

Our Smallest Person

The pond froze for the first time in eight years. Mom told me when I came downstairs that we'd take a closer look after breakfast. Valerie who went by Vee didn't want to walk down because she never did anything when someone else suggested it. She said she could make her own choices because she was fourteen now. Nina was asleep. I was happy to accompany Mom.

It was cold when we got down to the wooden dock. Mom's hands kept mine warm. Looking over the edge wasn't as scary when there was ice instead of water. I got on my knees and reached down to touch; it was not cold and smooth and clear so that pond weeds below were visible. They were like a still life. The weeds. Like time had stopped mid-sway. I asked Mom if we could stand on it and she said we'd have to send our smallest person to see if it would break under them. The smallest person was me. When I started crying, Mom said she was only joking and brushed the iced tears off my cheek.

She went first. Just one foot with both hands gripping the dock. I'm holding on because I'm afraid. That's what Mom told me; her fear scared me. Then she brought the other foot down and started walking, cautiously. More of a controlled slip than a walk, her feet never leaving the ice, her knees bent; a two-legged water strider, skidding ahead. The ice let out loud groans. Certain steps made more noise. And at each moan Mom would stand paralyzed for a moment, finger to her lips, telling me not to wake it.

In the ice I could see her upside down, and below her the sky which was blue even though it had been grey all week. There were pink clouds. The reflections looked more like watercolors than those in water. As if the light was also slipping on the surface.

The one time I'd stepped off the dock before, I'd gone in the water. It was more of a jump than a step. That was in August when newscasters and weathermen were talking about the hottest summer in twenty-five years, old people were dying daily, and Mom was telling me to drink water at least once an hour. On that heavy and windless day, the surface almost looked the same. Barely a ripple. Flat. But inside, pond weeds had oscillated, replacing absent waves, rolling whiplike from base to tip and snapping the epilimnion. I felt them on my naked legs. Shackling themselves around my calves, ancient, boneless sea monsters. But the water was warm. I didn't shiver.

Once at the middle, Mom said I could come over too. It felt all wrong to stand on the pond, like I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be. Each step I took sent fractal echoes ricocheting across the ice that reminded me of electric pulses shooting out from my feet. They sounded eerie and dangerous.

At the middle with Mom, I could see the dock and above it, on the hill, the house. I'd never seen it from this angle. From the side of the pond, or from inside, but never from on top. It didn't look different, it only felt different; or maybe it looked different because I felt different.

When we got back inside, I told Nina and Vee the ice was perfect for skating and the pond had never frozen over so evenly. Vee asked me how I knew. Mom said so.

At the skate shop the man told Mom it would be three hundred and seventy-five dollars for the five pairs. She held out her credit card. The man said cash only. Her smile wasn't like her normal smile. Then she asked him something I couldn't hear, and the man nodded and said four for two fifty could work. Vee told me we should buy skates for Dad because he was depressed and would be even more if he saw us having fun without him, anyways, and that she'd overheard her friend's mom say that all rich people get depressed after forty-five because they've put all their eggs in one basket and that basket was money or whatever; there would be a big fight just like there was last September. That was the only time I'd known Mom to cry and heard Dad shout that loudly. Dad cried often. Never in front of me, but I heard him when I pressed my ear to his door. I don't know if he knew that I knew. When I asked Mom why he cried she told me be quiet and don't talk about that again.

In September, we'd all cried, except Vee. She said crying was for babies.

I was going to tell Vee that Mom was also rich, and she wasn't depressed, so how could what she said be true, but she was on her phone now. I went to play with Nina. She was in the back aisle dragging pucks around the carpet with a hockey stick which I thought wasn't very fun but at least she didn't get spit on my face when she talked like Vee. Mom came to the back with the skates and the man helped us try them on. He tightened mine so much that it hurt. But he said that was normal and Mom asked me to please stop whining, so I let him force the second on.

Numbness in my foot. There were only four pairs in the bag at the checkout. I'll see you Tuesday the man said to Mom on our way out. The same smile in reply. I didn't understand why she was coming back.

I'd asked nicely, but Vee didn't wait for me. As soon as her skates were on, she was off the dock, recklessly. For a moment I held my breath; the blue jays ceased chirping; the trees stopped lashing the sky with bare switches; Mom's eyes followed silently. The only sound was blades cutting ice. And then the ice held, and Vee laughed, leaving behind her deep, winding records of paths. Mom relaxed; nature sighed. Nina went next, poised and balanced with wings spread, looking more like she was flying than skating.

I sat until Mom finished tying. I hardly fidgeted at all. She said I was a very good boy. Dad says everyone is either a pervert or a megalomaniac; and those people who think they're neither are the most perverted. Don't say that in front of the children is what Mom says. That's how the fight in September started.

I fell directly. My hands slid on the slippery surface, my skates shot out beneath my weight as I struggled to stand; I imagined the crab I'd caught with Dad when we went to the beach a few years ago, suspended in the air, held just above the swimmers by its cephalothorax, thrashing and attempting vainly to find something firm onto which it could latch its legs. Vee and Nina laughed. My face grew hot from the embarrassment, and because I was jealous. Behind me, on the dock, Mom had finished lacing her skates. I heard them slicing the sheet; then her arms appeared beneath mine and hoisted me to my feet. Mom pushed me forward from between

her legs. The cold wind ripped past my face. I've got you; I've got you she said, and I was safe, and I could almost scream of joy, raising my hands to her face. But she wasn't there. I turned to look, and she was waving from a distance across the pond – I was skating on my own. And then I was there with Vee and Nina and Mom, too, and I forgot and I was happy.

The sun was setting by the time Mom told us to return to the dock. Hot beams had been shining on the pond all afternoon, covering the ice in small puddles that distorted the sky. They were just shallow puddles. Mom said not to worry because the ice was thick, probably around three inches at least. And we trusted the ice without question now.

I sat with my feet off the edge waiting for Mom to finish her last lap. Jagged lacerations bleeding water ran through the once even surface of the pond. Each shallow slash traced movements we had made, an entropic register of our routes that looked like a violent scribble. Along one of these conduits I saw a much deeper crack. It came from beneath the dock. Like frames in a stop motion movie, it advanced in discrete one- or two-foot intervals. Either Nina or Vee screamed. I think it was Nina because Vee was too proud to yell like that. At the same time there was a loud sound. A bizarre, unnatural sound. Like a door slamming shut or a laser being fired or a thunderclap all in one. But cavernous too, reverberating profoundly into the pond. I looked up wide-eyed at Mom who had stopped around the center and was watching as the fissure moved towards her. My instinct was to shout, to yell she had to come back, quick. Mom stood rooted to the spot. The fracture was below her now and she was looking at her feet like there had been some misunderstanding. I don't know what she was thinking. And then there was a rip in

the landscape, a big ugly gash in the reflected sky like someone had stabbed a dagger through canvas painting. Mom was swallowed by the dark hole.

Quiet pervaded. Almost humorous how complete the lack of noise was. Water lapping, maybe a few birds. But no sound as the wind passed through the trees. They had no leaves to make any.

There was the expectation that I would see her arms, her fingers gripping the edge, and then her head, wet and cold, would pop up, shivering but smiling, laughing. Laughing because it's silly to fall into the water with your clothes on. I counted five seconds waiting for her to appear. I counted five more when she didn't. Vee ran to call someone. Which number do you dial for someone is stuck under the frozen pond? She said whatever you do don't go on the ice. Nina, do you understand? Don't go on the ice. Nina was sat about midway down the dock; when Vee ran for the phone, she followed her, but Vee told her to find a big stick that we could use to pull Mom out instead. Everything was muddled. I looked again at the hole; I didn't care if the ice broke beneath me.

Mom was not in the hole. She was about ten feet away, but on the wrong side of the ice. The blade of my skate caught on the crack, and I fell, skidding on my stomach. When I came to a stop I was directly above Mom's face. We looked at each other in the eyes. If she hadn't been underwater, I think she would have been crying for the second time in my life. Her open palm was striking the ice, moving in slow motion beneath the water, and her mouth was open, fixed in a mute scream.

With my closed fists I hit the ice, hard. I kicked and flopped like a beached animal, tears streaming down my face. Convulsions racked my chest. Not from the cold. My hot breath was forming tiny pools on the surface of the pond. Beneath me I could see bubbles rising from her gaping mouth, brushing past her lips. They were blue, her lips. Either from the cold or the light filtering through the ice, or both. Together we beat and thrashed at the transparent barrier that separated us. At one point Mom stopped. I couldn't, wouldn't – breathing in shuddered gasps I kept going blow after blow, until I heard a smaller cracking noise and thought the ice was giving way.

But it was my pinky finger, broken.

I looked at my limp hand and then back to Mom. She was staring at me seriously; her lips closed and formed a smile. Slowly, she brought her palm flat up against the surface. I lay mine down over hers, resigned, and pressed my forehead down to the ice. It wasn't cold. She looked happy. My heart still beat hard in my chest, but a calmness overcame me. Mom went still – her hand fell from mine. The pond weeds swayed with her hair.

It was dark by the time I heard sirens. Mom's body had long since sunk to the pond floor and I couldn't see her anymore. Vee and Nina and Dad's voices rang through the night with many others I didn't recognize. Stay down and crawl towards the dock they said. Stay down and crawl back to us. I rolled over. Stars were visible in the black sky; little pricks of light that twinkled vividly. I was aware of a spotlight on myself coming from somewhere on the banks at

the edge of my vision. Come on back, buddy. Dad liked to tell Mom there was nothing worth living for anymore. It'll be okay, it'll be okay just crawl on back to us carefully and make sure not to stand on the ice, keep low, on your stomach, slide on over. But the ice was warm and comfortable. I was okay here.