

Jack on Ice

by Barry R. Taylor

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The cracking of the ice broke the silence. The first crack was a barely audible tick that Jack wouldn't have heard had not the air been so still. He was out on the lake, ice fishing through one of the holes he had drilled back in January. The lidded box he was sitting on already held a fat lake trout. Two would be better. Fresh fish was a welcome alternative to freeze-dried rations.

Jack had arisen early to be on the ice at the special time of morning when the night breeze had settled and the air lay still and cold over the forest and the lake. The sun was nudging up over the unmoving trees, still veiled by clouds hanging on the eastern sky. It cast a pale yellow light over the wind-swept ice. The forest and the lake were as quiet as a painting.

A new rime of frost sparkled on the shrubs and sedges around the shore. The air was so still that Jack could watch his breath turn to tiny frozen clouds and drift away. Jack had grown frost of his own, in his beard and on his toque. He was still wearing his heavy winter parka, but with the hood down. In early March the chill of deep winter had relented. The rising sun promised another mild day.

Jack dangled his fishing line down the hole, slowly lifting in up and down. The bait was kitchen scraps. Jack guessed that the fish were attracted as much to the light of the hole, and the prospect of oxygenated water beneath the ice capped lake, as to the lure of his hook. He had drilled his holes where memory told him a rock sill created habitat near deeper water.

The cracking of the ice was a tiny sound, but Jack heard it. Instantly instinct took over. He dropped the fishing rod. He dropped off the box and sprawled on the ice with his legs and arms extended, spreading his weight as far as he could. He stayed that way for a few seconds, his face inches from the ice surface, listening. Then he grabbed the fish box and slid it hard toward the shore. He tossed the fishing rod after it. The axe he had used to re-open the hole lay nearby. He slithered over to it and spun it across the ice after the basket and rod. As he did so the ice cracked again, louder.

Jack looked about. He could see the crack now: a tiny hairline fracture running down the ice to his right. It started at the hole. If he watched closely he could see it extending, like a slow-growing vine: an inch; then another; then another. Did it reach downward all the way through the ice? By this late in winter the ice had grown complex and stratified. Layers added and diminished as snow accumulated and the water level changed. A crack could penetrate the top layer without ever reaching the true ice beneath.

The ice at the hole was still a hand-length thick. It should be safe. Maybe there was an inlet nearby; moving water made weaker ice. Or perhaps the ice layer was flexing. On cold January nights the lake groaned as the ice heaved and shifted, sometimes cracking under its own weight. Jack could hear it even from the cabin. It sounded mournful, as if the lake were in pain. But it was March now; the sun was higher, the air was warmer. The ice could be reshaping again as it warmed.

Jack began to slither awkwardly across the ice, head toward shore, keeping his weight spread. The shortest route to shore ran parallel to the crack. Jack moved away from it, working his way toward shore at an angle. The farther he was from the crack the safer he would be. He had not moved more than a few metres when the ice cracked again.

There was no mistaking it this time. The sound was sharp and loud as a pistol, shattering the morning silence. It seemed to reverberate in the spruce trees and in Jack's chest. He looked to his right. The hairline fracture had abruptly become a jagged seam, angling back and forth along its length. It grew like a root emerging from the round seed of the fishing hole. This was no surface fracture. The ice had broken clear through. He had to get off the lake!

There was a procedure for this situation. Jack rolled over on his back. He pulled off his gloves, unfastened his parka, pulled his arms out of the sleeves, then rolled over again, leaving the parka behind. He tugged his gloves back on. In sweater, jeans and boots he would grow cold soon enough. But if the ice gave out beneath him, the wet parka would drag him down like an anchor.

He began to slide toward shore again, more quickly now. The situation had become urgent. The ice was unstable. More cracks could develop any time. He grabbed the discarded parka by one hand and dragged it along behind him. It wasn't safe to wear it, but he didn't want to lose it. Jack hit the end of the discarded fishing pole with one boot. He swung around,

grabbed the pole and gave it another heave toward the shore. He kept moving, sliding like a beached porpoise, head down on the ice, alert to every sound.

The risk from falling through ice was more than drowning. Even in relatively shallow water, it was easy to get trapped in an ice hole and freeze. Climbing out could prove frustrating and exhausting, especially if the ice was thick. The smooth and slippery ice provided no protrusions to grab onto, and wet clothing was dead weight. The ice picks Jack carried around his neck were useful, but not a guarantee. Even if he did extricate himself from the hole, there was the problem of finding his way back to the warm cabin, soaking wet, without succumbing to hypothermia. March was not January, but neither was it spring.

He had been warned about this. “Jack, you don’t have to do this,” Sherman had argued, when Jack announced his intention to spend a winter in a cabin in the woods, alone. “There are so many ways it could go wrong. Freezing. Infection. Accidents. Drowning. You could die in the woods without us even knowing. And if I know you, you’ll also be bored out of your mind.”

“Yes, yes, I know it’s risky,” Jack countered. “But I have to go. I have to swing without a net for once. I can’t write convincingly about life I have never experienced beyond weekend camping trips. This is the only way I can keep my work authentic. I need to learn about a simpler way, closer to the earth, without all the noise and rush and constant connection of modern life. I need to feel it, to know it. I need to *live* it. If only for a while.”

Sherman frowned at him from behind his old wooden desk. Sherman was a good editor, and an even better friend. “This is insanity,” he said flatly. “What do you know about living in the woods?”

“More than you think. I grew up in northern Cape Breton, remember? And risks can be mitigated by careful planning. Learned that in the boy scouts.”

“But why in winter?”

“Because winter is elemental. Winter is the essential course, the stripped down version, without birds and black flies and foliage. Winter doesn’t give you any freebies like warm days and wild strawberries. If I am to truly know life at its most fundamental, it has to be in winter.”

Sherman made an exasperated sound. “What about the book you’re working on right now? How are you going to finish that while you’re wrestling with wolves in the white wilderness or whatever?”

Jack waved a hand. “I’ll take a typewriter.”

“A typewriter!”

“The cabin has no electricity. I’ll have plenty of spare time, and no distractions. It’s the perfect writer’s retreat.”

Sherman gazed at him through his round glasses, evidently trying to assess Jack’s mental competence. “Two conditions,” he pronounced. “First, you will take a satellite telephone. You will call this office once a week, without fail, or I will drive out there myself on a snowmobile, tie you to the back and haul you back to civilization, and your senses.”

“Fair enough. What’s the second condition?”

“Keep a journal. Write in it every day. If you die, maybe we can still squeeze a book out of it.”

Out on the lake, Jack reflected on Sherman’s warning as he squirmed and slithered toward shore. The parka was a constant hindrance. The ice cracked again less than a minute later. It made a second long fissure that began right beneath Jack’s sprawled form. It was clear now that Jack’s weight was an added stress the flexing ice could not bear. He moved away from the new fissure as quickly as his awkward posture allowed. The fissure followed him.

He was no more than twenty metres from shore now. The lake deepened steeply on this side; even this close the water would be well over his head. He yanked on the parka and kept going. He could hear the ice creaking beneath him like an old chair.

When he ran into the fishing rod a third time he gave it a great heave that propelled it into the bushes by the shoreline. The action made the ice groan. It was a warning. The fissure widened. Water spilled up onto the surface. Jack was becoming alarmed. Would that forgotten fishing pole be the only sign of him when rescuers arrived in spring?

He was moving more quickly now, racing the widening fissure. He half-climbing onto his hands and knees. Speed appeared to be more important than optimal weight distribution. He was less than a stone’s throw from shore. With luck and speed he could make it.

The ice cracked so loudly and so near it made Jack start. He reflexively plastered himself to the cold surface. When he looked up, he could see the new crack, jutting out sideways from the fissure like a branch on a tree. It lay directly between him and the shoreline, cutting off his escape route. It was widening as he watched.

Jack cursed out loud. The ice crack in front of him seemed almost intentional, the handiwork of some malign lake spirit intent on keeping him away from land. He slithered

sideways, trying to flank the growing crack. Hopeless. His own weight extended the crack as soon as he arrived. The only way to safety was to somehow climb over it.

Jack considered his options. He wasn't far from shore now, but escape without getting wet was looking very unlikely. It was time for a desperation move. He climbed to a kneeling position. He grabbed his parka and flung it as far forward as he could, over the new crack in the ice. It landed in a heap on the other side. Jack got to his feet. He took two steps backward, dashed forward with all the speed he could muster and leapt over the crack shoulder first, like a quarterback making a one-yard touchdown. He landed on the parka with a thud that muffled the sound of the ice rending beneath him. He crashed through the ice into the cold water beneath. His momentum carried him forward and down. He submerged completely in the frigid water.

For a few panicked seconds he lost his bearings, shocked by the cold water and entangled in his own parka. He fought his way upright. He lifted his head into the air, streaming water and curses. His feet found purchase. The water here was barely chest deep, but climbing up on the ice would be an ordeal. There was no time. He grabbed the sopping parka, hauled it up on the ice and launched himself against it again. The side of the hole gave out, submerging him again. This time he was prepared. He surfaced at once, took a few steps forward, and repeated the shoulder-stinging leap. On the third try he hit branches. He had reached the ring of hydrophilic bushes ringing the lake. He stood up in water that barely covered his knees.

Jack was miserably cold, drenched, shivering. His shoulders howled in pain. The important goal now was to get back to the cabin as quickly as possible. The bushes formed a tight perimeter, and deep snow lay beyond them. The only feasible route was to follow the lake shore back to his usual trail, where his snowshoes were waiting. Abandoning the ruined parka and his saturated toque, he turned and began walking along the shore, using the bushes for support.

The progress was slow, and agonizing. The ice was weaker among the bushes. Now and again it gave way without warning and dropping him back in the water. The slabs of broken ice lodged against the bottom at an angle, greatly complicating climbing out. Jack fell down again and again. By the time he arrived at the trail, and dry land, he was bruised, and scraped, and very cold. He was beginning to shiver severely. Water dripped from his hair and beard. His clothing was an ice bath.

The cabin was not far uphill but the path to it lay under deep snow. Jack considered his snowshoes: effective in snow, but not fast. Could his shaking hands even strap them on? Time was essential now. The path to the lake was well beaten by many passages back and forth. Perhaps he could run through the packed snow. Jack's shoulders screamed at him as he peeled off the sopping sweater. It was a liability now. He dropped it on the ground beside the snowshoes. He began to run up the hill, following the icy trail. It felt like running through molasses. The snow impeded his progress at every step. He slipped again and again. He fell, got up, snow-waded forward a few paces and fell again.

Every time he fell it was harder to get up. The icy cold in his body was disappearing, replaced by a comforting warmth. Jack remembered dimly what that meant. He climbed to his feet and stumbled blindly on up the hill. Wet hair clung to his face. His right knee shot out pain with every step. Somewhere he had banged it against a hidden rock. He could see the cabin, but it was fading in and out, like a badly shot film. How far away was it? His right boot slipped out from under him and with a grunt he fell into the snow again.

For a long time he lay there, too weak to move. Breathing was an effort. He rolled over. He studied the blue sky overhead. Maybe he would just lie here until the end. He looked over toward the cabin, nearer now, but somehow far away. Sherman was standing on the front step. What was he doing here? He was wearing a parka exactly like Jack's over his office clothes. His glasses glinted in the morning light.

"Sherman! Jack called. "The ice. I fell. Fell through the ice. Help me!"

"Help yourself," the other man replied. "You're the one that wanted to experience life at its most elemental. Remember?"

"No, please. I'm freezing to death. I know it. Help me up!"

Sherman waved a hand. "Stop whining. The cabin is like ten yards away. You can make it. I just came by to pick up your manuscript." His free hand held a stack of typewritten pages against his chest.

"Sherman, no, wait. It's not done. I can't move. Please –"

His editor looked annoyed. "Jack, you're almost there. Get to your feet. Walk forward. You can do it. I can't publish half a journal." He walked away and disappeared.

"Damn you, Sherman," Jack murmured. He climbed to his knees, then lurched to his feet once more. He staggered forward. Only ten yards to the cabin, Sherman said. He could see the

bulk of it in front of him now, but his eyes were stuck half-closed. One step, another, then another. Sinking through snow. Almost on one knee. Get back up. Take another step. One more. So tired. Falling asleep. Not yet. Must take another step.

He bumped into something. He peered at it, felt it with wet gloves. A post. Square. There were square posts at the steps of the cabin. He was at the cabin? He grabbed the post with both hands, then lifted himself up one step. Then another step. On the porch now. The door was in front of him. He opened the latch with fumbling hands. He stepped through the door, tripped over the sill, and collapsed onto the floor.

He lay there for a long time, unmoving, barely breathing. The cabin was warm. It was all one big room, heated by an old cooking stove along one side. Jack stirred, groggy. He lifted one boot and push the door closed.

He began to shiver again while he pulled off his boots. The shivers became uncontrollable as he padded wet-footed into the room. There were hot coals in the stove. He stumbled over to the wood box, found some kindling and threw it in, spilling much of it on the floor. Shedding his wet clothing was an ordeal; the shivers stole all of his muscles. When he got finally out of his trousers, he made his way to the bed, grabbed all the blankets and wrapped himself in them. He threw a couple of logs on the fire. Then he sat on the floor for a long, long time, close by the stove, wrapped in blankets, waiting for the shivers to subside. He fell asleep, but now he knew it was safe to do so.

Sometime later, Jack was sitting at his desk, still wrapped in a blanket, but dry now and fully dressed. He was sipping hot tea and nibbling cookies. There were still existential problems to be solved. He would have to go back for his parka, and all the other accoutrements he had left at the lake. He was reluctant to lose the fish. Jack contemplated using the fishing line to cast a hook onto the fish box and maybe pull it onto shore. Retrieving the axe would be more challenging.

But those problems could wait. At the moment Jack was grateful to be alive. True friend that he was, Sherman had saved him without even being there. Jack found his journal and a pen. He began a new entry: "4 March. I almost died, again, today."

