

The Thing Behind the Icebox

She awoke cold, alone, blind in the dark.

She reached over to the spot he had once occupied. Fear and loneliness, however, paled next to the cold. Staving off the bitter chill, she snatched her robe from the chair, and snuggled inside. Still her teeth chattered.

At the foot of her bed, her Cyclopean tomcat, Hank, hissed; his eye narrowed in rage.

“What fresh hell is this, Hank?” she asked. “You’re not serious about making me get up out of this bed, are you?” Hank replied by looking back at her, ears drawn back, green eye spiteful, tail twitching, spine arching. *You bet I do*, he was communicating, *something is up!*

She frowned, leaned down to grab house slippers and the baseball bat she kept under the bed. He had always wanted a gun; she had always refused. For that and a stack of equally appalling differences, she had left him behind. She had been

ashamed not to have seen them sooner, but her therapist had explained to her how men like him worked. Tenacious and subtle as termites, they ate away at reason and self-esteem until the entire structure collapses. Then, rapacious and heartless to their destruction, they move on.

She had escaped.

Cold snapped her out of her woolgathering. The baseball bat's metal stung her palms, and she dropped it.

“Well, snap dragons, Hank! Can't you pick it up?”

Hank hissed, arching his back. *Go figure it out, lady*. She sighed, grabbing from the armoire leather gloves he had given her. She had never imagined this would be her fifties: husband freshly gone, living with a cat in a spacious downtown loft.

She'd never lived alone. From parents to college then marriage, she'd never lived alone. At first, it had been exhilarating, yet scary, like the first day of college. Now it was just scary.

She took a deep breath and opened her bedroom door. She threw her slippers on the ground, shuffled into them, and left the safety of the bedroom. Letting the bat hang down at her side, she peered around. Nobody else was here. She put the bat on the ground, leaning on it, with a satisfied smirk.

From between her ankles, Hank dashed forward, yowling like bath time. She gasped, her hand going up to her chest, when she saw Hank was after a mouse.

Grimacing, she stormed after Hank, resolved to smash the rodent.

As she came huffing into the kitchen, a bitter cold assaulted her face, and she saw her breath. The water cooler had a thin patina of ice forming at the top.

Heedless of the cold, Hank pursued the rodent, who was weaving through furniture to escape. She almost felt bad for it. That ended when the mouse darted behind her gigantic oak icebox. Hank leapt to prevent it, but the mouse eked out victory, squeaking and wriggling through the narrow space between the icebox and the wall. Then she heard a sound like fingers snapping. Hank lowered his hackles,

stopped hissing, and turned around to look at his owner as if to say *well, I took care of that. Time to reward your savior.*

The cooler's thin sheet of ice cracked as the temperature returned to normal.

She leaned on the bat again, pursing her lips in thought. Had the mouse somehow tripped a wire behind the icebox causing the cold, only to retrigger it again? She couldn't move the icebox tonight without help. He had insisted on having it. He had left it behind, and she had wished he hadn't.

Sighing again, she shrugged. What else could it have been?

Next morning, she chalked it up to a dream. Or a half-awake, half-imagined state. Still, she called the super to check the icebox. Hank showed no signs of anything having happened, so she went about her day as well. Eventually the super called her back and left a message that he was out of town, not to worry, he'd check on her the day after. After the message had finished, Hank yowled again.

“What is it this time, you fantastic fur ball?” she asked, bracing for a sudden chill. Hank strolled between her legs, rubbing against his mistress for a scratch, which she gave him. Off he trotted to watch birds through the window. She followed him. He perched, head swiveling around to follow the birds flitting around outside, heedless of the ferocious predator on the other side of the glass. She smiled, watching Hank bat harmlessly at the birds who dared to fly, Icarus-style, too close to danger. She went back to check the icebox.

No change.

Night fell. She brought Hank and the bat to bed with her, locking the bedroom door. She barely had time to close her eyes before sleep overtook her. Then she heard it.

Hssss. Like a balloon slowly deflating, the *hssss* woke her. She gasped, exhaled, and saw her breath. Hank had adopted full attack mode, running pell-mell around the room, growling and yowling. She grabbed the bat, bathrobe, and slippers.

Steeling herself, she crept to the door, unlocked it, and opened it. Hank sped through her legs towards the kitchen. Something in her stomach lurched upwards then down. Hank was heading towards the sound, a *bad* sound. She swallowed hard, blew a few stray tendrils of dyed hair out of her face, set her jaw, and chased after her one-eyed crazy cat. With each step, the *hssss* grew louder. In the kitchen, it was nearly deafening. *How do the neighbors not hear this?* she asked herself, *after they complained enough about the arguments he and I would have.*

Hank was circling the icebox, his tail tucked between his legs, his back arched, hackles up, growling. Unable to move, as in a nightmare, she watched as Hank crept up to the side of the icebox where the mouse had disappeared. Then he seemed to be sucked behind the icebox. The *bad* sound had ended, replaced by one resembling a child slurping a milkshake.

“Hank! *No!*” She fell to the floor, convinced his tail had become caught in the fan, yet she saw no blood pooling from behind the icebox. The cold dissipated and

silence fell, apart from her cries of savage despair and rage, as she pulled at the massive icebox in vain. It sat where it had always sat, since he had brought it home as a Valentine's Day present, the worst one; the last one. She shrieked in fury, trying to budge the giant metal monster that had eaten her sole companion post-divorce. Their friends had always been his. She had half a mind to call him, wake him, and fill his ear with her anger, frustration, and blame. She took a breath, thought it through, and decided against it. Instead, she curled up on the impeccable mosaic floor of her kitchen, sobbing, feeling the waves of loss.

She awoke the next morning, sore and stiff from a night on the floor. She wiped her face with a towel, and stumbled to the bathroom, where she saw the tracks of tears on her cheeks.

“Well, doesn't this just beat all? I look a mess, and my cat's dead. Hell's bells!”

This brought it all back, and in no time at all, she was sobbing on the floor of her bathroom, clutching the little bed Hank had loved in there. His getaway bed.

She smelled him on it. She wished she could curl inside of it and forget the nightmare of last night. Forget the icebox, a relic of yesteryear that had enjoyed a Renaissance from a television show, the massive, fully automated icebox kept alcohol cold and produced ice. She had always hated it, how gaudy it had been, an unnecessary extravagance; he had used these same stinging words to refer to her at the end. This provoked her to action.

She pulled her phone out of her night robe's pocket and dialed him up. After one ring, voicemail. She groaned.

“Hello. So you need to come and get the icebox. If not, I’m going to have the super remove it. You want it? Come get it.” She considered adding: *I know you’re there. One ring? C’mon.* She hung up instead. She went to the gym to distract herself from it all. Every step on the treadmill, she heard that sucking sound from behind the icebox when Hank had disappeared.

She thought about posting about the strange experiences with the icebox on social media, but she worried people would question her sanity. It did sound loopy, after all; bitter cold, animals disappearing behind an appliance, an unpleasant sound as the haunting score to the nightmare.

An only child whose parents had both died years ago, she had nearly nobody. She couldn't count on him anymore.

She felt adrift in a sea of strangers who lived with their noses glued to one screen or another. Her remaining relatives had no time for their uppity cousin who had married well. Some had come after the divorce, yet despite their smiles, their efforts, their claims of compassion and empathy; it had all felt forced and insincere to her. They wanted something. Money, usually. She had sent them packing.

Now she returned home to an empty house. She went to the kitchen. In the corner of the room, the icebox remained silent and hateful in the shadows of the fading afternoon kitchen light. She felt the urge to spit on it but held back. What

would her cousins have said? She went to her room, turned on the television and drifted off to sleep.

Hssss.

Unsure whether it had been the cold or the hissing sound that woke her, she frowned, cradling the bat. The nightmare was back.

“You’re not serious about making me get up out of this bed, are you?” she asked to an empty bedroom. The hissing grew even louder.

“Fine. Let’s do this,” she said to herself. Her marriage had been a nightmare of sorts. She found her gloves, put on her night robe, and grabbed her bat. Kicking the door open, she barreled out of her bedroom, tears streaming from her eyes against the aggressive cold before they froze on her cheek. She ran to the kitchen. She was afraid her skin might freeze like her father’s had that one nasty winter in Minnesota.

As she entered the kitchen, she saw several things at once.

The water tank, having been frozen solid, had fallen and shattered into a million pieces of ice.

The mosaic floor was covered with these glittery shards.

The icebox was no longer where it had been. It had been moved aside enough for her to look behind. She wondered if her ex-husband had come over to move it.

The super wasn't due back until tomorrow.

The *hssss* stopped, and the chill receded a bit. She heard a familiar sound from behind the icebox.

A meow.

“Hank!” She dropped her bat, leaving the heavy object behind as she rushed to see her beloved pet again. What she saw instead was a hole in the universe. She peered at it, mystified and entranced. It was like she was staring into outer space, but none of the constellations looked like ones she had seen before. They looked *wrong* like the sound had been *bad*.

“Hank?” She backed up a step from the hole. “You there, Hank?”

Instead of her cat, a thin black tendril came through the hole behind the icebox into her world. Nausea seized her stomach, and she felt a familiar, involuntary cough travel from her stomach to her throat. She struggled to hold it down. The tendril probed around blindly for a moment before approaching her, motionless and frozen in place. The icy ebony appendage reached out, cold, alone, blind. She was reminded of Hank swatting at the clueless birds through the glass. At last the tendril touched her arm, causing her to expel the air she had been holding in from fear and lack of understanding. Intense cold changed to searing heat as the oily tendril snaked around and up her arm. She wanted to scream, but her lips would not part. Her mind reeled and recalled a poem she had read in college by T.S. Elliott.

I will show you something different.

She heard the plaintive feline yowling again as the sizzling sensation crept up her shoulder.

What lovely woman stoops to folly and/Paces around her room again, alone...

The icy pain had left her arm, now a blackened, withered branch.

I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

She longed to go south, to escape from these unnatural tendrils.

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The hole, a singularity that resembled the impact of a fist into a wall made of air, grew wider as her arm withered. Beyond the hole, she could now see only a tarry darkness where the malevolent stars wriggled around like cosmic termites.

Shantih shantih shantih came the skin-crawling chant from the hole in reality.

Her mind swam with images of dark, ancient worlds filled with irregular, foreign architecture that made what was left of her skin crawl with a rising nausea. Her

consciousness plummeted back into her mind as a terrible sound was expelled through her mouth in a terrible and alien voice.

“YOG-SOTHOTH! IÄ! YOG-SOTHOGH!”

Then she was sucked into the hole and vanished with a whisper of a sucking wind.

The next morning, her apartment door rattled and opened as the super and her husband entered. Her husband peeked inside.

“You here?” he called out. He looked back at the super. “Cold, huh? She must’ve left the air on again.” He rolled his eyes. “Classic her.” Then they heard a noise coming from the kitchen. He smiled at the super.

“She’s probably having a mid-morning drink from the icebox. Classic her.” The super smiled back, feeling a twinge of nausea, probably from the dicey breakfast burrito he had ripped through earlier. He shivered a little as they walked to the kitchen, feeling uneasy as though he were awake in a nightmare.

