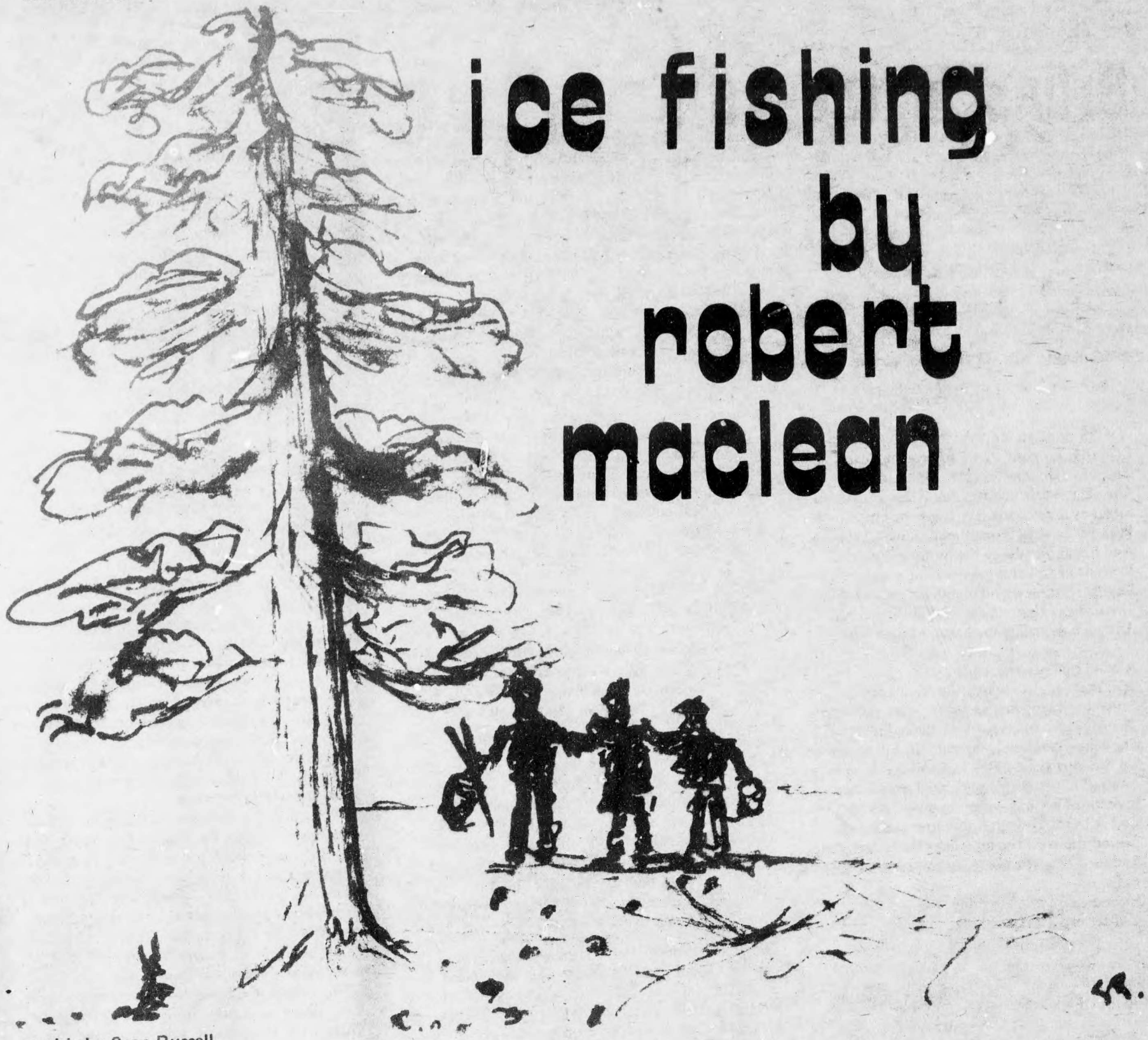


ice fishing

by robert maclean



graphic by Sean Russell

(Dedicated to Grandma and Grandpa)

(1)

I woke hearing Grandma bustling around upstairs. The fridge wheezed, her footsteps trotted to the stove, the frying pan started to crackle. I smelled eggs. Outside through the frosted basement window it was still dark, snow heaped upon the pane so I could hardly see the streetlamp which stood guard over my bed through its long night vigil. The goosefeather quilt which Grandma had sewn as her dowry long ago (fifty years, or sixty?) heaped over me thick and warm, so it seemed I lay buried beneath the earth in a snug burrow, while all the universe snowed above in a tumultuous fury of wind.

"Yooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Her voice came strained and distant, as from a far mountain peak. Each morning there was simply no question of disobeying the summons, even for a few moments. If someone stays in bed after he wakes he is lazy, and there is no salvation for a lazy man.

Then I remembered: today we were going ice fishing at Buck Lake! That's why it was still so early.

I bounced up quickly. The freezing cement floor made me dance. Longjohns, three wool socks handknit by Grandma, jeans, stag wool shirt, boots, sweater-parka and togue and mittens for later.

"About time you came," she said. "It's almost 5:00."

"Sorry Grandma, I got dressed. Oh boy, scrambled eggs."

Washing dishes after breakfast so we wouldn't have to come home to a dirty kitchen, I saw through the window light leaking into the east where the sky bunched pallid grey over the Alberta prairie. Now the streetlamp was off. I always wanted to see the exact moment they turned it off, whoever they were, but never did.

It seemed magical.

Grandma's hands shone in the sudsy water blue-veined and pink. She washed while I dried.

"Do you think we'll catch anything, Grandma?"

"Ach yes, mein kind. Aunt Bea and Dave last week got three jacks and two pickerel. But no whitefish," she added, sadly.

Grandpa came indoors. His droopy handlebar moustache sparkled with ice. Always he got up before even Grandma and made us hot Red River porridge. Then he went out again to shovel the walk, his breath blossoming, his ears flaring red as a rooster's wattle, the sharp clear clang of the shovel ringing in the dawn, waking me like bells.

"Aren't you ready yet, mamma?" he asked, incredulously.

"We're waiting for you, papa!" she complained as she hurried to finish dressing.

"It's 5 above. A good day."

That too was part of his ritual: each morning clomping out on the porch in his shirt sleeves, no matter how cold, to see what the temperature read--so he could compare it with his nose which (he claimed) was a barometer. He never went wrong more than a couple degrees.

Grandma put on her green old parka, and we walked outside. She gave me the key to lock up so I could feel grown-up, but watched at the gate to make sure. The house closed into its silence.

(11)

A few houses were just starting to stir. Solitary yellow lights floated in the dawn, like fishing-boats. Grandpa drove with both hands clutching the wheel, his blue twinkling eyes gauging the slippery places. He didn't like to

talk while driving, which frustrated Grandma. This was probably the last year he would get a license, since he was eighty-three. But he'd passed with flying colours this spring. The examiner even said (Grandma confided to me later) that he drove better than most young whipper-snappers. His reactions weren't so fast now though, so he never drove on the main four-lane highway into Edmonton.

"Did you bring the axe, papa?" asked Grandma.

"Yes yes."

"And the frozen minnows for bait?"

"Yes yes."

The white fields slipped by, with their huddled red barns like snails. In the back seat among the blankets and groceries it was just like sailing in an icebreaker lost on an endless polar sea. And the cows which lifted their heads to stare at us with mild, placid eyes were penguins.

It was starting to get lighter now. The sun glittered fiery behind the horizon, in a patch of jade green sky. The whole earth seemed to hold its breath...

The car bumping woke me. We were on a dirt road overshadowed by pines, almost at the lake.

"Do wolves live in these woods, Grandpa?" I asked.

"Is what?"

He had bad hearing but refused to admit it even to Grandma. All his relatives and children and children's children urged him to buy a hearing aid but he got angry whenever the subject was introduced. Grandma told him once, "They've got little plastic ones now you can hardly notice." He bellowed that he could hear as well as he ever did.