

John D. Eigenauer
2301 Barrington #3
Bakersfield, CA 93309
661.398.8465

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jeigenauer@yahoo.com

Icebox

By

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Icebox was a roach-eyed jellybean of a freshman. No one knew where he was from, and no one cared. He kept Brillcream in business by himself. He wore giant fishtank glasses that no one noticed because everyone who looked like Icebox wore fishtank glasses. Despite his efforts, he managed to elude even the most passing style. When he wore broad ties, everyone started wearing slim ties. When he wore straight-legged pants, everyone started wearing bell-bottoms. When he grew his hair long, everyone got a crew cut, and when he got a crew cut, everyone grew his hair long. He was a fashion plate to end all fashion plates, his most passing fancy changing styles across the United States—a sort of Beau Brummell with a penchant for inverse relationships. A math major on his floor told him that he was a sine curve and the world was a cosine curve. He laughed.

Icebox was the Rawley Eastwick of college students, collecting every discarded artifact with sublime enthusiasm. His room was a shrine to the ordinariness of civilization. He guarded a full box of condoms endowed him by a fellow freshman who was sure that he would lay every girl in the class, but who didn't lose his virginity until his senior year. He kept a telephone receiver that someone had told him was pilfered from the New York Yankees' bullpen. He prized a picture of Hank Metheny showing off his legendary cauliflower ears, treasured a

phone book torn in half by the school's greatest defensive end, carefully preserved a poker chip that had split cleanly down the middle lengthwise, and paid homage nightly to a rusted bird cage that had housed the school's mascot, a falcon, in an emergency.

No one knew how long Icebox had been a freshman. He never aged, he never graduated, he never moved. Others blazed on to become sophomores, juniors, and graduates, but Icebox preserved his freshman inertia with sacerdotal devotion. He thought about graduating, but he also thought about death, and that didn't mean that he wanted to die.

He admired Yossarian. Yossarian found a way to stay out of the war in the middle of the war. "He's my hero," he said. And he went to a comic book store to see if they had any posters of Yossarian. No Yossarian posters. He salvaged the trip with a clandestine visit to the dumpster behind the store, where he found an old milk crate that threatened severe penalties for those who employed the object for purposes other than the transportation of milk. The daring intrigued him and he kept it. When life seemed dull, he looked at the milk crate and felt exhilarated at the thought of living the life of a fugitive.

Icebox ate peanut butter. When he grew tired of peanut butter, he ate it until he liked it again. He mashed peanut butter into Wheaties for breakfast, and spread it on tuna sandwiches, pickles, apples, green beans, ice cream, eggs, chicken, ham, and broccoli for lunch. He broiled, sautéed, fried, and fondued it for dinner. Peanut butter offered him an identity that even his legendary assemblage of enshrined rubbish could not. When he overheard someone ask if he was the guy who ate everything with peanut butter, it encouraged him to eat greater quantities in more

bizarre combinations with increased alacrity. The extravagance allowed him the indulgence of introducing himself as if everyone should know who he was, and then add that he was the one who ate everything with peanut butter.

After a delightful breakfast of peanut butter and hash, Icebox was walking to class when he saw an object hurtling toward him. He ducked. It hit him in the head. Being accustomed to such anonymous attacks, he wiped some pulp from his hair and strode onward. He heard a loud crash as a chair landed only ten yards away. The object intrigued him, as he envisioned a place for it in his collection. As he moved closer, a larger object came rushing out of the sky. Icebox dove heroically toward the broken chair as if it were a dear friend. He pushed it out of the way and jumped back. The object landed on the chair, splintering it. He might have shed a tear had the new object not held even greater interest. It looked like an old radio, but it didn't have any dials. It looked like a chest, but it didn't have any drawers. As he reached for the handle to open its lone door, someone shouted, "Get the Hell out of the way, you idiot!"

Icebox moved reluctantly. Several pillows landed where he was standing in what seemed a shower of God's blessings. Right behind the pillows came a couch.

Throughout this incremental downpour of furniture and garbage, it never occurred to Icebox to look up. He was far too concerned with his fortune to examine its source, and thought only of fending off the newly-formed crowd in defense of his treasures. The crowd, however, had fixed its gaze upon the top floor of the school's tallest dormitory, where some demented and troubled soul was raining debris upon the school's lone patch of grass.

Someone shouted, "Television!" and the stark face that peered out the window retreated behind the curtains. The crowd took up the chant as the sound grew to a rhythmic, warlike, "Te-le-vi-sion! Te-le-vi-sion!" In minutes, the mad hurler parted the curtains and edged the television out the window. No one expected more than a measly portable, but Icebox had greater hopes. Out crept one leg, then another, and then the entire console as the crowd cheered wildly. The television soared out the window in front of a huge shove and shattered below to an encouraging and taunting ovation.

In moments, the crowd took up its next cheer with the same rhythmic invitation, chanting, "Ste-re-O! Ste-re-O!" and the pale face returned again, offering the crowd an oblation of speakers, turntable, receiver, and tape player delivered at three-second intervals. As each one smashed open, Icebox saw a panorama of collectibles from old television tubes to modern circuit boards. With all the reserve he could muster, he stood by and planned his raid on the most precious objects, which he was sure he would have to fight for. They would be worth it.

The crowd wanted more carnage. They chanted for mirrors and lamps and books and bookshelves and shower curtains and toilet seats and beds and tables and carpets, and they got them all. And just when their collective lust seemed sated, someone took up the lull with a gigantic, "REFRIGERATOR!"

The crowd's enthusiasm reached new heights. They clapped and they yelled and jumped with every syllable, begging for a culmination to the frenzied shower of housewares and furnishings. But the pallid face did not reappear. They shouted louder, but the face did not respond. They added expletives to "Refrigerator," made up rhymes with the expletives, but the face stayed hidden in the bare apartment.

At this pitch of excitement, the police arrived. Some of the more timid members of the crowd lost their crowd identity and hurried off to class, while others stayed to harass the police about what seemed to them to be none of the police's business. After all, if someone wanted to throw his shit out the window, he should be allowed to throw his shit out the window.

The police began questioning. Did anyone know the assailant? Was anyone hurt? Was there gunfire? Had the crowd incited a reaction? Who started all this? As the questioning went on, Icebox hurried to his treasures.

He stuffed a television tube in his shirt pocket, put a penny loafer with a penny in it in his back pocket along with an autographed picture of Jack Benny, stuffed a shoe horn, a candy cane, a box of fish food, and some used typewriter ribbons in his front pockets, tried to hide a dented globe under his coat, and resourcefully put on a pair of flippers. Thus laden with prizes, he made his way to the box that had intrigued him before. He tugged the handle and saw two smashed tomatoes, cottage cheese splattered on all the walls, a pizza that nearly held its shape, and a sadly broken jar of peanut butter.

"Hey, kid, get away from there!" yelled a policeman.

Icebox retreated and stammered, "But I've got it!"

A giant policeman with dark glasses and a moustache paced sternly toward Icebox and said, "You got what, kid?"

"It's an icebox. One of those old kind where you put some ice in it to keep things cold."

"What the Hell you talkin' about, boy?"

"Look at this, officer. It's an icebox. He threw it out the window."

"Kid, this nut threw everything out the window. And he'll probably throw himself next, so get out of the way before I have to arrest you for tampering..."

The officer stopped and surveyed Icebox. "What you got under your coat, boy?"

"Nothing, Sir. I mean, it's something for class. I've got geography today."

"You always wear flippers to geography class, boy?"

"Swimming after that."

The officer nodded suspiciously.

"Son, it looks an awful lot like you're attempting to remove evidence from the scene of a crime."

"Officer," he stuttered, "I'm not trying to take anything. It's just that I've got to talk to this guy."

"You know this whacko?"

"Well, not exactly, but I know something's really wrong."

"Listen, shit-for-brains, when people throw their living room out a tenth story window, something's wrong. It don't take no rocket scientist to figure that one out."

"Officer, you don't understand. This guy had some really nice stuff, I mean the kind of stuff I'd love to have and then he just throws it out the window. I mean, look at this old television and this ice..."

"That's enough, kid, you're coming with me."

The policeman grabbed Icebox by the arm, twisted it behind his back, and dragged him off to the patrol car.

"Officer," Icebox winced, "you're making a big mistake. It isn't right to arrest me. I didn't do anything wrong."

"Look, kid," the officer lectured, "this ain't got nothing to do with right and wrong. This is the law."

Icebox stopped fighting and went to the patrol car, looking back desperately for the troubled face on the tenth floor.

In the patrol car, Icebox sat quietly behind the black wire that separated him from the officer with the moustache. He heard his name blurted statically over the radio as the officer verified his name and address.

"What do you do, boy?"

"I'm a student."

"You kinda old for a student, ain't you?"

"I'm a doctoral candidate. Those things can go on forever."

"Well, then, you must be smart enough to keep your mouth shut until we get this loony down before he kills someone."

He slammed the door and gave Icebox a menacing look. Icebox sat still.

Outside, Icebox heard the troubled sound of silence. The crowd kept quiet with the realization that whatever problem provoked their fun had to be dealt with. A bullhorn shattered the silence, ordering the anonymous furniture tosser to come out the front door with his hands up. The curtains blew softly, but no one looked out. The crowd looked at the door and back at the window and unconsciously counted the time it would take an elevator to go up ten floors, open its doors, and return to the lobby. The crowd looked to the police. The police looked at each other. The giant policeman with the moustache motioned to several others to approach the building. They hunched over and ran like policemen do in the movies, slamming themselves dramatically against the brick walls surrounding the main entrance,

held their guns close to the chests, and peered in, ready to fire. They tried the door. It was locked. They kicked in the glass, unlocked the door, and stormed the lobby, hoping to save the hostages. There were none. The lobby was empty. The first floor was empty. The second floor was empty. Every floor was empty. But the tenth floor was locked and the elevator that everyone imagined running up and down functioned no better than the television on the front lawn.

Icebox heard the giant policeman's radio spurt static as the report came back, "We've got a live one, Sergeant. Done sealed himself off. Cut the wires to the elevator. And there ain't a soul in here."

"Stay put. Try to verify whether the suspect is ar..."

A burst of machine gun fire shredded the white linen curtains as the crowd splintered, fell, yelled, dove, and panicked. The giant policeman jumped back behind his car and ordered everyone to take cover behind the Science building. The crowd ran in every direction and managed find cover without reaching the Science building. The giant policeman called for the SWAT team. Icebox grew tense. He knew that he had to reach the man with the white face before the police did. He thought that they would kill him. He hoped that he could save him.

"Get out of the car, kid," the policeman ordered. "I ain't got time to worry about you. Stay behind this car and don't move or I'll shoot you before the crackpot does."

Icebox climbed out and obediently curled behind the car.

"Officer?"

"SHUT UP!"

"I know this guy. I can help."

The officer glared at Icebox. Icebox stared back. He was afraid, but he knew that if he did not help, the man with the white face might die.

"Who is he?" asked the policeman.

Icebox started to sweat. He wanted to talk to the man with the white face and tell him that he understood, that no one else understood, but that he could help. He wanted to tell him things that only they could understand. But the giant, ugly sergeant stood in the way.

"Bill," said Icebox. "We're in grad school together. He's got some problems, but I think that I can talk him down."

Icebox gulped, squinted from behind his glasses, and promised himself that if he could help the man with the white face, he would return the milk crate.

Another burst of bullets rattled overhead as everyone crouched a bit lower and a few people screamed from behind buildings. In a moment, a gun flew out the window and landed on the couch and bounced to the ground. Icebox peered through the window and saw the man with the white face lean out the window, put one leg out, and climb out on the ledge. Icebox noticed that he was not a man. He was a boy. He gripped the bricks with the ends of his fingers as he wavered on the ledge.

"I've got to talk to him now," said Icebox.

"Boy, the screwball will kill you. Looks bad on the report."

Icebox motioned his eyes from behind his thick glasses toward the tenth floor. The policeman followed his glance.

"Holy shit!"

Icebox grabbed the bullhorn and stood up.

"Don't do it. Please. Let's just talk. I understand."

The words echoed off the buildings and through the ranks of police officers and through the dispersed crowd and up to the tenth floor. The young man did not move.

"I'm coming to talk to you. Don't move. I understand."

Icebox dropped the bullhorn and ran to the lobby.

"Get back here, boy!" shouted the policeman.

Icebox kept running. They could shoot him if they wanted.

He burst in the front door, headed for the elevator, found it disabled, and ran to the stairs.

After the first flight, his legs felt heavy. He wished that he hadn't eaten so much for breakfast. He belched and tasted peanut butter. He began to sweat. His chest hurt. He closed his eyes and ran as fast as he could, pulling his unwilling body up the stairs. He reached the seventh floor and wondered if he could go any further. His chest heaved. His glasses dripped with sweat. He pushed on.

Icebox opened the door leading out of the ninth floor and startled two policemen.

"Freeze!"

"Don't shoot. FBI. Get the door open."

As hard as it was for Icebox to believe, the men obeyed. They kicked and beat the door until they broke off the handle, then opened it with a knife.

"Now stay here and don't move until I call you," said Icebox. "The code word is RABBIT."

The policemen were paralyzed. They looked at each other, silently pronounced "rabbit," and watched Icebox enter the tenth floor.

"He sure didn't look like FBI," said the first policeman.

"Now, what the Hell kind of FBI man would he be if he looked like FBI?"

The logic was irreproachable. The first policeman stared nervously at his feet and tried to remember the code word.

Icebox walked slowly down the hall. He wanted desperately to form a plan, but nothing came to mind. He fought to get his thoughts to rehearse some Clint Eastwood movie, but nothing happened. All he could think about was the precious garbage that lay on the front lawn. He hoped that no one would take his icebox.

He found the door that he imagined led to the apartment where the boy with the white face was. He turned the handle and opened it slowly. The living room was nearly bare. The phone lay on the floor next to an address book. He made a note of the boy's name and crept toward the window.

As he peeked out the window, he saw the policemen stare up at him in detached amazement. He leaned out a little further and saw a pale hand with bulging purple veins clinging to a brick wall that defiantly resisted the boy's clutch. He watched the large blue vein in the middle of the back of his hand bulge to what looked to be the bursting point, and could not stop himself from imagining that same blood spilling out of the boy's mouth and onto the concrete below. The boy's blood seemed trapped inside of him, aching with a life of its own to escape. But Icebox could not let it. He knew too much.

"Philip, I want to talk to you," Icebox said.

Philip did not respond. He stared straight ahead, gripping the wall with his bony fingers and bulging, bloody hands.

"Philip, I know what you're going through. I tried it once, too. I couldn't do it, and it's not because I'm chicken. I was just tired of everybody making fun of me and ignoring me, which is worse."

Icebox paused, groping and praying for the right words.

"I looked around my room and I just got sick of everything and I started throwing everything away. My mother's pictures, my books, the coffee pot, everything seemed trivial. Then I got even madder and I put the stuff in my car and I headed down to the dump to burn it all. And I was just going to jump right in with all the junk."

Icebox looked at the boy's face and saw him crying.

"Then I looked at the stupid old coffee pot and remembered how when my brother came to see me at Christmas and I made him a cup of coffee and he said it was the best coffee he ever had. And I saw some old cleats and remembered when I didn't used to weigh so much and even played softball once in a while with the guys from the dorm. And I saw an old picture of before my operations when I didn't have to wear these big old glasses."

The boy turned his head to look at Icebox.

"And I sat right there in the city dump and cried like a dummy. I cried because I figured I'd just be burning up all kinds of memories."

Icebox paused a few seconds and lowered his voice.

"And when you're as lonely as I was, memories didn't seem like bad things to have."

Icebox and the boy stared at each other. They understood. Icebox didn't have to tell him dramatically to reach out his hand; the boy just did it. Icebox grabbed it, watching his own fingers squeeze down gently on the veins, feeling the blood take hold again in the boy's body. He guided him through the window and closed it behind him.

As they walked toward the door together, Icebox said, "You know, this big stupid policeman with a moustache is really going to give it to you for the machine gun bit. But you're just going to have to take that one on the chin. They'll probably hit you with a fine or something. Don't worry about it. I'll pay it if you don't have the cash."

Icebox led the boy down the hall to the two policemen.

"Philip, I'm kind of big on memories, so would you mind if I kept the icebox you tossed?"

The boy smiled and shook his head. Icebox walked down the stairs a few feet in front of the policemen.

Down below, Icebox faced a crowd of eager reporters. They clamored around him, shoving microphones in his face, glaring lights so bright that he couldn't see, and rattling questions so quickly that he couldn't understand them.

"What's your name?"

"Are you the machine gunner's brother?"

"Do you expect a reward?"

"What's the suspect's name?"

"Did your training as a grad student in psychology aid you in the rescue?"

"How long did you work for the FBI?"

Icebox tried to sort the answers out, matching questions with faces. He innocently nodded toward one and said, "Philip," toward another and said, "Yeah, I'd like to keep the icebox," and toward a third and said, "My brother lives in Iowa." A trim, Oriental newscaster then turned to the camera and proudly announced, "Good evening. This is Mallory Chow with the latest breaking news on the OLSU machine gun incident. The suspect has been apprehended by the police, but not without the aid of one 'Icebox' Philips, as he calls himself. A close friend of the assailant's brother, Mr. Philips, who once worked for the FBI in Iowa, maneuvered his way to the tenth floor of the building, where he..."

Behind the smiling and serious Ms. Chow, Icebox wandered onto the lawn, opened his newest memory, closed it gently, dislodged it from the grass, and enlisted assistance in carrying it back to his dormitory, where he watched himself on a special news feature. That evening, he bought a block of ice that fit perfectly in the ice compartment and dedicated the antiquated machine with a fresh jar of peanut butter. The next day, he returned the milk crate to American Dairy Farmers on South Welsh Boulevard and treated himself to a grilled peanut butter and jelly sandwich at Wacker's Deli.