

ICKE

by Greg Stolze

Icke held his killing tool casually, tipping it up against a shoulder with his right hand. The box that accompanied it rested beside his foot. He looked out over the ocean and frowned. It was Friday, the eleventh.

Icke was seventeen and had a lot on his mind. From where he stood, all he could see was the open water, cold gray foam fading to clear as it touched the bleak gray gravel beach. But if he turned around, he'd see his hometown of Wellesport.

The day smelled like dead mackerel.

Francis Icke (or "Icky" as he was almost always called at school) had been born in Wellesport, had gone to Wellesport North Elementary, Wellesport East Jr. High, and was now in Wellesport Central High School. He was poor, and pale, and his eyes were a little too close together under his shelving brow. If that wasn't grief enough, Icke was dadless since age ten, scrawny, and had a high, reedy, dissonant voice.

He didn't say much to anyone and no one said much to him, except in the language of sneers and cut-away glances

and bumps that were almost, but not quite, contemptuous shoves.

With a sigh, he looked down at his tackle box and opened it.

It unfolded smoothly into two ranked rows of small compartments, each one holding lures or hooks. It was like an amphitheater of tempting death, ocean-fishing tackle on one side, and lake and stream on the other. The sinkers and spare line and the fiberglass components of his lightweight stream rod were tidily stowed away. His gear was all top flight, either won in fishing competitions or bought with prize money.

Icke wasn't good at much and he didn't understand much, but he was the best damn fisherman Wellesport had seen in generations. As he started towards the bait shack, he thought about Wendy.

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Wendy was the only person who was nice to him. At some level, Francis realized that even she wasn't that nice to him. She didn't sit next to him at lunch or anything. But nine days earlier, on Wednesday, he was assigned to be her partner in Chem Lab. Everyone else laughed, but she didn't laugh. Didn't even roll her eyes. There was something

unseen going on with that between Wendy and Mrs. Frye, the always-frowning Chemistry teacher. Was there an understanding between them? Did Frye think Wendy would help him and then he wouldn't fail? Was Frye punishing Wendy for something? Or did she just think Wendy would be the least disruptive to pair with him? He didn't get it.

But when he read the lab instructions and started to do it, she corrected his mistake without calling him stupid, and when she passed him a beaker her fingers touched the back of his hand.

(As he checked over his excellent fish-killing tool, he looked down. He could remember the exact spot, on the little web by his thumb. Two fingertips, right there.)

He said "thank you" when she handed him the beaker and she said, "You're welcome" just as polite as could be. When class ended he said, "Bye" and she said, "See you later."

She didn't ignore him or say, "Yeah" or "Whatever" or "Bye" but "See you later." He didn't want to read too much into that, but he watched her walk away down the hall. It wasn't until he heard the laughter that he realized he was staring, and blushing.

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With his rod assembled and bait in a bucket, Icke walked out to the edge of the dock. He didn't cast yet. Instead, he sat and closed his eyes. He slumped and let things go away. The chill wind that was mostly passing right through his nylon jacket... he let it go. The growth pains in his shoulder and elbow and hip joints, he was probably going to get even taller and thinner now, and be even hungrier... he let it go. The sorrow at being him, and the anger that everyone else was everyone else... he let it all slide out of him until he wasn't a boy in a body any more, he was something else somewhere else.

He'd been able to do it as long as he could remember. Mostly at night, when Mom and Dad were yelling, he'd do it. He'd slide away into bodiless silence, until he could relax into sleep. It wasn't until a boring fishing trip on Stony Hill Lake that he'd realized where he was going when he left himself.

*

Francis was eight years old, and his father rowed him out to the center of the lake to make a few attempts – asked how school was, if he wanted to try any sports. At one point, his dad said, "You know, your mother and I..." But then he

couldn't finish it, as if he couldn't think of anything that applied to both of them.

For his part, Francis tried to talk to his dad about things that mattered to him – who was picking on him at school, and the console video game system he'd seen at the store when they were getting his winter coat, and his favorite TV show, but Dad didn't seem to understand any of it. So after some desultory fishing directions that ended with Dad impatiently baiting the hook and shoving the rod into Francis' hands, they settled into silence, staring out over the water.

"This is awright, is'nit?" Dad said, at one point. "Two men, out on the water, not needing to talk about anything."

Francis had already been bored right out of his body when he felt a bright, quick presence. Then two more, and a deeper, slower one. He'd felt things like this before when he went Out, but this time he had his eyes open and was more awake than asleep. He felt forms floating in the space he occupied and just that moment realized they corresponded, in one way, to what his eyes were seeing.

It was like an optical illusion resolving itself, like one of those Magic Eye books suddenly surrendering its hidden picture. The edges of difference

he felt matched up with the light and shadow falling on the water, which meant that... yes, that cool spot there must be the shadow of their boat!

The delight of understanding made Francis sit up straight and blink, and then his father swore at him for rocking the boat, then apologized for swearing. "Guess I'm just cranky 'cause they ain't biting," he said. After a pause, he asked if Francis wanted a 7-Up, and Francis said no, and his dad got out a beer.

Francis sank back into the mind of the water and realized those bright moving shapes had to be fish. He oriented himself in the water with the boat's shadow and put himself on, or in, or through the dark blue presence. His body up top slowly dangled the worm closer, and his mind down below worked the fish. He didn't control it, not the way he controlled the RC car his uncle from Maine had given him, before it broke

(and before Dad left and the uncle stopped coming around).

It didn't feel like that. It was more like he knew what the fish was going to do, or had decided to know, and the fish did exactly what he already knew it would. Or something.

Anyhow, he brought hook and fish together and caught a decent-sized bass.

His dad looked at him with genuine happiness, real pride, unforced joy for the first time Francis could remember.

*

After that, it'd been simple to get better and better at it. With practice, you could do anything, and this was the first time Francis had tried to learn something that wasn't hard (like reading and math) or tricky (like hitting a baseball or riding a bike). He found out he could go a lot bigger in salt water, and that while he could feel inside the fish, whales and dolphins and swimming people were just holes in space, like rocks and boats and pieces of trash. He wondered what that meant, but didn't think he could ask anyone.

He might have told his dad about it eventually, but Dad left. The fights had eased off after Stony Hill, but when they started again they seemed louder and worse. Francis caught more and more fish, started competing at the junior level, trying to keep Dad around, but he'd failed somehow.

That had been years ago and people were no longer impressed. It wasn't special anymore, instead of being confused the kids now just made it one more thing to tease about. "Hey Icky, you smell like fish guts!" was a typical example. It was just accepted that he'd

graduate high school to make his mom happy, or drop out, or flunk out, and become a professional fisherman. Maybe he'd compete at sport, maybe he'd go up to Alaska on the big boats, but those were details.

Pushing himself into the sea, any future felt very far away.

*

A week ago, on Friday the fourth, his mom had said, "How come you ain't got a girlfriend?"

Icke never replied when his mom asked this, which was often. It was afternoon, after school, and he was mixing up batter. They had fish just about every night – fried fish, fish stew, fish fillets, whatever he caught. Icke could never pin down when it started, but as he'd gotten older he found himself doing more and more. After Dad left, Mom deputized him with the cleaning and cooking, had acted like it was a togetherness thing, the two of them against the world. But the bigger he'd gotten, the less she'd done. She'd still put together a chowder now and then, if she had a yen for it, but by seventeen he was doing almost all the housework and cleaning and bill paying. Mom still shopped for groceries, since Icke was too young to buy Crème de Cacao (which Mom drank in coffee all winter) or gin

(which she drank in 7-Up all summer) or beer (which she drank year round). He'd kind of hoped, at some level, that the money they saved with him filling the freezer with cod and haddock and speckled trout would come back as some other good thing. He was getting old enough to realize all he'd done was expand his mother's booze budget.

"I mean it Francis, it's time you got yourself a girlfriend, stopped moping, got yourself some joy. You're no prize pig, but water always finds its level. There's someone out there, most everyone can wind up with someone."

"Yes mama."

"Don't you 'yes mama' me, always 'yes mama' and no action! You've got a lot to offer! You're a good, a good provider, you'll make a very comfortable living some day! There's many a girl who'd be happy to get herself someone so reliable."

"Okay mom."

"So go out there and look! Christ, you're seventeen, you're supposed to be a horny devil and I'm supposed to be, be keeping you away from girls, not pushing you out the door! Y'ain't one of those gays, are you?"

Icke's ears burned and he peered intently at the batter, making sure to whip out every lump. "No ma'am."

"So what's the problem?"

"I don't know?"

"Too picky, I 'spect. Look, none of us gets exactly what we want in life, the trick is to take what you get and don't fret. There's nothing wrong with a poor girl, you find a girl who's hungry and fill her up with food, she'll find some love in her heart soon enough. Poor girls can be pretty too you know, and grateful!"

Icke didn't answer, but he was thinking about Wendy. She wasn't poor, and he didn't think he could get her, and he didn't think he'd accept anyone else.

*

After about five minutes of sitting, Icke baited. He was in no hurry. Usually there would be a good number of casual fishermen out on a Friday afternoon, but today was just too cold. That was fine. More for Francis. There was a good school out by the shoal and now he knew they were coming closer. It would be a minute or so before they were in reach. He whipped the line out and waited, letting the float get still. Less suspicious to them if they just came upon it.

When the first fish struck, Icke felt its pain, the confusion of being bitten from inside, there was nothing in it prepared for this. Icke pulled and felt the stretching dark agony run from mouth through its whole body. He knew that

meant the hook was deep enough, so he yanked and then started reeling in as the others scattered. He wasn't worried. They wouldn't go far.

The smothering alien panic when the fish hit the air was familiar too, and the relief when Icke unhooked it into a wire enclosure dangling in the water. The normalcy of the water sedated the pain from its lip, somewhat. When Icke filled the cage up, he'd pull it out, carry it home with his catch flopping and suffocating, and then one by one he'd behead them with a heavy cleaver on a flat-top stump in the back yard. Some people bashed their fish with boards, but Icke preferred the knife and he kept it razor sharp. Quicker that way.

Other fishermen saw the sport as a gradual game, or a tranquil pastime, or just a way to get some good eats. To Icke it was killing and always had to be. It was too close when he felt it. He couldn't think of it as anything else.

*

"Oh, uh, hi," Francis said.

"Oh. Hi there!" Wendy replied, and Francis thought she might sound a little too cheerful, like she was faking it and didn't want to hurt his feelings. But Francis wasn't good at judging things like that.

It was Monday, the sixth, and they were coming out of school. Wendy stayed late for basketball practice and Francis knew she walked home by the back stairway, while the other girls mostly drove. He'd watched the last couple days, waiting for her, as casually as he was able. She'd gone somewhere else those days. But today she was here.

"I was thinkin'," Francis said.

"Um. This Saturday I've got a weight-fishing thing, y'know, at Barnes' Stream. Couple towns south. Anyway, I'll probably win some money there, I usually do... eh, when I get back, would you... y'know... like to... um..."

"Oh." Wendy looked off to the left, though there was nothing to see there. "Oh, Francis, no."

"Yeah, okay."

"I mean, I don't..."

"Yeah, I know. It's no big deal. It was just a thought."

"Okay then." She gave him a small brave smile, heartbreakingly sweet and a little sad. Like she wished things were different too.

He watched her walk away, and when he turned around, Wesley was there. Wesley was Wendy's older brother.

"Hey!" Wesley said. Icke shied away, started to slink around him. Wesley stepped into his path. He was

breathing heavy, like he'd run to get there.

"Where d'you think you're going?" Wesley demanded.

"Home," Icke muttered, turning to go down the steps. Wendy was already out of sight.

Wesley grabbed his shoulder and turned Icke around. Wesley wasn't big, didn't play sports. In fact, Icke knew that some of the guys who beat him and laughed, laughed about beating Wesley too. But Wesley was still stronger than Francis.

"I heard you were bugging my sister, is that right?"

"No," Icke mumbled, looking away, stepping back, trying to reclaim his sleeve from Wesley's grasp.

"Don't lie to me, you freak!" Now Wesley had both his shoulders and Icke realized this wasn't going to be the same as the other times. Wesley wasn't going to hit him for fun or to make himself feel better or to look tough. Wesley was going to do it because he was revolted, because Icke disgusted him and he needed to face it.

"I'll leave her alone," Icke said, getting his hands up into a too-familiar cringe, "I won't talk to her again," he said, but he knew his assurances would do no good. Wesley had to do this. Icke

could almost understand, even through his hatred. He hated Wesley that minute, and all the people who'd made Wesley hate him, all the people who'd made jokes and made fun until Wesley couldn't stand the thought of Icky polluting his sister. For just a moment, his hate of them eclipsed his hate of himself, and Wesley hit him in the head.

Icke hadn't expected it. It usually started with punches to the belly or the kidneys or somewhere that wouldn't leave a mark. It was an unspoken rule. The head was for slapping or spitting, you only punched the head closed fist against a worthy opponent, or at the end as a final statement if you were really wound up. Wesley didn't seem to know the rules and he pulled Icke in by his shoulder, reeling him right into the blow. Icke stumbled back a pace and had time to see Wesley's knuckle bleeding from a tooth-cut before he took a step into open air and crashed ass down on the concrete stairs. His head whipped back against a painted-steel stair rail.

*

The night of his beating, Icke put a trash bag on his bed and then put the ice bag on top of it, tucking the black plastic around it. He knew cold water would form on it and he didn't want his sheets wet at bedtime. He lowered the bump on

the back of his head onto the ice and tried to relax. It hurt a lot.

He'd been unconscious for a while. He didn't know how long. When he woke up and looked up the steps, he saw Woody Manderveigh at the top, staring down at him, motionless. When Icke glanced down he saw blood on his jacket and shirt, but not too much. He'd stumbled to his feet, and Woody didn't help him. By the time Icke was standing, the other boy was gone.

Icke had walked home, showered, been glumly grateful that it was his mom's night for bar drinking, and put himself to bed without comment. It was hard to get sleep though. He kept thinking about what he'd been while he was knocked out.

He'd gone out into the ocean again, sending his mind farther and deeper than ever before. He hadn't been able to hold any clear thoughts or grasp a string of words, but at some level he'd been hoping that if he went far enough, he might not have to come back. Eventually he did return, but between waking and blackout he'd found something.

Miles out and fathoms deep, he'd occupied a creature unlike any other. He could tell it was primitive, simple in thought and act even compared to a

swordfish or a salmon. It wasn't exactly fish, either, though he felt fins and gills. Icke's wandering talent had touched squids and octopi, and this had something in common with those as well, he felt tentacles but more than eight. There was something of the polyp to it, something of the crustacean in the way it was joined together, but with no shell, and immense. Of that he was certain. Icke had felt around whales on one rare day when no other human knew they were passing, and this was bigger. Bigger than the whole pod.

He couldn't know how he knew it was old, older than men, any more than he could explain knowing its size and its slumber and the hunger that slept with it. He knew it was vast and easily roused to frenzy. He knew it was too primitive to die.

*

As Francis' Friday catch filled his wet prison, he reached out farther, deeper, searching for that vast mind of stupid and alien dreams. It was still there, he could find it. He had some vague sensation that the lump on his head was acting like an antenna. He put himself through it and knew that it could come ashore, its mere rising bulk enough to flood the cheap houses, like his, that were close to the beach where the fish got

guttled. He knew that whatever its limbs were – not tentacles or pseudopods or hands or claws exactly, but something long and numerous and powerful – they could reach the top of the hill, as far as Wellesport Central High School. Certainly they could reach Wendy and Wesley’s home, halfway up. It could rise and reach and crush and consume. It could.

Icke thought about whether Wendy would be grateful if he saved her from it, or if that would only raise more questions. He wondered if he could escape its hunger, if he called it. He didn’t even know if that mattered to him.

He couldn’t control these things, exactly. It was more like he knew what they’d do before they acted, and they always acted according to the knowledge he possessed.

He stared out at the sea and wondered what he should decide to know.

His cage was full. Francis Icke reached down into the water. Even though the water was icy, his hand paused, halfway between the carrying handle and the latch that would set his captives free.

THE END

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