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## The Ice

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## THE ICE

I MET A CITIZEN on the ice, older guy, had quit his job, now living out of a teardrop trailer with his spouse, who identified as a Boilermaker. We talked ferments across a picnic table while the spouse bundled the pug into a parka: a brutal sea breeze carried her words off into oblivion. Mauve was the color of the parka. You will settle down here and endure a decade on the ice, were her words. You will bounce around from low end to dead end to odds and ends. Odds and ends, you'll discover, are the meat and potatoes of commerce on the ice, such as it is. Oh, commerce, she sighed.

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ABNEGATION FIGURED INTO the commerce. The couple with the pug after selling their bungalow and investing in the teardrop put the rest of their savings into abnegating. The banner at the entrance to the marketplace flashed a trademarked jingle about abnegating, minus the melody. The neon was loud. Nonetheless the pug snoozed in its mauve cocoon. I commented on abnegation in regard to ferments. I noticed a definite austerity trend. I commented into my cupped hands. What? said the older guy. Into my cupped hands I shouted an observation about a starvation diet. What? said the older guy again, startling Herschel awake. Herschel opened his mouth and nothing came out.

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SOME OTHER OLD guy had a picnic table to himself; he was hogging a coveted picnic table. Feeling that I'd been monopolizing the Boilermaker, I went over and began a shouting chat with the ancient mariner. See that blade hanging over your head? he shouted. Blade? I shouted. He shouted back a gruesome moralistic anecdote from his childhood. You were only supposed to pull, never to push, was the premise. Pushing imperiled the sibling. It felt like he'd never left the ice just so he could recount his mischief on his home turf. Make a home for himself at the head of the table, milk the anecdote for all it was worth, lie in wait.

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THE BLADE BELONGED to him, and then again it didn't. If ever a blade could be said to have an owner...and the picnic table, and the cone of space, and the drink coasters from an interior lair. I watched him go off inside to this lair and I thought of riding the elevator up to the ice and how you normally walked out the front doors but if you were a mischievous child determined not to outlive your parents you punched buttons at random until the rear doors opened onto an alcove where obsolete implements existed in a state of suspended abnegation. He brought out into the crowded patio a stack of coasters, all alike: the ice had shifted as it did from time to time. As he knelt, I thought of the lackeys with their antique elevator keys who checked in from time to time on the implements.

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AFTER SOME ADDING and taking away and folding and folding again, the wayward picnic table promised to behave, at least until the next upheaval,

and the couple joined us there in a tight huddle, the blade which had been made safe hanging over the four of us. The teardrop in its travels had collected stories about all kinds of commerce-related curiosities like the serrated blade; this was their burden now, the couple's, they'd been everywhere beyond the ice and its economy based on the exchange of knickknacks; for every knickknack on the ice they had their own anecdote from beyond the ice about the knickknack in some non-abnegated version. Some variant which in idyllic childhood with a sibling at the other end had been pushed, hard. Not mischief but one ladder truck after another, unfestooned. Not mischief leading to innocently milking an anecdote. More like tick tick BOOM! Off the ice, the sonic component of an explosion wouldn't instantly be carried away into the whitecaps by the nonstop so-called sea breeze. The snow globe which on the ice hung from a peg as a knickknack essentially served the function of hawking other knickknacks. It had a double off the ice. Both versions looked real, with safety pins and fuses. The version on the peg hanging from its safety pin ring; beneath it, the regulars, in their folksy Yankee windbreakers, quipping about pulling duty as a dud.

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SURELY YOU WOULDN'T consider a ferment like this to be a knickknack? I shouted at the Boilermaker.

You will take a test, she shouted back. You'll be led down an alley to a storage shed, an ordinary outbuilding by the looks of it, weathered, in need of repair. Someone will have mentioned trial by fire. Someone else will have mentioned ulceration, eschar, irreparable damage to growth plates.

I don't expect to grow much more, anyway, I shouted.

Hanging above the padlocked door will be a widowmaker, she shouted.

A what? I shouted back.

...a vault, a one-room testing headquarters, padlocked, devoid of creature comforts, she continued while I shifted my position on the picnic bench as if I were a stainless steel directional chimney cap. She went on. No furniture except for stainless steel restaurant shelving. A chilly vault sheltered from the elements where you could hold out for a few hours at most. Someone will have mentioned sink or swim. Someone else will have mentioned terminal burrowing, paradoxical undressing, blood blisters.

Now the fun begins, she continued. You find yourself alone among a massive flight of ferments. Someone will have mentioned alphabetizing. Hopefully you were paying attention at the time because you won't last long beginning from a standing start.

A standing start? I shouted.

Because you're on the clock, shouted the Boilermaker.

She went on about how if I hoped to beat the clock, I would need to push myself, hard.

I thought again of the elevator up to the ice and the pranks that involved pushing, the button-pushing pranks as well as the teamwork pranks when the elevator stopped along the way and an overly enthusiastic passenger already in love with abnegation was taught a harmless lesson as the

doors with their cheerful hospitality propaganda slid into their recesses and an unlit void appeared which was merely a staging area not yet bustling with activity but immediately made the overcrowded elevator seem a cozy haven in comparison.

Eschar? I shouted. The Boilermaker shook her head.

Widowmaker? I shouted. The Boilermaker pointed at the sky with a pink mitten. I followed the mitten to the trinket referenced by the elder who knew where the fermenters hoarded their coasters.

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THE SHED! While the Boilermaker had been filling me in, an alley passed itself off as a nursery sparsely decorated with human statuary. Unremarked, the storage shed traversed the alley on bright orange skids fitted to it by the Boilermaker's husband, a team leader before he quit his job. He pulled the shed. The shed arrived.

I brought the test to you, shouted the Boilermaker's husband, throwing his weight into a last adjustment so that the padlock clanked near enough that I could hear it.

I felt eager, prepared to alphabetize. Not so fast, shouted a voice that came from a place of remembering wariness about elevators, the FILO commerce principle as it applies to elevators.

The Boilermaker's husband climbed onto the picnic table with a glass in one hand and began a toast. I caught a few words that were the names of ferments not found on the ice. I envisioned entering the shed

and encountering exotic ferments from the Dakotas or Montana. Ringers thrown into the mix, to identify candidates who hadn't done their homework. Kids like me who impulsively stabbed the Up button.

I thought I heard the word "lackey" and I pictured a server at the bottom of the food chain tasked with ransacking the unheated attic for a bolt cutter that could still open its mouth like a fish and the server conveying the bolt cutter out into the elements where it was wanted by the patron wielding a goblet as he ennobled the youngster with the foreign accent.

Hey Mr. Teardrop! shouted the homegrown coaster engineer and, quicker than he looked, shot out his arms and gripped the Boilermaker's husband by the ankles.

The Boilermaker's husband reached up toward the trinket, set the palms of his overmitts gently against its downward-facing teeth; gave it a tentative shove as if in his travels he'd met with many such rustic emblems of commerce and taken their measure. He was heavysset and the veteran of countless sedentary miles and he'd been sending the server back for goblet after goblet. The force of the sea breeze flexed the polished steel of the trinket as, gripping with his overmitts, the husband swayed. Many of his anecdotes from beyond the ice described his joining in some quaint regional bacchanal. Hung over, atherosclerotic, plugging a battery charger back into the electrical panel serviced by Safari Condo in Quebec. Quebec was very far away now, farther even more by inches as the ice again shifted.

Not winning any prizes, but without incident, the Boilermaker's husband managed to lift the trinket off its hooks and lower it to the picnic

table where it lay aglitter in the bankable sunshine.

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I'M NOT GETTING any younger! I shouted as the others in our party of four admired the formerly aloft blade and its two batons, one at each end. The Boilermaker and her husband resembled missionaries brought back to the moment when, in their travels, they'd first encountered, in a campground deep in the woods, the fabled river snake blogged about by fellow missionaries. Snake or eel, the lore varied, but in every account the witnesses emphasized how the table or pedestal was too small for the full length of the captured specimen: and so it had been in the campground deep in the woods.

The couple's sudden abnegation of life in the fast lane for work as missionaries stunned everyone.

Maybe beyond the ice there was a version of the knickknack that would hop off the table all by itself and make quick work of the padlock. I looked at the padlock and then at the mischief-maker who grew up on the ice. Whom the ice had formed, for better or worse, into a local rooted to his past. At some level he was still the child who was supposed to push not pull; near to his heart was the temptation to imperil and the strength to resist temptation. Meanwhile I'd been through all kinds of peril in my journey to the ice. We were sibling mischief-makers, the difference being that long ago an opportunity had passed him by. I was the one who would pass through the door.

Nuh-uh, he shouted at me. Antifreeze. It wrecked my wrists. And

he launched into an anecdote about snow globe quality control, living week to week, OSHA.

The Boilermaker's husband looked at me from under droopy eyelids, done in by his ascent and safe return.

The wind dropped off momentarily. In the Boilermaker's lap, the pug, startled, coughed out a hoarse bark. That roused the Boilermaker from her stupor. I followed her lead as she took hold of one of the batons, and together we hoisted the misery whip into position at the entrance to the shed.

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DID THE LULL last?

It did not.

In proximity to the glittering serrations, did the padlock flinch? The padlock which only an hour earlier in the alley which had been its only home had been rioting while shackled, bellowing in its riot voice which went unheard the only word it knew, *clink clink clink clink clink?*

It did not.

Can the padlock's not flinching be attributed to neglect in the upkeep of the trinket's teeth?

It can not.

Does a ferment exist whose name in terms of alphabetization is a near neighbor of the word "padlock" and whose origins are in the traditional cuisine of the ice?

It does not.

The brachycephal in the mallow anorak, did it return to snoozing once it noticed the knickknack poised to signal the beginning of the test?

It did not.

The toddler with chin hair, had he ever envisioned inside the elevator that he would be almost lifted off his feet by a sea breeze while gripping a baton which would transfer his power to a length of flexing stainless steel at the other end of which a Boilermaker happy not to be cooped up in a teardrop set herself with her boots far apart in a biomechanically efficient stance and prepared to throw her weight into a vigorous first push?

He had not.

Did the padlock cease its inaudible noisy quaking when the Boilermaker adjusted the vector of the push so that the serrations no longer playacted at threatening the shackle?

It did not.

In the alley, had the trinket when it loomed over the door conversed at length with the padlock about the ferments inside the shed and the illusory simplicity of alphabetizing in a niche commercial environment of unstandardized menu items many of whose names even in a single language varied between alternate versions as far apart or farther in their initial bigrams as the words “knickknack” and “padlock?”

It had not.

The word that the Boilermaker shouted into the sea breeze from her end of the flexing steel, was it “kerf?”

It was not.

The Boilermaker's spouse and former team leader who'd become a competent teardrop engineer and had jawboned about teardrop eccentricities over campfires in the company of the few and far between fellow teardrop wanderers, is it possible that he would choose the wrong tool for the job?

Not remotely possible.

In terms of partnership and keeping the serrations engaged and mutual decision making and working together in a cycle in one continuous motion rather than two distinct movements, all specifically in a context of dual-operator knickknacks, did the elevator survivor know what he was doing?

He did not.

Had he ever had his hands on a baton that would gain him entrance to a shed?

He had not.

Was he getting ahead of himself and worrying that once inside the shed he would tear through the flight of ferments with unprecedented speed or would be so depleted by the time he got inside the shed that he would alphabetize in a depleted haze and, either way, when he completed the test and knocked on the door from the inside to be let out, the administrators of the test, assuming he was still at it, would have retreated indoors to shed their overmitts and warm their hands over ferments complemented by the distinct taste imparted by the acidic byproduct of non-spore-forming microorganisms to the toasted leavened quartered slices upon which the

ferments sat?

He was not.

As the baton on his side of the padlock moved in his direction due to the force exerted by the Boilermaker on her baton on her side of the padlock, was he tempted to remove his overmitts so as to gain a better intuitive sense of the magnitude of the force exerted by the Boilermaker and respond appropriately either with pressure of equal magnitude or to add or subtract magnitude so as to correct for tentativeness or overenthusiasm on the part of the Boilermaker?

He was not.

Had he converted his height to feet and inches and taken the two numbers, feet and inches, as the tens and ones digits respectively of the recommended distance, in inches, from the ball of his front foot to the midline of his rear foot?

He had not.

Was he in danger of hesitating before he made his first contribution to the ideal cycle of continuous collaborative motion because he couldn't feel his feet and had become distracted by pondering the angle at which his knee closer to the test was supposed to be bent and the relationship between that angle and the angle of his knee farther from the test and how the name for the unit of measurement for those angles as well as the angle at which he was supposed to be exerting force upward against the trinket was identical to the name for the unit of measurement that applies in quantifying the magnitude of thermodynamic energy transferred in the

continuous cycles of states in an idealized device called a Carnot engine as well as the magnitude of heat energy in the measurement system modeled after the Carnot engine which if it were an actual and not an idealized engine could be said accurately to be transferring energy from reservoir 1 to reservoir 2 in a magnitude insufficient at the moment to sustain sensation in his pedal extremities?

He was not.

Was the test rigged?

Not that test.