my hands, flinging my arms, but I can't. The trees have disappeared in the fog. The trees have turned to fog and I can not see anything. The fog is everywhere. Everything is turning into fog, evaporating and turning to fog.

It is getting very warm. My feet feel very hot. My legs, very hot. My legs are sweating in the heat and fog. I am wearing blue jeans. I must take them off. They are soaked through with sweat and fog and I must take them off. I peel them off, scrape them like cardboard over my hot sweating legs. My thighs try to stick together, melt together in the sticky heat. My armpits are dripping with perspiration, dripping into my shirt and through my coat, soaking my coat. I am hot, I am sweating and itching. Perspiration is running down my face, my arms. My hair is being soaked with sweat and I am still walking, staggering and groping the fog.

I drag at my coat. I take off my coat and hold it over my arm, daintily. What if it becomes cold again? I'll need my coat if it should become cold again. It is a feather coat, a goose down parka, warm and lightweight. I can carry it, a blue goose down parka, very warm and lightweight. Very expensive. It is getting heavy on my arm and I throw it away. The fog swallows it up. I take my shirt off and throw it away, too.

My underpants are sticking to me. They have slid up my crack and are sticking. I do not need them. There is no one around. The person near my boots has disappeared into the steam. It was a man. Yes, I'm sure it was a man: my father. My father had come out to get me, to find me and bring me home. But he became lost in the steam. I am naked and I do not know where I am. I am lost. I can not remember what the leader looked like. I can not remember the purpose of the walk. Who was the leader? Was the leader a man? I do not think so.... A woman? I can not remember. I do not know. I am lost and very tired.

It is all this heat, this humidity. That is what is making me so tired. There is no air to breathe. It is very quiet, and if I wanted to, I could fall asleep easily. Fall asleep without any trouble. That is what I will do. I will lay down and sleep for a while, just a little short while, a short time. Someone is sure to find me soon. Soon the fog will lift and my father will come and find me. There is nothing I can do now.

--from Sensations (1984)

--background photo: Rosenthal, "Witch's Head, Missouri"

2012 Wood Coin: The Natural Sciences and Supernatural Physics Break Issue: Rosenthal, "Icy Cold"