

Praise for *The Ice House*

‘[A] delicately spun story of family, loyalty, and the difficult choices people must make when forgiving someone.’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘*The Ice House* is a tour de force that sweeps readers into a symphony of powerfully drawn characters, all of whom have been wounded in ways that both cripple and embolden them. This novel is an intercontinental family saga and an exploration of blue-collar life, but at its core it’s a very good novel that asks us to consider the lengths we’ll go to in order to save the things that matter most: a company, a loved one, ourselves.’ Wiley Cash, author of *The Last Ballad* and *A Land More Kind than Home*

‘*The Ice House* offers all the pleasures of the novel – robust characters we worry about and root for, a story that deepens and intrigues, language that charms and surprises, and even some rare and welcome humor. It does all this in a setting unusual to a novel – the world of work, in this case, a family icemaking business in Florida. How does Laura Lee Smith keep that small, cold world so large and ardent hearted? *The Ice House* is a marvel of a novel.’ Beth Ann Fennelly, Poet Laureate of Mississippi and author of *Heating & Cooling*

Laura Lee Smith is also the author of *Heart of Palm*.
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THE ICE HOUSE

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For Ken and Judy, who gave me yesterday.
And for Iain and Gemma, who give me tomorrow.



Between melting and freezing

The soul's sap quivers.

—T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”



THE ICE HOUSE



O N E

Johnny MacKinnon developed a fierce headache just before dawn. He'd slept poorly: spells of fitful dreaming and heart-skittering wakefulness. Now he lay still and chilled, watching through half-opened eyes as gray October light pushed into the bedroom. In his head: jackhammers. Pile drivers. My God.

He looked to his right and found the bed empty. Pauline had already risen. He closed his eyes and listened; she was moving around the kitchen downstairs. There was the soft thunk of the refrigerator door and Pauline's voice, indistinct but lilting, speaking to the dog. There was the music of spoons and ceramic mugs on tile. There was the faint rushing of a compressor. The air-conditioning temperature was set too low. Johnny found it all immeasurably irksome. He was hurting, and he was cold.

The only way out of it is through it. He'd read that somewhere. He willed himself out of bed and made for the bathroom, where he swallowed three ibuprofen tablets with handfuls of water from

the tap and took a shower while waiting impatiently for relief. It arrived tentatively. The pounding in his head resolved slowly to a dull echo. He dressed and descended the stairs. Then, standing at the kitchen sink with a cup of coffee, he immediately found himself caught in a nettlesome conversation with Pauline, who thought they ought to give Johnny's son Corran a call today. It was Corran's thirtieth birthday, she reminded him. But Johnny wasn't keen.

"I have a headache," he said. "And I need to get to the factory."

"Well, maybe later then. Did you take something? Ibuprofen? Maybe you need to eat." Pauline was standing next to the kitchen table, rigging an iPod to the waistband of her shorts in preparation for a run. "Eat and feel better. And then we could call him. Or you could call him on the drive in."

"I took something. I'm not hungry."

"Just to say happy birthday. Try to get past this thing."

Johnny regarded his reflection in the kitchen window and didn't answer immediately. The air conditioner finally sighed to rest, and in the sudden silence he could hear the indistinct bickering of fractious gulls, the faint thumping of waves on sand. Two blocks away, the Atlantic Ocean advanced, retreated, advanced.

"I don't think so, Pauline."

"But there's the baby now," Pauline said. "You're a grandfather. Don't you want to mend the fence?"

"There's no fence to mend," Johnny said. "Corran's seen to that." An exaggeration, perhaps, but metaphorically sound.

"He's clean now. It's what we wanted. You could just swallow your pride and give him a call," Pauline said.

"He needs to apologize to us. He could give *me* a call."

Pauline always said stubbornness was the same as stupidity. "One day you'll be sorry," she told Johnny. "Your only child. One day you'll regret this."

"One day *he'll* regret it," Johnny said. Pauline threw up her hands.

"He's your son. And if *I* can forgive him, *you* ought to be able to."

"Pauline," Johnny said. "I can't. Tough love. You wouldn't understand."

That stopped her. She hated that, to be reminded that she wasn't Corran's *real* mother, that she wasn't anybody's real mother, and therefore couldn't possibly understand how any parent could turn his back on his own child. Johnny didn't mean to hurt her. But he couldn't discuss it anymore.

"Lord have mercy," she said, her injury quickly turning to annoyance. She moved to the center of the kitchen and started to do toe raises. "I swear to heaven, Johnny, you could piss off the Pope." Sometimes—like when Pauline was irritated with him, for example—the North Florida argot he always found so arousing became even more pronounced. When he'd first arrived in Jacksonville from Scotland at twenty-seven, he'd been astounded at the local dialect—it was *real!*—and to meet someone of Pauline's beauty and grace and hear the tangy drawl of her voice had been almost too much. The first time he'd ever heard her say "y'all" he'd immediately developed an erection. There were moments even now, all these years later, when the sound of Pauline's voice still had this effect on him, though this morning, with her insistence that he reopen this barrel of emotional monkeys with Corran, was admittedly not one of them. An *apology*. He'd made the point to Pauline a

thousand times. He'd wait for an apology from Corran before taking a single step back from the line.

"I'm sorry," he said to her now, "I only meant—"

"Oh, quit," she said. She raised up on her toes again. "I know what you meant. Anyway, *I'm* going to call him."

"I'd rather you didn't."

Pauline put her hands on her hips and stared at him as she bobbed up and down, flexing her calves. He watched a flicker of resistance pass over her face—God forbid he try to tell her what to do!—but he kept his gaze neutral and added "please," and it seemed to work. Her face softened a bit. She settled flat on her feet. She bent one knee, drew a leg up behind her, and clasped her foot to her backside in a move that she'd explained to him as a quad stretch but that always looked to him like an awkward but slightly erotic jackknife.

Pauline had become a runner only a few years ago. She ran on the beach at low tide, when the sand was wide and flat. She was usually in training for some race or other, and she maintained a meticulous log of times and dates and pace rates in her iPhone. At fifty, she was three years younger than Johnny, a point she rarely allowed him to forget, but even with this advantage she was still, in his opinion, aging past the athletic ability to which she now aspired. When she was in her thirties and forties, she was softer and more pliable (*fat*, she would correct him), but since she'd started running her muscles were steely, unyielding. He had very mixed feelings about all this.

"You don't need to train at all," he told her one afternoon recently, when she came in from a long run red-faced and limping. "We own an ice factory. Just come out on the shop floor and throw ice with me for a few weeks, you'll be fit as a fiddle."

"Throwing ice is not the same as athletic training," Pauline said.

"Let me see you throw two bags up onto a pallet. One. Let me see you throw one bag." Pauline narrowed her eyes and didn't answer.

"Fine," she said now. "Don't call your son, and I won't, either." She stretched the opposite quadriceps and then stood still and regarded Johnny somberly. "But I just think it's sad."

"It's sad," Johnny agreed. Though really, "sad" didn't even begin to describe it. Over the past decade, Johnny had paid for his son to attend three different private programs for heroin rehabilitation: two in Scotland and one—the real doozy—a stay at an exorbitant inpatient facility in Jacksonville that was paid for with a second mortgage on the MacKinnons' house. Corran had relapsed within a few months of each treatment. It wasn't that Johnny blamed his son for falling victim to addiction. But last Christmas, Corran came from Glasgow to Florida for a holiday visit and went on a bender that culminated in a violent row upon the discovery that he'd stolen Pauline's wedding ring for drug money. Oh, God, wasn't *that* quite the circus? Denial. Defensiveness. Rage and accusations. *Enough.* Johnny put Corran on the first flight back to Scotland and hadn't spoken with him since. Now, word from Glasgow via Johnny's ex-wife was that their son, inspired by the birth of a child, had recently cold-turkeyed at a public clinic. Which was a lovely thing, if it was true. Even more if it was permanent. But Johnny was afraid to hope.

"All right. I'm going down to the beach to run," Pauline said. She'd stopped stretching and was pulling her blond hair up into a tight ponytail. "Can you feed the General?" General San Jose was the geriatric dachshund who had lived in their house

for fourteen years. The old dog slept in the bed with Johnny and Pauline, though Johnny had been trying to insist for years that he should at least be relegated to the foot of the mattress and not be allowed to burrow directly between them, which he usually ended up doing in the middle of the night anyway. The General came downstairs once every morning to eat a bowl of kibble and poke around the backyard for a few minutes, and then he bumped back up the stairs and spent the rest of the day in bed. In cooler months Pauline left a heating pad under the duvet. It was an out-of-control situation. Johnny had given up. The General was now gazing at him skeptically.

"I'll feed you, you fat old thing," Johnny said. "Quit worrying."

"Obdurate," Pauline said. She'd stopped near the back door.

"What?"

"That was a word I got this morning in my game. That's what you are, Johnny. Obdurate."

"Well, that sounds a wee bit ugly, Pauline," Johnny said.

"And do you want to know another word I got the other day that reminded me of you?" she said.

"I don't think so."

"Truculent."

"I don't know what that means," he said, though he did.

"I'll leave it to you to look it up, then."

"I've got a word for *you*, Pauline," he said.

"Oh?" she tipped her head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

"Grand."

"Grand?" She scowled.

"Yes, grand."

"That makes me sound huge. And old."

"I mean *grand*, like we use it in Scotland. As in brilliant. And stately. Queenly."

"Those are even worse! What am I, a cruise ship? A cathedral?"

He rolled his eyes. "I can't win," he said.

"Word to the wise, Johnny," she said. "Ain't a woman on God's green earth wants to be called grand. You know they named a canyon for that word, don't you?"

"You're not grand, Pauline," he said. "You're nongrand. Antigrand." She suffered a reluctant grin. "I'll be gone by the time you get back," he added.

"Fine. Grand. I'll see you at the factory later," Pauline said. She waggled her fingers at him. Then she wedged in a pair of earbuds and banged out the back door. Johnny turned back to the kitchen window and watched her run away: shoulders hunched, head down, flesh pressing tight against overpriced Lycra. She *was* grand. If he could see her face he knew she'd be scowling fiercely against the pain of her own exertion. Such a serious business. She reached the beach access and disappeared beyond a dune. Oh, Pauline. It was a mystery beyond reason; he'd never understand how he'd won her.

Johnny fed the General and took him to the backyard. While waiting for the dog to do his business, he checked his phone and found a text from Pauline that she'd evidently sent while running. How did she do that? *Don't forget atty coming to factory this week*, it said. *Want to see work logs. For OSHA. Remember?*

Well, now, there was one more thing to add to what was becoming a thoroughly discomforting morning. Johnny had been rather proud of himself for successfully beating back thoughts of the United States Occupational Safety and Health

Administration throughout the entire weekend. Leave it to Pauline to bring it back to mind on Monday morning. The Bold City Ice Plant, which they'd owned for nearly twenty years, was in the process of preparing an appeal against federal citations levied following a harrowing ammonia tank rupture that had occurred over the summer. There'd been no injuries, miraculously, though clearly the potential for harm or even loss of life had been significant. OSHA didn't like it one bit. The investigation was quick, the safety citations were hefty, and the associated fines, if they stuck, were hovering near three-quarters of a million dollars. Unfathomable! Bold City Ice would never survive a financial hit of that magnitude; the success of the looming appeal was critical. OSHA claimed negligent maintenance on the ammonia tank; Johnny MacKinnon claimed bullshit. And while the expensive attorneys Pauline had signed up were attempting reassurances (throwing around phrases Johnny found intentionally vague, like "nonculpable confidence" and "derivative innocence"), the whole calamity was not something that he was in danger of forgetting about anytime soon. He felt a moment's pique at Pauline for assuming he would.

He texted back a terse *Yep* and went to put the phone in his pocket, but before he did his eye fell on the date depicted on the phone's welcome screen: October 25. Yes, there it was: Corran's birthday indeed.

Don't you want to mend the fence?

It was hot in the backyard, must have been already pushing ninety, and here it was not quite seven in the morning. General San Jose was nosing in the Mexican bluebell. The gulls on the beach were still squabbling, their cries distant but clear through the pines. Johnny pocketed the phone and sat down on

the back step while something like an aura washed over him, not quite dizziness, but the opposite: a startling clarity, as though everything was suddenly rendering itself at a higher resolution. His headache clanged with renewed fervor for a moment, then almost as quickly subsided to a mild pulse. He waited until the General was pushing at the kitchen door, then he went inside, gathered his keys, locked up the house, and headed for ice.

For almost a year, Johnny had asked only one thing of Corran: an apology. He was willing to wait as long as it took.

One day you'll regret this.

Johnny knew, of course, that Pauline was rarely wrong. But this time was an exception. Tough love. It's what Corran needed.

Thirty minutes later, Johnny was gaining slowly on the approach to the Acosta Bridge, pushing stubbornly through the familiar traffic-stoppered I-95 bottleneck that was his daily commute from the house on Watchers Island to the ice factory in downtown Jacksonville. The forecast had promised rain, but the morning thus far was searingly, frustratingly bright. In the distance, the city's northern skyline, a loose half dozen high-rises, hugged the St. Johns like corset bones. Jacksonville, Bold New City of the South—city of bridges and Baptists, of Navy bases and nor'easters, of breweries and boats and the hot, holy temple of the fifty-yard line at EverBank Field. Engine rumbling. Radio chattering. Thumping of bass somewhere behind. And through it all, the faint smell of coffee, borne on a hot wind from the Maxwell House factory two miles up the river. Winter, spring, summer, now fall—always, in Jacksonville, the stubborn tinge of burned coffee. It was not something you could get used to.

Johnny crested an overpass and looked south, where the narrow funnel of the river opened wide and the banks winked with the reflections of stately white homes fronting the water in San Marco and Ortega. Where the rich people lived, Pauline always said. A relative statement, Johnny maintained; after all, it wasn't as if Pauline herself had ever known want. No, *rich-rich*, she would clarify. Old South rich. Not *working* rich. Different thing entirely. Johnny had to take her word for it. Johnny had spent the first half of his life in the biting poverty of a cold Scottish slum, so richness of any type was not a world he knew well. Well, fine. Better than working poor, he told Pauline. Johnny had seen the other side.

The ice factory was located in Little Silver, one of the oldest and coarsest neighborhoods in the sprawling city of Jacksonville. Bold City Ice was the biggest player on the Little Silver tax roll, and sometimes Johnny wondered if he and Pauline were keeping afloat not just the factory but the whole community, such as it was: a tight basket weave of avenues crowded with historic but decaying houses that were nothing but termites holding hands, really. Back in the '90s there'd been talk of revitalization for Little Silver. New streets, for example, or at least repairs to the potholes in the old ones. More incentives for business owners to set up shop. Maybe replumb the drainage system so the residents didn't have to wade through standing water and mosquito larvae every time it rained. But it hadn't happened. The money went to other things: crape myrtle giveaways for the Riverside districts, a new library downtown, even a new jaguar exhibit at the zoo (*Go Jags!*). Money attracted money. And Little Silver continued to molder.

Johnny drove down King Street and had to negotiate a narrow passage between a rusted-out Impala and a slow-moving

street sweeper before he could pull into the Bold City Ice lot. He parked and entered the admin wing. The factory lobby was quiet, and at first glance it appeared there was no one stationed at the reception desk, which wasn't particularly unusual. They'd been having trouble keeping the position filled, and Johnny had almost grown used to the vacant chair and the irksome sight of the desk cluttered with the day's rubber-banded packets of mail, stranded overnight packages, and the marooned calling cards of thwarted equipment reps who'd been hoping for a sales entrée and who had gotten, instead, a lobby barren as Gobi.

Then last spring they hired Rosa Kaplan, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Pauline's assistant Claire, to man the reception desk. Rosa, sweet kid but a little dim, if anybody was being honest about it, had graduated from the arts high school last spring with an impressive sculptor's hand but with a less-than-impressive GPA or attendant college outlook. Claire had been in a near-panic over what to do with the girl until Pauline stepped in and suggested that Rosa take on the receptionist's role, at least for the summer, until the junior college started sessions. That it was now October and Rosa had yet to make any move toward higher education was not a topic that anyone had been motivated to broach. And really, Rosa was doing a suitable job in reception—not counting the time she wasted batting her eyes at the boys on the ice crew, and with one in particular: Owen Vickers, a feckless delivery driver and a garden-variety jackass, if you asked Johnny. Every time Johnny came through the lobby and found Vickers slouched over the reception desk, leering at Rosa, he wanted to puke. "You're not busy enough?" he'd bark at Vickers. "You need more to do?" Rosa would bite her lip and Vickers would slink back off toward the loading bays.

But now the receptionist's station was empty again. Johnny was about to proceed through the lobby to the factory floor when he heard a string of obscenities and approached reception to find Rosa—or Rosa's blue-jeaned backside, rather—emerging from underneath the desk. She sat back on her heels and dangled a dusty wireless router in front of her.

"Damn router!" she said. "I hate this freaking thing!" Her face was red with exertion, and her hair was coated with dust. She'd been putting on weight since getting out of high school, and Johnny was a little sad to see that the first glimpses of harried womanhood had begun to stake a claim on a face he'd always thought of as nothing short of cherubic.

"Settle down there, kidda, you'll hurt yourself," Johnny said.

"I'm going to hurt this bleeping router, is what I'm going to do." Rosa struggled to her feet and pitched the router onto the desk. "Or the people who made this router, that's who. Who makes a router that won't—that won't even *route*?" She wiped the sweat from her brow and spit a strand of hair out of her mouth. "Do you know where Pauline is?" she said. "She needs to sign these I-9's on the new hires."

"Running. She'll be in later. Here. I'll sign the forms."

Rosa shook her head. "They need Pauline's signature."

Now this was irritating. Years ago, when he and Pauline first bought the ice plant from her father, they'd drawn up an elaborately detailed business plan which included an organizational chart that presumably gave each of them equal leadership. It wasn't as if Johnny—a self-taught journeyman with a high school degree—had been to business school. How did he know what all the terminology meant? But there it was in the business plan:

At Bold City Ice, Pauline was CEO, and Johnny was COO. His understanding, at the time, was that the “C”-level titles implied parallel authority. Not that it really mattered, of course. It was just that over the years it became apparent to Johnny that some of the administrative staff seemed to assume that Pauline was the actual boss of the ice venture, while he was more like the lead roustabout in a stationary circus.

Once, out of curiosity, Johnny googled the titles and was surprised to discover that a chief executive officer was widely considered to have greater authority than a chief operating officer. Well, bollocks. He wondered if Pauline knew that when they wrote the business plan. Ah, not that it made a real difference. To his own operations staff, to the workers making the ice, there was no issue. Out on the factory floor, he was the boss. He was “Ice,” as the crew called him. But these folks inside. Now *they* were another story.

“I’ll sign Pauline’s name, then,” he said to Rosa, reaching for the forms.

“Forge them? That’s dishonest.”

“It’s fine. I’m half-owner of the company. Hasn’t Pauline ever signed something for me?”

“No. She always wants things done right.”

“And I don’t?”

“Well, you’re suggesting we forge government documents. That’s dishonest.”

“Honesty is overrated, Rosa,” Johnny said, just as Roy Grassi, the factory’s lead operations engineer, banged into the lobby, shouldering a ladder. “And if anybody ever asks you where you heard that,” Johnny continued, “you lie and tell them it was Roy Grassi.”

"Roy Grassi told her what?" Roy said.

"Told her she's under the mistaken impression that my wife is the boss of me," Johnny said. "Now give me those papers," he said to Rosa.

Rosa rolled her eyes. "Oh, fine," she said. She handed him the forms. "I'll just tell Mrs. MacKinnon you pressured me to commit a felony."

"Now it's 'Mrs. MacKinnon'?"

Rosa sighed. "My mother tells me I have to behave more professionally."

Johnny signed the forms and handed them back to Rosa, who accepted them grudgingly.

"Pfffft," she said. "Anyway, you had two calls. One from Southeastern Distribution. And one from a lady named Sharon. She sounded Scottish." Rosa exaggerated an accent on the word "Scottish," dropping the t's in the middle so it came out "Scaw-ish." She handed Johnny two slips of paper with phone numbers written on them. "Like, maybe a relative?" He looked at the numbers, which were fuzzy and out of focus. He rubbed his eyes.

"My ex-wife," he said.

But Rosa had lost interest in Johnny. She picked up the router and called across the lobby to where Roy was now struggling out the front door with the ladder. "Roy," she said. "This router's broke."

"Take it up with your mom, Rosa," Roy said. "I'm busy." He paused and looked back at Johnny. "I know why Southeastern's calling, by the way," he said. "They got a bug up their backside about pallet heights. Ed's gonna come pester you about it."

"Brilliant," Johnny said. "Looking forward to it."

"Oh, and Pauline texted me. She told me to remind you that the OSHA lawyers want to come this week about working on the appeal."

"I know," Johnny said. "*Och, I know.*"

Roy grunted and bumbled out the door.

"What did she want, Rosa?" Johnny said.

"Who?"

"Sharon."

"Oh," Rosa said, squinting at him while she tried to retrieve it from her memory. "She didn't say. Just that you should call her back. Oh, and the Southeastern guy? *Rude.*"

Johnny made his way to his office. He dialed the number at Southeastern Distribution but got voicemail. He left a message. Then he dialed Sharon's number but reached voicemail there, too. Didn't anyone answer phones anymore? He listened to the familiar cadence of Sharon's voice on the recording. "I'm not here right now," she said. "But leave me a message. I'll ring you back."

"Returning your call," he said simply. "Hope all's well." *Don't overthink, he told himself. If it had been an emergency, she would have called your cell.*

It wasn't just the headache. He was feeling decidedly punk, he realized. He left his office and stopped in the men's room, where he chugged a few gritty nips of Pepto and swallowed three more ibuprofen tablets. Then he donned a parka and headed for the ice floor, the music of Sharon's voice still ringing in his ears.

Johnny's first wife was a survivor. That's what Sharon called herself, and it was true. She had survived a number of seemingly insurmountable obstacles in her lifetime: abuse, poverty, breast

cancer, and even—as she often reminded him—marriage to Johnny. But it was funny how things worked out. He and Sharon had loved each other, but they had been terrible together. Far too young, for one thing. Hopelessly poor, constantly overwhelmed, scrapping like cats at every turn. They'd been living in a moldy flat in the housing schemes of Easterhouse, just outside Glasgow, when Sharon discovered she was pregnant. Easterhouse was a place filled with fear and despair, governed by a ring of territorial gangs: the Drummies and Barlanarks, the Monks and the Provies, all of whom had been hacking each other with machetes and Buckfast bottles for close to a century and who showed little sign of slowing down anytime soon. When the baby was born, they called him Corran and gave him the middle name of Boniface, a name Johnny had heard once in a movie and never forgotten. "Good fate," it meant. They laid their hands on the baby's downy head and wished it so.

Johnny and Sharon stayed together for a few years after that, which seemed a miracle now, looking back. There had been no doubt in either one's mind that they should split. The only real surprise was how much more they liked each other after they separated. After a few rueful, stiff meetings with legal aid about custody arrangements, they realized with great relief that they could chuck the lawyers, get the divorce, and still be friends. They even still lived together for a spell. "Just my ex-husband," Sharon would say to the new boyfriends who came calling, pointing to where Johnny sat in the lounge watching telly or in the kitchen making Marmite toast for Corran. "Pay no mind." Sometimes Johnny would fetch them a beer, have a chat about the Rangers while Sharon finished getting ready.

The only problem was money. It was moderately miraculous that they both had jobs: Johnny as a packer in a frozen food warehouse and Sharon as a night-shift orderly in an elder care hospital so she could be home days with Corran. They worked as hard as they could. *Out of Easterhouse*, they said. *We're getting Corran out of Easterhouse*. They swore on it. They drank on it. Sharon wept over it and Johnny made grim-faced promises in the night, hands clenched, watching Corran's thin chest rise and fall as he slept in the little cot in the lounge. They cut back on cigarettes and quit going to the pub. They put the extra pound notes in a biscuit tin and hid it in the oven.

But then the warehouse cut the hours on Johnny's shift nearly in half, and the Drummies busted into the flat and stole the stash, and the tenuously balanced scale of solvency they'd worked so hard to stabilize went plummeting toward paucity again. Sharon took on extra hours. Johnny spent every afternoon and evening with Corran and even looked after a little girl from the other end of the housing schemes to try to pull in a little extra cash. It wasn't enough. *Out of Easterhouse*, they whispered, voices growing fainter and more hopeless. The flat was cold, and icy water dripped from a spongy area in the bedroom ceiling. One day three-year-old Corran stumbled and cut his hand on a broken Buckfast bottle tossed just outside their back door. Another day he stood transfixed at the front window, watching two teenage girls beat each other senseless while a gang of young men urged them on. Sharon pulled him away from the window, gave him a zwieback.

Then she met Toole, a physical therapist at the hospital where she worked. "This is the one," she told Johnny. "You might

be looking for another roommate." She was right. Toole was a good man. And he wanted to marry Sharon, wanted her and Corran to move with him down to Dunedin. Out of the schemes. "He said he'd pay for nursing school," Sharon told Johnny. Toole was on the front steps, goofing with little Corran.

Johnny looked around at the horrid little flat and then back at Sharon again.

"He'll be good to ye?"

"Yes."

"Well, then." He walked over and kissed the top of her head. And then he told her about the lead he'd gotten from a mate on a job in America. An ice factory in Florida. A real salary. Promotions, even. He could send money home. They could save for Corran's education.

"But won't ye miss us?" Sharon said. Toole walked in holding Corran upside down by his ankles. Corran was screaming with laughter, his fat soft belly rolling out of his shirt.

"Ah, no," Johnny said. "I'll make so much money I'll never think of ye again." He looked out the window, at the cold dirty streets of the schemes, and he cleared his throat. Then cleared it again.

"Ye cold basturt," she said, sniffing.

Johnny pulled three Tennent's from the icebox and passed them around. He gave Corran a cup of chocolate milk. They went out to the front steps and stood freezing in the gray haze. "Fuck you, Easterhouse," he said. He raised his beer.

"Fuck you," Sharon said. "Pack a' numpties."

"Fuck you," Toole said.

"Fuck you," Corran said, banging his cup against the rusted metal porch rail.

"Your mouth!" Sharon said. They laughed and went in, then spent the night drinking and talking of schools, airplanes, and America. And about the sweet salvation of money.

The next morning, they were hungover. Sharon left Toole snoring in the bedroom and came out to drink tea with Johnny. "Florida. It's what you want?" she said.

"It's good money," he said. "It's money I'll never make here. It's for Corran, aye?"

"Well, then."

"I'll come visit," he said. "And Corran can come see me."

She nodded.

"We're getting him out of Easterhouse, Sharon," he said. And they did.

The frigid operations wing of the old ice factory was a cavernous rectangle, somber as a basilica, three stories high with column-like fenestration that lent the place the look of an art deco Parthenon. The manufacturing gallery was surrounded by its supporting departments: water purifying, drying, storage, shipping. In the center, six twenty-foot-tall cylindrical ice machines stood in formation, and when the light was right, the effect of the looming silhouette of the barrels against the tall windows was like a Gotham City skyline, Johnny often thought. The ice machines were ancient, stubborn as pachyderms, a sextet of cantankerous old beasts that Johnny had been nursing, cursing, and cajoling for nearly three decades.

They had long ago outlived their manufacturer, and Johnny had found it so difficult to find replacement parts when he needed them that he had begun machining them himself in

his garage at home: a containment valve, a mounting bracket, a conveyor screw. The old tube machines could lose parts like rotted teeth, and sometimes Johnny felt like an antediluvian dentist, trying to fashion custom teeth for a passel of cranky old hippos that were only going to turn around and bite him once he got the choppers fitted.

Ah, but he loved the old brutes. Who was he kidding? He regarded them. The most problematic of the six was Dumbo, a wholly erratic lunk of a machine that had been rebuilt so many times Johnny was surprised every day to come in and find the old hog still wheezing and clanking away. Then there were the others, which over the years the crew had christened according to reliability, productivity, and personality: Tut, Popeye, GoGo, Samson, and Proud Mary. He wondered how much longer he could conceivably keep this old fleet of rust buckets going. But he'd work them until they were dead. What else could you do?

As if on cue, Dumbo started acting up, clattering like a washing machine with an off-kilter bushing. *Damn it.* Johnny knew what was happening. Lately there'd been a pesky tendency for short-outs on Dumbo's electronic expansion valve, a new-fangled add-on that had been installed on all the old icemakers a few years ago. Before some of these newer technologies had been integrated into operations, a step that Johnny grudgingly accepted as a conduit to more efficient production, the icemakers had been completely mechanical. But increasingly, the old machines were being retrofitted with electronic and even computerized parts, which might have meant gains in efficiency but also meant losses in bloody *fixability*. Johnny could fix a mechanical part. He could even retool one, if necessary. But these computerized valves? They were like highly complex parasites

on a bunch of simple old dinosaurs. The only thing he really wanted to do with them was pull them off. He shut Dumbo down and waited for her to stop thrashing. Then he shimmied under the base of the icemaker. If he could reach up and jiggle one of the hoses to the expansion valve, it might help trip the connection back to life.

He'd been at it for only a couple of minutes when a pair of leather loafers appeared next to Dumbo, pivoted once, then stopped. Johnny wondered if it was possible to crawl all the way under the machine to avoid detection, but it was too late.

"Compression valve again, eh, Ice?" The voice belonged to Ed from Sales, who was now squatting on the opposite side of the old icemaker, peering underneath toward Johnny. "A bitch, ain't it?" Ed from Sales, Johnny thought, wouldn't know the difference between a compression valve and an expansion valve if said valve were attached to his own undersized pecker. It had often struck Johnny as gratingly miraculous that Ed could so successfully peddle a product about which he had so little concrete understanding. Johnny had lost track of the number of times he'd tried to tutor the man in the physics of refrigeration and the mechanics of fulfillment, with the idea that perhaps with a bit of background Ed would have a little more respect for what went on out here on the ops floor. But it was no use. To Ed, the ice just magically appeared. He was a good salesman; Johnny would give him that. Head of the department, and top seller, every month. But annoying as hell in the process.

"Expansion valve, Ed," Johnny said.

"Have you read your email, Ice?" Ed said.

"I don't read email, Ed," Johnny said, which was not entirely true. He did read email; just not email from Ed.

Ed suffered a smile. "Well, that must be nice," he said, in an ingratiating *just kidding!* tone. "Some of us *have* to read email."

"What do you want, Ed?"

"I want to request a meeting."

"This is a meeting." Johnny was still on his back underneath the ice machine, one arm snaked up toward the expansion valve and the other shaking a series of hoses in succession, trying to locate the short.

"I mean, a *meeting*. Like, where we sit down and talk."

"We're talking right now."

"Yes, but you're not giving me your full attention. That's why I want to schedule a meeting."

Johnny closed his eyes. Being on his back like this seemed to be causing a troubling sense of vertigo. He dropped his arm and took a deep breath, then slid out from underneath Dumbo and stood up, wiping his hands on his parka. He was dizzy, but he fought off a stumble. He looked at Ed, who was beginning to rub his hands together and bobble up and down on his toes, standard choreography for anyone from admin who came out onto the ice floor without a parka and remained for more than a couple of minutes.

"Shit, it's freezing out here," Ed said.

"What do you *want*, Ed?" Johnny repeated.

"It's not what I want, Ice. It's what my *customers* want. Shorter pallets."

This again. For months, Ed had been fixated on the bone-headed idea of having the packing crew stack the pallets with fewer bags of ice. Set procedure, which Johnny and Roy supervised with an aviator's precision, was to have the crew create eight-foot-high cross-hatching towers of ice bags that were solid

as a bunker and that fitted squarely with the dimensions of the trucks, thus maximizing shipping efficiency. The pallet towers were a point of pride with the packing crew, in fact. Only the most skilled could throw an ice bag up to the top of a nearly filled pallet and have it land in the proper position before the entire pallet was forklifted over to be stretch-wrapped and stored for shipment.

But Ed was on a campaign. The pallets were too tall for his distributors' comfort, he said. They were forced to use step-ladders to reach the tops of the pallets in order to break up the shipments for individual orders. Stepladders! Imagine the hardship! So Ed's genius solution was to reduce the stacked pallets by a foot or more, thus decreasing the number of bags on each pallet and making it easier for his pansy-ass distributors to fill their orders without having to strain their fragile arms.

"That's asinine," Johnny had told Ed, more than once. "That blows our shipping numbers. That costs more money."

"We gain market share through customer service," Ed argued. "Distributors think we're hard to work with. We've got to make it easier on them. Then we *make* more money."

And on like that.

"Can we at least talk about it?" Ed was saying now.

"No."

Ed sighed. He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and extended it to Johnny. "I knew you wouldn't read the email. So I printed it out for you." Johnny took the paper and put it into his own pocket, then watched the flicker of frustration cross Ed's face.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Ed said.

"I'm pretty sure you're going to tell me what it says."

"It's a *complaint*. From Southeastern Distribution. They say the high pallets are dangerous. And that they slow down their operations."

"And you're slowing down mine right now, Ed."

Johnny moved around Ed and kicked at Dumbo from the other side.

"I want shorter pallets, Ice."

"No, Ed."

Ed actually stamped his loafered foot in impatience, and Johnny had to work to suppress a smile. It was almost too easy to get Ed's goat.

"Well, what am I supposed to do with this complaint, then?"
Ed said.

"You'll figure something out."

"You don't respect me, Ice."

"I respect what you do, Ed."

"That's not the same thing."

"Look, what do you want, Ed? You want a fucking hug, or what? I don't hug, Ed. I make ice. And you sell it."

Ed looked away, furious. "And you're lucky I do," he muttered.

"I'm not deaf, asshole," Johnny said.

Ed put his hands in his pockets. "You should treat people better, Ice," he said.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Ed. You're breaking my heart."

Johnny's phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and answered it.

"Where you at?" Roy said.

"I'm beating up Dumbo," Johnny said. "And bonding with Ed."

"Can you come out front?" Roy said. "To the parking lot? I need to show you something."

"I'll be there in a minute," Johnny said. "I'll bring Ed. He needs a hug."

"I ain't hugging his ass," Roy said.

Johnny placed a hand over the phone's mouthpiece and turned to Ed. "Sorry, Ed," he said. "Roy says he ain't hugging your ass either."

Johnny restarted Dumbo and waited; the wracking imbalance seemed to have subsided, and the old machine clattered back into operation. Ed shook his head and walked away. His lips were moving, but with the machinery racket, Johnny couldn't hear what he was saying. Though he had some idea.

Out in the parking lot, Johnny had a moment to look up at the hoary old ice factory, and to wonder how it could be that more than twenty-five years had elapsed since he'd first laid eyes on it, yet *only* a moment. Then the bespectacled countenance of Roy Grassi appeared at the top of the building's roofline and pivoted like a bobblehead before drawing a bead on Johnny in the parking lot below.

"The security lights," Roy yelled. "One was out."

Well, of course it was. The security lights were a fancy and expensive system of façade fixtures that Pauline, skittish about the decline of the surrounding neighborhood, had insisted on installing last year. At the time, Johnny had proclaimed it a waste of money and a concession to the fearmongering of the local news outlets. But now, given the recent increase in drug activity in Little Silver, he had to concede that perhaps the lighting

system was a pretty good idea. If only the damn bulbs—at eighty dollars a pop!—would quit blowing.

“I found the bad one,” Roy hollered from the top of the building. “One dead bulb was shorting out the whole system.”

Even from this distance, Johnny could see that Roy was sweltering on the rooftop. And no wonder. It was at least ninety degrees here in the parking lot, Johnny realized, which at least had the benefit of a bit of shade from the few moss-draped live oaks that stretched their roots under the railroad tracks to the west and cast long afternoon shadows to the east. He could only imagine the heat up on the blackened roof of the ice plant. Sure enough, Roy looked to be in a hurry to get down. “Let me toss this to you,” he called, holding up a lightbulb the size of a small punch bowl.

Johnny squinted up at him. Roy had become a blurry silhouette against the sun’s rays, which were so intense they were beginning to play tricks on Johnny’s vision. In fact, there now appeared to be more than one Roy—there were two up there . . . and now *three*? Johnny couldn’t get oriented; a formation of green floaters danced across his sight line. He knew he wouldn’t be able to see the bulb if Roy threw it, so he held up his hands in a gesture of refusal.

“You ready?” Roy said.

“Yes,” Johnny said.

The bulb sailed down from the roof and smashed on the blacktop three feet to Johnny’s left, sending razors of glass across two empty parking spaces and clinging to the legs of Johnny’s pants. He rubbed his eyes.

“Oh, man,” Roy said.

Johnny looked up. "You numpty," he said. "What the hell did you think was going to happen?"

"Well, I thought you were going to catch it, Johnny."

"I told you not to throw it."

"You did not! You said throw it."

"Bullshit."

"I said are you ready, and you said yes."

Johnny squinted at Roy, feeling as he did a fat drop of sweat tracking down his back. Had he said yes? He meant to say no. He searched for an echo in his audio memory. Damn. Maybe he *had* said yes. Why did he say yes? Everything, today, was short-circuiting. Even his brain.

Up on the roofline, Roy was shaking his head. "I'll be right down," Roy said.

Johnny kicked at a few of the larger shards of glass and bent to pick up the broken base of the bulb. Then he brushed his hands across his pants, realizing too late that he'd just embedded tiny slivers of glass into his hands. A few minutes later Roy appeared, sweating and carrying a push broom.

"You should have caught that, Ice," Roy said. "It was right in front of you." He looked at Johnny curiously. "You all right?" Roy said.

"Yeh," Johnny said, though suddenly he wasn't sure this was true. He walked back into the factory and paused near one of the catch bins to cool off. He peered into the bin and watched the cubes of ice fall, bright and clean.

Johnny had come to know many things about ice. He and Pauline once attended a talk at the community center at the Watchers Island town hall. The talk was given by an artist; he

was some sort of crystal craftsman, or he worked in glass; Johnny couldn't remember. But he said the reason people are drawn to glass, and to crystals of any sort, is that the reflectiveness reminds them of where they came from, of some bright nascent place, and Johnny thought it was the same with ice. It was an astonishing substance that most people rarely stopped to contemplate. He considered a simple cube of ice—the outer ridge clear as a diamond, and within, a swirling, smoky core. Ice can vanish in a moment and endure for thousands of years. It can freeze metal and burn human flesh. It can sink a tanker and soothe a baby's gums. It can crawl. It can rise from the earth. It can fall from the sky. It can preserve a beating human heart in a flimsy Styrofoam cooler.

At the factory, most men saw it as nothing but a chore. It was the enemy, to them, something to be made, packed, stacked, loaded, shipped. But Johnny never tired of it. Think of it! Water turned to ice. Liquid turned to solid. Who but Christ could take one element and turn it into another? He told Pauline all the time, *We are miracle workers*. Have you ever seen a frozen waterfall? he asked her. It's a violation of everything we know: the space-time continuum, the basic laws of physics. Motion is arrested, energy is suspended, the laws of nature are confounded. *It's magic*, he told her. *It's the fifth dimension*.

It's just ice, she said.

Johnny looked up from the ice in the catch bin. Roy was back inside the factory. He was shouting. Dumbo was convulsing again. Johnny was seized with nausea. He bolted for the men's room and made it to a stall in time to vomit, but as he straightened up and made for the sink to wash up, the room became a kaleidoscope. The ceiling tiles fell around his head, and the floor

buckled and wrapped itself around his knees. The light became liquid. He heard his own voice moaning. And then all was dark.

He woke to the sound of Roy's voice.

Ice, you fell.

Ice, you hit your head.

Ice, man, are you with us?