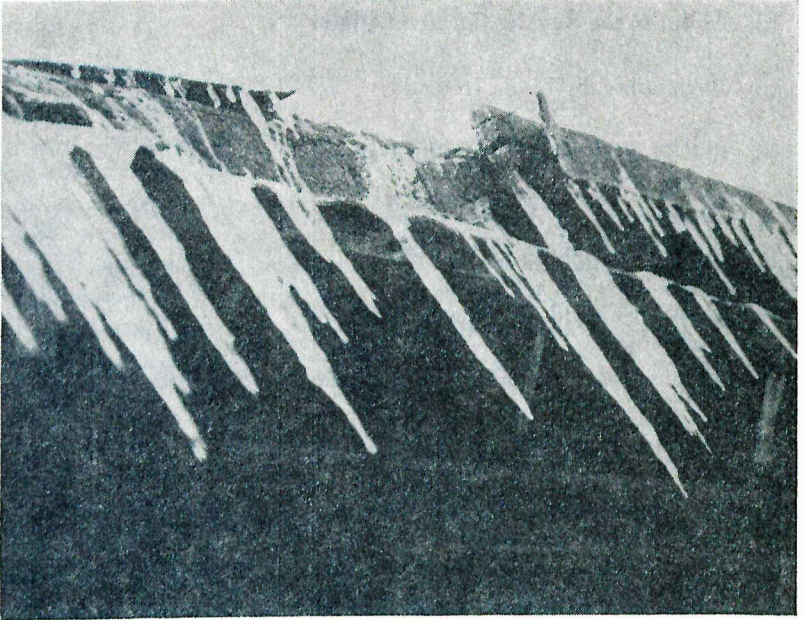


CHANDELIER OF ICE

Elisabeth Harter



Frances flung her scarf toreador-style over her shoulder and stepped out boldly to face the snow-enchanted day. It took only a moment for her to gain her balance on the icy stoop and adjust her eyes to the dazzling glare of sun on snow. Then before her unveiled vision appeared a new world, pure and infant. Overnight the neighborhood of dingy Cape Cods had been transformed into a fantasy land of sugar-frosted cottages.

Frances viewed the scene with amazement and tilted back her head to drink in the sheer, hopeful blue of the sky. Suddenly she drew in her breath. There, hanging three feet above her like the most delicate

of prism chandeliers, was an immense cluster of transparent icicles that trapped the beams of the sun and released them again as—yes, she was almost *sure* that's what she saw—as faint little rainbows.

So, thought Frances, miracles *do* happen overnight. She shook her head to clear it and set off for town, sifting the snow with each foot-step. A miracle—that's what she was hoping for now. If miracles could ever happen, today was the day.

Frances' thoughts as she trod along were as agitated as the loose powder spiralling in the gusts of wind. She didn't know whether to feel exultation at the glorious day and the confirmation she was certain to receive soon, or despair. Mark wouldn't really be angry, would he? Of course, she had given her word in answer to his threats. What else could she have done? But everyone knows the method isn't 100% foolproof. And what if she *had* cheated a little—he wouldn't really mind. He should be ready by now to give up some of his independence, take on some responsibility. Perhaps their shaky relationship would be cemented. Mark would be really glad, too—

Frances tried to convince herself, but in the back of her mind something was chipping away at her optimism. She sighed. The mist of her breath billowed in front of her as in a dream, then cleared, revealing vividly to her mind a scene that had occurred fourteen years go, before she was married.

It was a beautiful, ripe day in autumn. Corn-shocks stood at attention in the fields of her father's farm as squadrons of birds skimmed past overhead. She and Mark were sitting lazily in the warm sunlight of Indian summer, talking of nothing in particular and eating the first ruddy apples from the orchard. Suddenly the capricious breeze changed direction, mischievously caught Mark's hair, and blew his blond forelocks back off his forehead, exposing the high, bony dome which looked so fragile and transparent against the deep tan lingering yet on the rest of his face. Frances pointed at him and giggled. "You look like a peeled onion!"

Mark tried to glare at her, but he finally had to succumb to free and hearty laughter. Frances laughed with him. She loved him in this rare mood—it lifted his veil of distant moodiness just as the breeze had lifted his hair, and for a moment she thought she saw him clearly. Everything was perfect.

As the laughter subsided, Frances impulsively shook her apple-seeds into her hand and recited a rhyme she had learned as a girl. Mark smiled at her in amusement.

“One—he first meets you.
Two—he does woo.
Three—he says ‘dearest.’
Four—he is true.
Five—he is tender.
Six—he sends roses.
Seven—he kisses you.
Eight—he proposes.
Nine—he adores you.
Ten—he is spouse.
For the rest, count the children
You’ll have in your house.
One, two, three—”

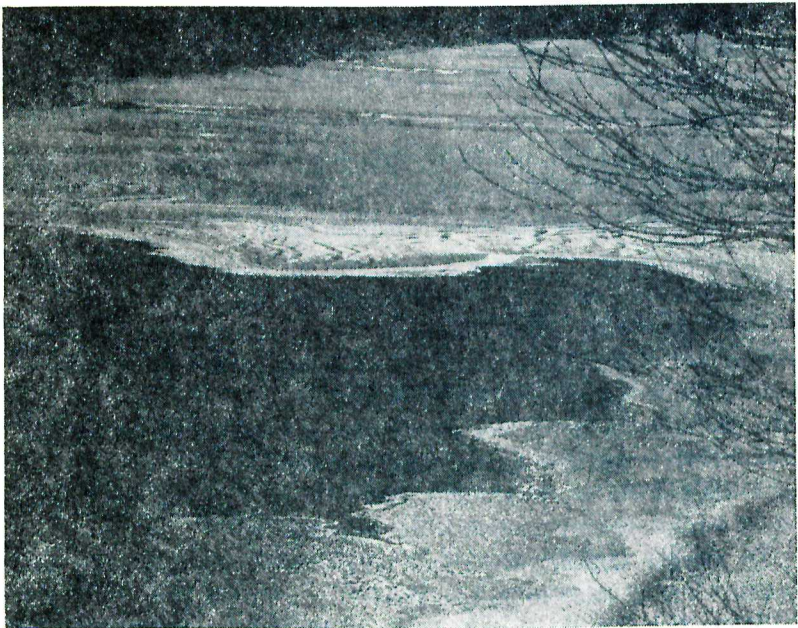
Suddenly Mark’s jaw clamped tight. With a swift, rude motion he sent the seeds flying out of her hand. They lay scattered before her on the brown earth.

“Dr. David Gordon, MD”: the ice-varnished sign brought her back to the present. She had already reached her destination. With mixed feelings of hope and apprehension she creaked open the door and tip-toed up to the desk. The receptionist looked up and smiled knowingly.

“Hello, Mrs. Nicholson. Have a seat. The doctor will be with you shortly.”

Frances hung her snow-collared coat on a hook and found the only available chair in the crowded waiting-room. How long would she have to sit? Were all these people ahead of her? She picked up a magazine she’d read two months ago and glanced idly at the pictures. The piped-in music failed to soothe her now-anxious nerves, and her mind returned to its preoccupying thoughts.

Frances was fearful, but she tried to reason objectively. Perhaps she and Mark should never have married. Oh sure, they had been in love at first. Mark had needed and appreciated her cheerful stability



The photograph captures a serene and expansive landscape, likely a rural or semi-rural area. The foreground is dominated by a dark, textured surface, possibly a path or a streambed, which leads the eye into the vast, open expanse of the middle ground. The landscape is characterized by subtle variations in tone and texture, suggesting different types of terrain or vegetation. On the right side, the dark, bare branches of trees or shrubs add a sense of depth and contrast to the scene. The overall atmosphere is one of quiet solitude and natural beauty.

and warmth: she could draw him in from the cold regions of pessimistic introspection and dark brooding. She, on her part, had admired his intellectual powers and loved him simply because he needed her. She didn't understand him; but in fondness and, admittedly, in hope of reforming him, she could overlook his puzzling and eccentric moods. The rare and sacred glimpses she caught of him when the veil lifted were enough to reassure her. So, they were married.

Then the trouble started. For a while it didn't matter that he had insisted on an unfettered life to pursue his interest in writing. At that time she had also wanted some independence for her teaching. But then, when she had approached him about starting a family, he had gone into a rage.

"Mrs. Nicholson, the doctor will see you now in Room 3."

Frances jumped up nervously, dropping the magazine from her lap. Oh, please, she prayed as she placed it on the table and walked back to the room, please let a miracle happen today.

In Room 3, Dr. Gordon was bent over his desk filling out some forms. When she entered, he merely pointed to a chair without raising his head. "Have a seat, Mrs. Nicholson. I'll be with you in a minute." He continued to scribble rapidly. His efficiently professional manner added to her uneasiness. At last the doctor set aside the papers brusquely. He turned a frosty blue stare on her and rubbed his moustache seriously. He must have been trying to anticipate her reaction. Of course, Dr. Gordon was aware only dimly of her problems with Mark. Frances felt her heart pounding at the suspense.

Dr. Gordon smiled. "Well, little lady, the test results came in this morning. You're going to be a mother!"

She collapsed in the chair to let the words sink in. Now that there was no doubt, she could allow herself some joy at the long-awaited announcement. Excited questions began to explode from her. "When is it due? Can I still go bowling? How much should I eat? What—"

"Stop, stop!" Dr. Gordon laughed and held up his hand. "Don't worry. You've got the best doctor in Burton County. I'll tell you all you need to know when I'm not two hours behind schedule. Make an appointment for next week. Meanwhile, you can do whatever you usually do. Okay?" He looked relieved at the way she had taken it. "Oh, and I hope things work out with your husband."

Her fears returned at this benediction and alloyed themselves with the joy that had come to her. She thanked the doctor and left quickly. For the second time that day, but not as boldly as before, she stepped out into the enchanted sunlight.

On the way home she saw some children building a snowman. She tried to imagine a little boy—with Mark's blond hair and her own freckles—out there patting down the sides and screwing in the buttons. He'd run up to her excitedly and tug at her scarf to bring her down to his level. She'd wipe his nose as he told her all about it. Then he'd dash off again to watch the taller boys put on the face. That was a dream Frances would have been afraid to give in to before, but now she welcomed it happily. If only Mark would share her happiness!

When she reached home, she made all the usual preparations to make the breaking of the news to Mark easier. She broiled a couple sirloins, got out the best china, and put on his favorite dress. Now she was as ready as she would ever be. Anxiously, she listened for him to come home.

At last she heard the gritty sound of the car on the gravel drive, the weary shuffle of Mark's step, the swish of the storm door, and—Frances couldn't wait. She ran up to him on the stoop and hugged him hard. Between the shock and the slipperiness of the ice, Mark nearly fell.

"Wow, I haven't been greeted like that since you scratched the Chevy. All right, do I get the story now or after my steak dinner?"

I've got to tell him now, thought Frances, while he's in a good mood. She led him inside silently and hung up his coat and hat. She must have looked worried, for his eyes had become harsh x-rays penetrating her mind.

"Frances, it's something serious, isn't it?"

"No, Mark." She tried to smile. "It's really very good news." Mark frowned skeptically, put his hands on his hips, and tapped his fingers impatiently against his belt. Okay, she thought, no psychological smoothing of the way. Lets get it over with. "Honey, I'm going to have a baby!"

Mark stood absolutely still. He wasn't expecting that. After a long minute of intense deliberation he drew back his lips in what failed to be a smile. "Well, that *is* a pretty mess. But there's no need to worry.

We can get it fixed. I know a doctor in New York who—”

“Fix it? *Fix* it? Just like you fixed the car! As though this is just another minor tragedy that can be remedied with a little trouble and a price.” Frances was horrified. “No, sir. I’ve waited a long time for this baby, and I’m going to have it.”

Mark didn’t shout, but his words contained a quiet fury. “Then perhaps it will replace a husband.”

She pleaded with him. “I know how strongly you feel and how angry you must be, but things will work out. It might be a boy, and we could call him Mark Allan, after you.”

“A choice, Frances. The baby or me.”

She trembled. “I want you, but I’m not giving up my baby.”

Mark’s face grew livid. Without a word he stormed to the closet, jerked on his coat, and opened the front door.

“Mark, where are you going? Your dinner’s waiting. Mark? Please don’t leave me. I love you.” Her voice trailed off.

She heard the violent slam of the door, and then the tinkle of shattering ice. Her chandelier. Could she ever put the pieces together again?