

MARCH 10, 1972

"Do wolves live in these woods?"

"Not anymore. Some coyotes yes. We'd shoot a few big grey Lobos each winter in the Old Days. Back in the mountains now, there might."

We turned into a driveway and stopped before Uncle Dave's cottage white with green shutters. Along the lakeshore other cottages grouped, each with its tidy wharf and boat-house and outhouse. But hardly anyone stayed winter. Only a few Indians lived in a settlement two miles away. They were allowed by the government to net as many fish as they wanted. They always got drunk, Grandpa said, and were good for nothing.

"Go in and make a fire, papa," said Grandma. "I'll stay in the car until it's warm."

I carried in the box of split kindling we'd brought from home. Scrap lumber from the mill. At Buck Lake the wood was mostly cut except for in the bush where you needed a chain saw.

Inside was freezing. Cold radiated from the rough wooden floor, whistled down the rusted chimney. My nose felt brittle. I wondered if it would break off if I happened to sneeze. Grandpa started a fire. It tried to roar but was swallowed by the cold.

Grandma couldn't wait, and rushed inside. She bustled around sweeping, raising a cloud of dust, washing the stained ancient table, throwing out some frozen potatoes—all the while keeping up a running commentary on how lovely the day was going to be.

I looked out the window. My breath smudged a wee periscope hold so I could peep out. Delicate frost-flowers and flowing ice-feathers curved across the glass. It made everything outside look like it was held in a picture frame, or in one of those little snowglobes that snows when you shake it, down, down into a village of sleep.

I could hardly wait to get outside. This was my first time ice fishing. Grandma was excited too, I could tell. She didn't even take time to make more than a cup of tea. Her grey hair was covered by a red polkadotted scarf tucked under chin to warm the dumpling dewlap which, she complained, always got cold first. In her sweater and slacks and parka she looked like a rolypoly jolly panda bear.

"Hurry daddy or it'll be too late," she shouted at Grandpa who sat unsnagging lines and hooks. "They don't bite too late," her voice dropped to my level. "kind das leben, I'd like to get a good fat whitefish to freeze for Christmas."

"I'm coming I'm coming, hold your horses." Grandpa smiled sideways at me, man-to-man.

We filled our pockets to overflowing with goodies—apples and tangerines, fresh baked kuchen and cinnamon buns—and walked down to the lake. The sun still hadn't risen over the top of the pine woods. Grandpa led the way, his ears flaming ruby-red. He never wore a cap even in the coldest weather. They were the biggest ears I'd ever seen on anybody: great, flappy, intricately-structured relics which seemed to possess a different function from ordinary mortal ears. Maybe he was only pretending to be half-deaf, and used them to test the wind, or to pick up radar from the Old Russia which had been his homeland, or to listen to butterflies break from their chrysalises in spring, and fish stir beneath the ice in their shadowy kingdom?

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I walked gingerly onto the ice. It shone crystal, like spun glass, smooth and shimmering, making me feel as if I were walking on water. Some places it ridged into crater bubbles and opaque milky nebulae; others, like frozen milk froth.

I stretched spread-eagled and peered down. Below, a whole new alien world lay exposed to my view. Golden sand, each grain distinct, rolled into miniscule hills and canyons, pitching

deeper into a black abyss. Bullrush roots curled like snakes; leaves hung suspended, their veins undulating in the invisible winds of the current; a beer can gleamed half-buried. Everything sparkled vivid and translucent. I was a kind of God peering down from my safe Heaven into the depths of a world which had its own incomprehensible laws and rhythms and inhabitants.

"Come see the ice, Grandma!" I hollered.

"Are you sure it won't break? It doesn't look safe, if you ask me."

"Come see!"

She advanced timidly, bundled up plump and warm, her rimless spectacles glittering. Her face was like a nun's—after birthing seven children: richly textured, satin-soft, as if dusted with flour.

Suddenly it seemed to me that at any instant she would hop, skip and jump into a little jig, and go dancing away over the luminous ice, and I would join her, clasping her hands, spinning, singing the old German carol she had taught me last Christmas:—

Leise rieselt der Schnee  
Still und stau ruht der See  
Freue Dich Schaffhirt der Wacht  
Freue Dich Christkind Koomt bald.

(Quietly falls the snow  
Calm and placid rests the sea  
Be joyful, shepherd who watches  
Be joyful, the Christchild comes soon.  
We peered down together.

"O see the fish!" she squealed. "Do you see him? A great big monster! Come see, papa!"

Yes: a primordial armless, legless, voiceless shape hovered at the edge of my vision like some fantastic dirigible. Its green-blue back was speckled with rusty spots, like Grandma's own hands. It hung there staring back at us as with bulging spherical eyes, gills pulsing rhythmically; then, when we moved closer, drifted away.

"You can see where they live!" said Grandma. "That's what I like about ice fishing—you're almost a fish yourself."

Grandpa, meanwhile, was stolidly chopping a hole. Chunks of ice flew up and scattered, twanging. The sun suddenly bulged over the top of the trees, hung as if panting for breath. The lake turned molten quicksilver, flashed like a mirror. Splinters of ice from Grandpa's axe sprayed up in an incandescent fountain. Turquoise water gushed through the hole, welling to the top. Grandpa stuck his bare hand in and laddied out the ice. His hands didn't seem to get cold either. They were worn and blunt, like the paws of an old animal.

"Come use this hole, mamma," he commanded.

She stuck a minnow on her hook and dropped it into the water. It hung revolving slowly, suspended like some crescent planet.

Suddenly the ice boomed: an ominous, reverberating crack, as of artillery. I started to run, afraid the lake was breaking. The sound radiated into the distance, echoing into groans and mumbblings.

Grandpa looked at me standing there foolishly, and laughed. His face shone happy and humble in the knowledge which belonged to him and which he would give to me.

"The old bear is starting to roar," he said. "he does that when he's still going to sleep. The lake isn't all frozen yet. No danger."

IV

By noon we hadn't caught anything. The sun shone so warm now I took off my parka. My toes were still cold but I didn't mind; they had passed the painful stage and entered blissful numbness.

Grandma lay flat on her stomach, staring into the world below the ice, mesmerized. Every few seconds she jerked her line so it seemed the minnow came alive. Grandpa stood alone by his hole a ways off. His scarlet ears blazed like autumn leaves.

"Have you caught anything yet, papa?" she called.

"Is what?"

"Have-you-caught-anything?"

"Not a nibble."

Two figures came toward us over the lake. When they got close I saw they were an Indian and a man dressed in a bright red thermal hunting outfit. The kind you see advertised in sportsman's magazines as being tested in ninety degrees below zero in the Arctic, yet warm as toast.

"Any luck?" he shouted.

"Not yet," said Grandma.

The Indian laughed. He was smoking a disintegrated cigar, and his black eyes were squinted, held in a spiderweb of wrinkles. So that's what a drunkard looks like, I thought, awed.

"Lousy fishing this way," said the Indian. "You need a net. Like me. Want to buy some good whitefish?"

"That's what I'm doing," said the other man. He wore earmuffs which looked like headphones, combined with a hat studded with fishing lures. "No sense freezing your ass off if you can get trout fresh from the Indians."

"Last week my daughter caught three jacks and two pickerel," said Grandma.

"Bet you can't get whitefish. Especially the way these here Injuns smoke 'em. Eat 'em raw."

"Do you fish here often?" asked Grandma.

"Now fly casting, that's an art. Take the wife and trailer each summer and head for the resort. Up North, expensive but worth it. A real art. See this Colonel Mumford's Silver King Special?"

He took off his hat. It glistened like an ornate Christmas tree. We followed his finger to a mammoth, iridescent, frog-like, grinning plug.

"This baby caught the biggest damn arctic char you folks ever seen. Five feet if it was an inch. But Buck Lake's barren as a bog. Even in summer."

Grandpa, at his hole, nodded. "We've been coming sixty years now," he said. "I used to ride here alone on a horsewagon to get fish for winter. There were lots of trout then. Nobody lived here—"

The man waved. "That so! Well, be seeing you folks."

The Indian sidled up to Grandma, as if he were selling dirty pictures. "Want some good smoked whitefish?" he said. "Very cheap."

Grandma looked at Grandpa. "Papa, sallen wier etwas van die fisch kaufen?" He didn't say anything but peered down into his hole.

"No," she said, firmly.

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The sun descended in an arch toward the trees drowned again purple shadow. Grandpa got together his gear. Grandma put her own line in the basket, lingeringly.

As they stood there, he helping her put on her parka, I saw how their faces had the same features, as if long ago blended, transfused and eroded by the same elements into one comingled mold: she plump, he thin and gnarled, together fitting into each other like a jigsaw puzzle, making a single person.

"Are we going home now?" I asked.

"Yes, let's eat," said Grandma.

We walked back slowly. I skidded off on my own. I still couldn't get over the miracle of floating on top of the water. It was hard to realize the ice itself was frozen water: it seemed a different element entirely; a crystalized sky. When I broke off a piece of ice and threw it along the lake, it tinkled, like bells, softer and softer until envelopped by the silence.

In the cottage Grandma started to fry potatoes. "Too bad we don't have fish for supper," she clucked. "Maybe next time, huh daddy?"

Grandpa didn't answer. He put the fishing gear into the car then came back inside and slumped into a chair. He looked tired. The frost-flowers on the window had melted now and lay in a dirty puddle on the sill. I looked out the window at the evening lake which shone, barely discernable, like a cloud seen far away in an empty sky.