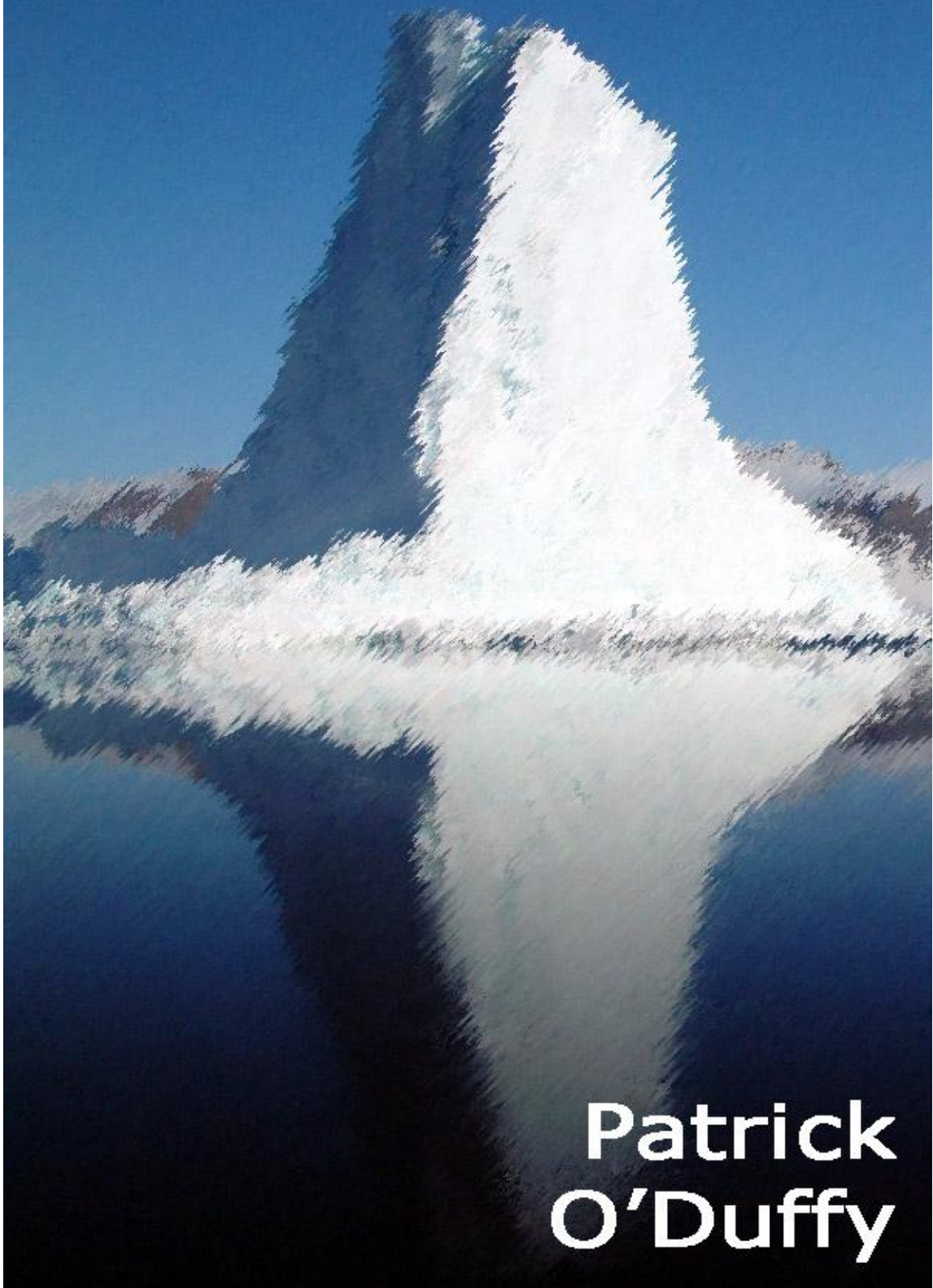


Hearts of Ice



Patrick
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Hearts of Ice

Winters are easier since you stopped smoking meth. You no longer sit wrapped in blankets at 4am in TV-lit rooms, legs curled unfeeling under you and stealing all the heat from your body while your naked chest oozes enough hot sweat to boil an egg. You stopped grinding your teeth down to bloody china chips, constantly worried that your frozen feet will set blue-black or disintegrate into ragged stumps, but never considering the possibility of setting the damn pipe aside and letting your boiling-point organs sleep. No, those days are done, and blood actually flows from your heart to your extremities now, instead of clumping in your veins like slush.

Winters are easier. Not much else is. Especially not now that you come home from work and find that she has left you.

You flick on every light in the apartment, as if hoping she is hiding somewhere in a shadow, that this is one big joke, and that you will find her and you will both laugh. But the two of you have not laughed in months, and once the shadows are chased away there's nothing left.

Grabbing a beer from the fridge, you go out onto the balcony and look out over the streets, not really hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but just wanting to put the apartment and her absence behind you, out of sight, maybe out of mind for just a second if you're lucky. Halos hover around every streetlight, light glinting off microscopic crystals of ice in the July air.

Crystals used to play a much bigger part in your life, of course, and bigger ones than these. You still remember nights spent turning a perspex

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pipe over in your hands, hunting down the slutty fat lumps of meth that had reformed on the walls, holding them to a flame so they melted and flowed like wax, liquefied into heavy white smoke that pooled and swirled in the current of your breath, inhaling shallowly but steadily to draw it up into your lungs, hold it, hold it, then exhaling into her waiting mouth and kissing her on the backswing.

Not that shotgunning meth does much. But it was part of the ritual. Everything becomes part of a ritual when you're using, everything bleeds relevance and meaning that just won't make sense to someone that hasn't been awake for forty hours and still has fully functioning kidneys. The world is feverbright in that space, brittlepretty, and you might feel great or you might feel like strung-out shit but either way it all *matters*. Like the way she looked at you when you were both half-cut. The way she hasn't looked at you for nearly a year. The way you guess she'll never look at you again.

The beer is finished, the streets are quiet, and you call your best friend to give him the news.

'Ah fuck, mate, I'm sorry,' he says. 'I knew things were bad, but I didn't think she'd just up and piss off like that. Did she leave a note or anything?'

No, you say. She didn't need to.

'Shit. That's just fucked, mate. It's not right of her to do the dirty on you like this.'

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Probably not, you agree. But like you said, things were bad. This was probably building up for a long time and I just didn't notice it.

'You should call her. Don't ask her to come back, that won't work, but just to get some closure. Get things sorted in your own head so you can move on.'

Maybe. I'm just so tired, you know? Tired and flat. Maybe if I was speeding I could handle talking to her, but –

'You better fucking not,' he says, and his voice is something surly and bruised. 'You were an absolute asshole on that shit, especially towards the end. You fucked off a lot of people who cared about you, and you're lucky I wasn't one of them. Start using again and your luck's going to run out with me and a *lot* of other people.'

I didn't say I was going to –

'So fucking *don't*. Not again.'

Okay.

'Good.' An awkward pause. 'Listen, I gotta go, but you should come over on the weekend. Alright?'

Sure.

He hangs up and the apartment is filled with the sound of your own thoughts again. The old internal monologue that used to be your everpresent soundtrack in the good-old-bad-old days.

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It was fine to start with, while you both straightened out and built something adult from the mess you'd made of your lives. Then she told you that she was bored with staying home on a Saturday night or calling it quits after an hour out on Friday. She told you she was tired of hearing about wild and crazy adventures that she missed in favour of housework and DVDs. She told you she wanted to meet new people, do new things, travel and play and maybe move closer to the CBD, and you said you'd do those things soon, honest, *but right now I just need to scrub the day out of my head and get some sleep, okay baby, please?*

She never told you that she loved you more when you were using.

She never had to.

You erased your dealer's number from your mobile when you stopped using, never called him again, never wanted to be tempted. But there's always an escape hatch, and after ten minutes you find it scrawled on a piece of scrap paper in a desk drawer. You look at the number for long moments, turn it over in your hand like a smoke-stained pipe with one bright nugget hidden behind the black, and think about consequences.

The one you love will never come back to you, and the people who do love you either treat you like an injured child or a leper. The streets outside are icy and winding, and no-one will grab the steering wheel and pull you back on a road that goes anywhere worthwhile.

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You don't need meth. You don't particularly *want* meth. But at least it's something you know. A WRONG WAY GO BACK sign you still know how to read in the night.

And perhaps, in the end, you would just rather be hated than pitied.

Do you make the call?

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Afterword

I put this story together because I wanted to write something outside my usual horror/weirdness playground and because I wanted to experiment with writing in second person. I quite like the effect; putting the story back on the reader perhaps means that, just for a moment, they have to decide what they would do when that last line rolls around.

Or maybe not.

If you liked it, you should check out my other ebook titles, although they're pretty much completely different to this one and so there's no guarantee that you'll like them. If you didn't, well, at least it was free. Man, I suck at self-promotion.

The cover image is a photograph of an iceberg in Baffin Bay, Greenland, which I took from Wikimedia Commons (thanks to the folks from the US Air Force base for taking the picture and making it public domain) and tweaked with my minimal Photoshop skills.

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