

COLDER

by Eric P. Isaacson

I can no longer feel anything below my ankles and a few days ago lost all feeling in my fingertips. I called in sick today, the fourth time in two weeks. It's hard to hold a pen or chalk, and I can't lecture without something in my hands. Really, though, I just can't bring myself to look at all those young faces anymore, with all their ignorance and energy. They don't realize what's going to happen to them — sagging waists and breasts, the wrinkles (oh, they start out as laugh lines but grow deeper and harder), the lost hair, the fear. I've got to be careful, though. Gary'll have to say something to me if I don't start showing up; I'll go in tomorrow, I think.

The phone rings. I ignore it in favor of the Discovery channel — a safari jeep runs from a charging bull rhino. Mostly I'm dozing on the couch. The computer chirps the middle of the hour. It's in the study, waiting. I turn it on every morning with hopes that I'll work on something. The old book, the new book. I used to indulge myself in a little Forum-type writing — what I liked to see happen with my sex life. Dana liked it when I wrote that kind of stuff, though she doesn't care for the dark fiction.

The phone is still ringing. I move my arm; if I didn't know better, I'd say it was asleep, but the numbness has spread. I should probably see my doctor.

"Hello?" It's Andi, my teaching assistant and sometimes lover. "Hi. No, no, I'm fine, really, just a slight case of I'll be better tomorrow. No, you probably better not. You might catch it. That does sound fun. No, she's away all day. I really

shouldn't. I bet you could, but, no. Yes, I'm sure. Maybe another time. Yes. Bye." I put the phone down so hard it rings a protest at me.

On the TV vultures pick at the lumped remains of a whitening rhino.

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Around four o'clock I get some energy back. I decide to start making dinner, mainly from the prodding of Hanna, my eight-year-old daughter, just home from Girl Scouts and "absolutely starved."

"Don't they feed you at those meetings?"

"Yeah," she says. She climbs up on the barstool and props her chin on clasped hands, watching me open the refrigerator.

"And you're still hungry?"

"It's just a couple of cookies, Dad." She gulps half a glass of milk, which I made her drink instead of the juice she wanted. "You can't expect me to survive on that, can you?" Her eyes roll up and she hops down from the barstool, heading for her room and the TV.

Dana arrives forty-five minutes later, when I'm chopping lettuce for a salad. She smiles at me when she comes into the kitchen. I smile back. I like the way her auburn hair frames her face, emphasizing large, white teeth. She comes over to me, putting her hand on the small of my back, an old habit. She starts to say something when Hanna bounds into the room. They talk about their days. Actually, Hanna speaks at Dana. Dana saw it on a talk show once, how parents never truly listen to their kids, and if they'd just listen for five minutes, without interrupting once, then the world would be

such a better place for you and me. But really, Dana's much better at listening to Hanna than I am. Especially recently.

I turn my attention back to the salad, then I see a deep, thick red in the lettuce and I realize I've cut a large chunk off the tip of my thumb.

"Fuck!" And I know I've pissed off Dana — she doesn't like me to use "that word" around Hanna. I sweep the lettuce into the sink and turn on the water, then the disposal.

"Eeyooo," Hanna says, her face scrunched up like a rotting peach.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dana yells. She grabs the cutting board and scoots it and the remaining lettuce into the sink. "How did that happen?" She takes my hand, which I had in the running water. I couldn't even feel the water on the wound.

"I'm sorry," I croak. Dana wraps a towel around the thumb and hand. She leads me toward the bathroom and bandages me up.

"You're going to see Qande," she says, teeth clenched.

* * *

I could tell by the tone in Gary's secretary's voice that Gary wouldn't be too pleased when she told him I wasn't going to be in again. As I sat in Dr. Qande's office I thought of what I would say to Gary when I talked to him. Gary is a fair man, but I had been taking a little liberty with my sick leave. Still, I felt entitled. It's not every day that you start going numb.

Qande comes into the narrow room and smiles briefly at Dana standing next to me on the examination bed. Qande's only thirty-six, but his stooped figure, whitening

beard with streaks of black, and thinning hair make him look in his fifties. He is a dark-skinned man of Mid-East ancestry, with thick eyebrows, giving him a Neanderthal look.

“Well, let’s see,” he says, looking at my folder. It’s growing thicker, a medical rap sheet. “Blood pressure is fine, reflexes okay. Blood work came back normal.” Qande looks at me – the first time since I’ve been in this room. “So,” he attempts a smile that only pulls one lip exposing a gold cap, “what the hell is wrong with you?” He stands there looking at me until a nurse steps in and whispers over his shoulder, her eyes flickering toward me briefly. Qande nods and grunts once. “Excuse me,” he says, and walks out, the door closing quietly. Dana stands as soon as he leaves. I listen to the soft ruffling of her red cotton skirt – the one she wears when she goes to meetings or office get-togethers. She chews her thumbnail, the other hand cradling her elbow. I don’t say “What is it?” though I know she wants me to. We’ve gotten used to this arrangement. She takes a few steps toward the door, stops, pivots and comes back.

I watch Dana sometimes, when she isn’t looking. In fact, I prefer to watch her then. When she shaves her armpits – the careful way she brings the razor down, then up; I can almost feel the sensual tension of caress and cut – it used to give me goosebumps. Or how she twirls the phone cord around her index finger, wrapping until there is no more finger, lets it uncoil and begins again. I caught her masturbating once, a long time ago. She was home, early from her secretarial job and I was supposed to be at a departmental meeting. She had in a Nine Inch Nails cd, a lacy black teddy on, and was on her knees, her left hand holding her crotch, singing with that Rat Razor guy: “I want to fuck you like an animal.” I watched the process: the slow rubbing of her

buttocks, upwards to the breasts, back to her pussy. Then the shedding of the teddy — she made it flow down her supple body. She began jerking her hips to the incongruous beat of that damned music and arched her back as she slipped her index and middle fingers in. I left once I saw her stop moving to the music — I knew she was close — and drove to the video store, debating whether or not she would know that I knew, and finally rented a couple soft porns that she'd been wanting to see. Now she finds it amusing that I want to listen to Nine Inch Nails.

Qande comes back in. "Why don't you go see a specialist?" He closes the folder and tucks his pen away. "I can set up the appointments for you."

Dana stands. "That would be fine," she says quickly.

Qande goes for the door and it isn't until it clicks shut that I realize I'm sitting in this unbearably white room alone, rubbing my arms.

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I straighten my attire and step out into the hall. I find Dana standing outside on the sidewalk smoking. I put my jacket over my right arm and my left hand in a pocket. I look at my shoes, finding odd that my feet are still there, still functioning. I blow out a short breath.

"What?" Dana chirps. She lets out a long line of smoke.

I shrug one shoulder. She takes one more pull and then as she breathes that out, she drops the butt and steps on it. She folds her arms and looks at me.

"I have to go," she says finally. "To work. See you at home." She steps off the curb, heading to her gold Lexus. She starts the car and checks her hair in the mirror.

She turns to look out the back and our eyes meet. Then she shakes her head, eyes closed, and pulls out. She doesn't look at me as she drives off.

I go to my Ford truck and climb in. I drop my keys as I try to put them in the ignition. I reach down and grab for them. It's like trying to pick up some small thing with thick winter gloves on. I finally get the keys in and turn them. The truck dings to let me know it's alive and ready. I just sit there, my left hand on the wheel, my forehead resting on top, waiting.

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Andi is on top, as usual, and my hands are clamped on her hips. She pitches forward, her dark hair smothering my face, and she digs her nails into my shoulders – she once told me that it makes her come even longer when she can feel flesh under her nails. I withdraw my fingers when she moves to lie beside me.

“God, that was great,” she breathes. “Your turn.”

She rolls back over and crawls backwards down the bed until her head hovers over my limpness. With one hand she takes my penis at its base and then her tongue flicks out playfully. Then she takes the tip in, sucking, and then draws the rest of me in. I feel a slight pressure when she bites.

I shake my head, one hand touching the top of her head. She let's me out of her mouth and rises, resting on legs. I sit up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. I cradle my face in my hands. I should be able to feel the warmth of my breath. I should be able to go hard. I should be able to feel something here. Andi hugs me from behind, a quick movement.

“People are starting to ask about you at work,” she says, stepping onto the floor. She slips into her panties beside me — they’ve got a hole starting in the crotch — and she touches my shoulder. “You okay?”

“Mmm.” I go to put my hand on hers and find that it’s gone. I get up and walk into the bathroom, shut the door and lock it. I sit on the toilet seat even after I hear Andi finish dressing and leave.

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Dana doesn’t come home until after seven. Hanna is watching The Simpsons — something Dana frowns on, but I don’t mind so much. I watch through the peep hole and jerk the door open as Dana reaches for the knob. She jumps, her hand going to that place where the neck meets the chest.

“Jesus! You scared me. Why did you do that?” She comes in, laying her purse on the kitchen table. Hanna promenades in and gives her mother a hug. They start talking as Dana directs her into the living room. I look outside for a moment and see a Camaro or Firebird or one of those sporty looking Chevys rolling down the street away from our house. And, seemingly at the moment I spot the car, it lurches forward, building speed until it turns a corner.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Dana calls.

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After dinner, Hanna in bed, I go to my study and the computer. I try typing, but my fingers won’t conform to the keyboard. This book is going nowhere anyway.

“Did you make your appointment today?” Dana asks, hovering at the open door. She’s carrying her purse under one arm, her hands sorting the mail. She doesn’t look at me. I wonder if she is starting to feel like me.

I almost tell her, before she leaves the room, that I have no intention of making it to any appointment; that I’ll get over this soon; that Qande is exaggerating. I almost believe it, which makes me not want to tell her, so I don’t. My body performs its habit well – I stand, stretching my back, hands on my waist, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

The phone rings.

“Hello?” I say, just before Dana does on the other phone. We both wait. I think I hear a breath. “Listen,” I say, “leave us alone.” Then I push the hookswitch down and wait. A second or two later I let up on it slowly. “Hello?” I almost think it’s Hanna, the voice is so quiet and small. Then the dial tone assails me. I wait for Dana to put her phone down and then I do.

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It’s 11:30 or so as I stand at the open sliding glass door, looking out at the full moon. I take a sip of scotch and get only a slight tickle from my ulcer. The glass hangs at the end of my arm. My paunch is slowly replacing the view of my penis. I see my breath in front of me, but feel nothing – I wish I could say it’s the scotch. A sudden roar of a hotrod somewhere reminds me that we’re not alone here.

I turn and go to the doorway to the bedroom and look at my wife sleeping. The moonlight touches half her face. One leg snakes quietly under the comforter. I’ve lost

all feeling now — even the shape of my wedding band in my hand. I open my palm just to make sure that it's there. I imagine this is what the man on the moon feels like — circling the warm earth, the hot sun, suspended in the void, perfectly preserved.

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