

Ice Fishing

Douglas Thayer

"WHY YOU WANT TO GO OUT and sit all day on the ice just to catch a fish, I'll never know. Ed, you're going to freeze to death one of these days, or catch pneumonia."

He didn't say anything.

"The TV says it's going to snow later today."

"I know, love. Be sure to tape the BYU-Utah game."

"Oh, I'll remember, and for heaven's sakes be careful and get home before dark. You don't want to be driving down that canyon after dark. You could hit a deer"

Beth put on a sweater and followed him out to the pickup. "You're not as young as you used to be, you know. You could stay home and watch the game. You'd be nice and warm."

"Yes, I know."

"You're going to miss Les. Poor Betty. I've got to call her again. It's hard."

Ed looked at his wife. "Poor Betty?" It was Les who had done the dying, not "Poor Betty."

Ed nodded. Beth kissed him on the cheek. He got in the truck and rolled down the window.

"I'll have supper ready when you get home. You can have a nice hot bath and watch your game. Be careful."

He nodded. He backed out of the driveway. Beth waved and he waved. When he got home, Beth wouldn't tell him the score. She knew he didn't like to know who won. It took some of the pleasure out of watching the taped game.

He shifted and turned up the street. No need to hurry. They didn't get up before daylight anymore to go fishing. He looked up at Mount Timp, grey-white with deep snow in the morning light coming through the clouds. He wondered how cold it got on top in the winter, probably thirty or forty below. He stopped at the stop sign, looked both ways twice, and pulled out. It was cold in Provo, down to ten above at night, but no new snow for two days.

They'd been ice-fishing Scofield Reservoir on the twenty-third, and Les had died on the twenty-fourth, two weeks ago. But then younger friends than Les had died. Ed was sixty-eight. He'd planned to retire at sixty-five, but the plant had asked him to stay on and he had. He would retire in April.

He stopped and picked up Bob. His wife waved from the porch.

"Nice day, no wind," Bob said looking up through the windshield at the sky.

"Fishing should be good."

The clouds were high, but would be getting lower. Coming home they'd be out of the canyon before the highway got slick. Ordinarily Ed liked storms and the cold, but he didn't like to drive slick canyon roads. He liked things white and cold and clean.

Ed glanced over at Bob. Bob didn't speak again. Ed knew he wouldn't say anything about missing Les. Bob had always sat on the outside because of his long legs, Les in the middle. Being in the truck together was part of the pleasure of going fishing. Mostly they told stories about other fishing trips, the stories going back thirty years some of them, but still true, still important, still pleasing to repeat in the intimacy of the truck cab.

Bob was retired; Les had been retired too. Ed tended to categorize the older men he knew as either retired or not retired. It made a difference now, although it didn't used to. You really had nothing to do, except mow your lawn and shovel snow. Some men he'd known at the plant seemed to lose respect for themselves when they retired, as if only their jobs had made their lives worthwhile.

In the rest homes Ed had seen the ghosts of good men he'd known all his life. You shook hands with a man in high priest meeting on Sunday, and the next Sunday he was in a rest home, paralyzed from a stroke, or was dead. A heart attack was usually a faster way of going than a stroke.

Just before Ed took the off-ramp at Spanish Fork, they passed a semi and trailer jackknifed and smashed on the side of the freeway. A flattened car lay near the semi. The ambulances were gone. Two cruisers, their lights flashing, reflecting off the aluminum sides of the semi, still sat at the edge of the freeway.

"Looks like a bad one," Bob said turning from his window. "Probably hit a patch of black ice earlier."

"Probably."

The freeway was dry except where the plowed snow had melted and the water spread out in patches on the outside lane and then froze at night.

As they approached Spanish Fork Canyon on Highway 6, four semis in a row passed them headed for I-15. Six was one of the main routes out

of Denver. More people were injured and killed in Spanish Fork Canyon in traffic accidents than in any other canyon in the state.

You saw skid marks, maybe fifty feet long, but no debris, or the skid marks went off the highway onto the shoulder, gouging into the soft soil. Sometimes you saw a dead deer, or maybe an elk, and you knew the story, but most of the time you didn't know, except there had been danger and somebody had escaped. Hitting an elk was as bad as hitting a horse or a cow.

He and Bob and Les had never talked about death when they went fishing (they wouldn't talk about Les's death today). They didn't talk much about their families, their jobs at the plant, or football either. In fact, they didn't really talk about anything except fishing; they told stories about other fishing trips. It was as if certain topics were forbidden to them because they needed to keep the pleasure of fishing, and to talk about certain things would destroy that pleasure.

They didn't see each other except to go fishing, although they phoned each other to set up trips, talk about the weather, new equipment, and repeat information they'd heard about where the best fishing was. They could have been strangers except for the fishing. It was as if their fishing put them in another minor world. They visited each other at Christmas to drop off a gift that always had to do with fishing.

Ed kept his eyes on the road. He watched for deer crossing. Three ravens flew up from something they were feeding on at the side of the highway.

Les's death had not stunned or shocked Ed. He was used to his friends dying, but he felt the loss deeply. Les's death was very important because of fishing. This trip was to see if ice-fishing was gone too. After you were sixty, maybe a little older, you began not to do certain things, the circle of your life beginning to tighten a little. Ed wasn't particularly afraid of dying, as long as there wasn't great pain and he didn't rot away in some rest home wearing a diaper and connected to a catheter. But Les's death had opened the door a little more for him, he knew that. People kept asking him when he was going to retire and if he was looking forward to it. When you retired, you crossed the divide.

Going to work every morning he saw retired men out walking—for the exercise but also to get out from under the wife's feet. A wife wasn't used to having a man around all day. She had her own life between eight and five. Or he saw men in the passenger seat of the car, the wife driving, the man strapped in, looking straight ahead, not smiling, as if in a state of shock at what had happened, or perhaps it was embarrassment.

He and Beth had talked a little about what they would do after he retired, but they hadn't decided anything. Beth wanted to go on a mission,

but the idea didn't interest him much. Beth was more religious than he was. She always liked going to church.

Ed had gone to church all his life, but it surprised him how little difference religion made to him now. It was as if he'd learned as much about religion as he was going to and now the thing to do was wait. He assumed when he got to the other side, he would visit with all of his friends and relatives, but what he'd do after that he didn't know or really think about. Preaching the gospel, doing temple work, or creating worlds didn't particularly interest him. When he looked around at his ward high priest group on Sunday, there weren't any potential gods as far as he could tell. Most of them had all they could do to deal with their wives and families. Hell.

"We shot some nice bucks up there." Bob bent forward to look up through the windshield. They were passing Diamond Fork on the left.

Ed nodded.

The three of them had hunted Diamond, Lake Fork, Tucker, and Sheep Creek, all drainage feeding down into Spanish Fork Canyon.

"Four head of deer over on that slope."

"Any bucks?"

"No."

Ed didn't take his eyes from the road. Bob knew he wouldn't. Bob and Les had always reported the deer and elk they saw in the canyon, but Ed paid attention to his driving. On a two-lane highway you had to pay attention to your driving every minute. The snow brought the deer and elk out of the high country down to the mouth of the canyons and across the foothills above Utah Valley.

Ed glanced over at Bob. They should be telling hunting stories now. Les was always the best story teller, had the best memory for details. Watching the highway, Ed had the feeling that they should just turn around and go home. It wasn't going to work with just the two of them. But he didn't say anything to Bob. They might as well keep going now they'd come this far.

They'd stopped hunting nearly twenty-five years ago, about the time they were all forty, as if by common consent, their concern, or perhaps guilt, mutual. Shooting animals and birds, killing them for no reason except the enjoyment of killing them, became wrong, even threatening to their own lives because to kill was to hold life cheaply. And the older they got, the more they desired that life not be held cheaply. But he, Bob, and Les had not talked about these things. They didn't reason about them. Hunting was simply something they stopped doing, an activity that had become too personal. They still had their guns, but they didn't hunt.

But they still went ice-fishing. They didn't troll or fly-fish anymore, but they still went ice-fishing. They released most of the fish they caught. It didn't seem important anymore to take a limit home.

Fishing was not wrong. Fishing was more basic than hunting. Fish did not breathe air, walk, or make sounds; they were not full of blood, did not have heavy bones and skeletons. You didn't think of fish as being male and female. Fishing was more mysterious than hunting, particularly ice fishing, which had become the most important kind of fishing for some reason they didn't understand.

The canyon topped out at Soldier Summit, a valley three or four miles long and a half a mile wide. The snow was deeper, two feet at least. By the end of the winter it would be four or five, if it was a good snow year. With snow that deep the whole landscape became rounder and smoother—and whiter, the white mountains fading into the pale winter sky so that things seemed not to have a beginning or an end. Soldier Summit had once been a small railroad town, but all the houses were gone; only the cement foundations remained, now mounded under the snow.

The small black flags on the snow poles marking the sides of the highway moved only when a car or truck passed. There was still no wind. A windy day took some of the pleasure out of ice fishing, but snow increased the pleasure for Ed.

Semis and open coal and ore trucks passed headed down Spanish Fork Canyon. Ed had seen the smashed cars, sometimes two or three, as if one were not enough, the jackknifed truck, half a dozen cruisers and three ambulances nested around the accident, lights flashing off the white snow. Ed never stopped. The big semis rocked his truck when they passed, covered his windshield with spray and slush if it was raining or there was snow, big, looming, pounding trucks that could grind you to pieces if you skidded ten feet on black ice, the big front end coming at you at seventy miles an hour like a metal wall, and in that split second, terrified, you knew you were doomed. But at least it was quick. Ed turned off the highway onto the road leading up to the reservoir. Ahead of them were two big extended-cab pickups pulling long, white snowmobile trailers. A man could have fifty thousand dollars tied up in an outfit like that. Ed didn't understand where a man got that kind of money, why his wife would let him spend it that way if he did. He knew that Beth wouldn't put up with that kind of expense just to go racing across the snow.

The south side of the canyon was fenced all the way, a tire hung on a fence post every hundred yards with "Keep Out" written in white paint, the tires capped with snow. Ed didn't like the tires; he didn't like the canyons and mountains posted. Farms and ranches, yes (he could understand why they needed to be posted), but not the mountains. He wanted the mountains free. How could you feel you were in the mountains if some scissorbill ran ten miles of fence line with tires saying "Keep Out"? How could a man own a mountain, or even want to?

They topped out into Scofield Valley and then the north end of the reservoir was visible, the sky a layer of high winter-grey clouds. The small black dots were fishermen; the bigger dots were tents and black ice shelters. A few fishermen were out by the island. The black flags on the guide poles along the road still hung limp.

"Looks like a crowd," Bob said.

"It's Saturday." Ed didn't feel much of the old anticipation.

They started around the reservoir toward the shallow south end. From that distance some areas on the reservoir were patches of black where large numbers of fishermen were congregated in the most popular spots. The pattern was always the same, like flocks of large black birds lit across the ice. A line of four snowmobiles was moving out just below a parking lot. A snowmobile had broken through last year in the shallow end where a spring had weakened the ice. He'd seen pictures of ice fishermen in Minnesota and Michigan pulling huts out on the ice with trucks. Sometimes a truck broke through, only the back bumper showing as it sank.

He, Bob, and Les had never wanted an ice shelter; they came to be outside, not sit all day cooped up in some black shelter. It would be like fishing in a cave.

In high school Ed had read a story about a man hiking alone in Alaska with his dog. The man in the story fell through the thin ice over a spring and wet his feet. The temperature was seventy-five degrees below zero. He built a fire under a tree and the snow from the tree fell on it and put it out. Freezing, the man tried to kill his dog to cut it open and thrust his hands into its warm guts, but he couldn't catch the dog and froze to death sitting by the side of the trail. Ed had always remembered the story. The coldest weather he'd ever been in was thirty below.

They crossed the dam. The railroad tracks ran fifty yards above them on the left. The tracks followed the Price River down the canyon; they didn't follow the road. The trains carried coal from the mines above the town of Scofield. In 1900 one of the Scofield mines had blown up, killing at least two hundred men. It was one of the greatest mine disasters in the west. They had to bring in coffins from as far away as Denver. Ed had seen a picture of a railroad flat car stacked high with coffins. One woman lost her husband, a brother, and two sons.

People had pretty well forgotten about the mine disaster. Nobody ever talked about it. Ed knew you were soon forgotten after you died. But that didn't bother him. He was more concerned about how hard growing old was going to be than he was in being remembered. Seventy was the beginning of growing old. He liked the idea in the church that families were eternal, but it wasn't something he thought about much.

Both he and Beth had prepaid funeral plans and their lots. Beth kept

after him to write down what he wanted on his program, but he wasn't about to do that. One thing he didn't want was all his grandkids lining up to sing some song about families being together forever, and then his kids speaking, bawling, telling how wonderful he was and making everybody embarrassed. It was all too personal. As far as he was concerned they could forget about the funeral. Like his mother used to say, die and let the stink bury you.

They drove to the south end of the reservoir where they always fished. Ed parked just above the snow-packed dirt road leading to the reservoir. He didn't drive down it, too easy to get stuck. Five years ago they would have parked farther back and climbed down the steep bank, but it was too easy to slip. Break a hip and you were really fixed. Going slowly blind, deaf, and lame was bad enough without breaking your hip and getting a jumpstart on the whole process.

They got out of the truck and pulled on their snowmobiling outfits and insulated boots. Bob helped Ed lift the sled out of the back of the covered pickup. Ed liked the feeling of being warm and protected. They spoke few words. What they were doing was habit. Bob carried the assembled rods; Ed pulled the sled with the power auger, chairs, and five-gallon buckets. Les had always helped pull the sled.

They walked down to the end of the road and walked out on the ice. The ice was hard. Sometimes a layer of slush three or four inches deep lay between a thin, frozen top layer and the heavy ice underneath. You always broke through. Ed didn't like that.

He heard the loud whine of snowmobiles. He looked out across the reservoir. Two snowmobiles were going hell-bent for leather across the reservoir out toward the island. Two kids probably—as if going sixty miles an hour was the only thing that made life worthwhile. When Ed was ice-fishing, he didn't want noise. He had read in *National Geographic* that the Eskimos used snowmobiles now. They didn't have dog sleds anymore.

Ed and Bob followed the path through the two-foot deep snow, which was easy walking, and then cut left to get away from the crowd. Pulling the sled through the unbroken snow was work.

He, Bob, and Les had always liked fifty yards between them and the next group of fishermen. Some of the groups had fifteen or twenty fishermen, fathers, sons, grandfathers, whole families except for the women. Some brought dogs. Some brought heaters, charcoal broilers, propane stoves, tables, and turned the ice into a campground, people shouting to each other, kids running around hollering and playing games. Ed didn't come to the ice for confusion. The ice was a place for simplicity. Occasionally you saw a woman on the ice, but not many. Women didn't like the ice. It was a man's sport.

They had several places they fished, so they could pick the spot that

was least crowded. Of course, when you started to catch fish, people sometimes crowded in. You couldn't do anything about that. Most people were decent and didn't try to horn in. A man would let you know if he wanted you to fish by him.

They always caught fish, but not many big fish anymore, the three- and four-pounders, maybe one apiece each season. They'd fished the deep water out by the island, where the big fish were reported to be, but they had never found the right spot. The last two or three years they'd stopped trying. It was too far out to the island if they didn't catch bigger fish than the ones they caught near the east shore.

Ed looked out toward the island. A lone fisherman fished off the south tip of the island about a hundred yards. Ed had seen him there the two times they were out before Les died. The fisherman was always in the same place. Most fishermen set up closer in by the rocks. Ed wanted to ask him what the fishing was like out there in the deep water. They'd always left before the fisherman came in.

Ed and Bob moved off the beaten trail to cut left. The sled was harder to pull in the deep snow; the walking was harder. Bob dropped back and took a hold of the rope. He always did that.

Ed checked the east shore, the big clump of willows and then turned to look south at the old fence coming down to the edge of the reservoir. He checked the distance out from each point. They were about right.

"What do you think?"

"Looks good, Ed."

Les had always been best at finding the right spot. The old holes were frozen over and covered with snow.

They each had their jobs. Ed cut the holes, Bob set up the chairs and got the buckets out, and Les had dipped the holes clean of ice. They always cut a half a dozen holes. Once one of them had a hot hole, they cut holes for the other two maybe three or four feet out. That's when it was best, when they were fishing close together. Sometimes you had to cut three or four sets of holes before you found a hot hole. The three of them together was just right.

They'd chipped in and bought the power auger three years ago. The hand auger became too hard to work finally. Early in the season when you had only four or five inches of ice, the hand auger was okay. But once you got fifteen inches, cutting holes had become too much for the three of them. They didn't use a fishfinder. It made fishing too scientific, too easy. It took the fun out of fishing. There was a new camera out that you dropped down the hole on a coaxial cable so you could watch the fish on a screen when they took your bait. Hell. You might as well drop a stick of dynamite down the hole and get it over with. They'd joked about being old men and having to buy a power auger.

Ed drilled a hole six inches into the ice and left the auger upright. He didn't like an auger lying on the ice; too easy to trip over.

Bob was baiting his jig. Ed stood there. There needed to be three of them. A raven croaked. Two ravens flew slowly by. Ravens patrolled the reservoir looking for fish guts and pieces of sandwiches.

Ed set his chair and bucket where he wanted them and then baited his jig. He always put on two wax worms. He didn't thread them; he hooked them just behind the tail. With two wax worms, if he missed the first bite, he might hook the fish on the second. A rainbow would usually keep biting unless you nicked him with the hook. Ed had one split-shot eight inches above the jig.

He dropped his jig into the water, released the bale on his spinning reel and let the monofilament line play out. When it stopped, the line coiling on the surface, he knew the split-shot was on the bottom. He lowered the end of the pole to the surface of the water and turned the reel handle to engage the bale and tighten the line. Then he laid the pole on the bucket. That way he knew his jig was about six inches off the bottom. You had to fish close to the bottom; that's where the fish fed.

He sat down in his chair. Looking out at the two or three hundred fishermen on the ice, he knew that a lot of them had their bait right on the bottom or too high up. He watched the end of his rod, an old five-and-a-half foot Browning ultra-light spinning rod. It was a beautiful rod for ice-fishing. You needed a very limber tip or you couldn't see the bite. Most fishermen fished with too heavy a rod; they might as well be fishing with a broomstick. It was satisfying to sit and watch the end of his rod.

The layer of clouds hung just above the low, white mountains. They wouldn't get any sun today. It would begin to snow later, and they'd get wind.

The ice cracked almost under his chair, the cracking sound fading off along the break. Sometimes the ice cracked all day. Ed didn't know why. He assumed it depended on the temperature and thickness of the ice. Some fathers had to take their young sons back to the car when the ice cracked too much. The boys became frightened; they thought the ice would open and they would be swallowed up. Ed had heard of such things happening.

He stood up from his chair and dipped out his hole, and then went over and dipped out Bob's hole.

Sitting down again, Ed looked out across the ice. He'd read in the *National Geographic* of a polar expedition whose ship got caught in the ice and sank. The men got off and tried to get back to civilization pulling their own sleds, but they all starved to death. They left notes pleading with their government to take care of their wives and children. They were English.

Sitting in his chair, Ed pulled back into his heavy, warm clothes, settling down in his chair. He didn't wear gloves. It wasn't that cold yet. He felt his hands deep in his pockets. But that's where the cold started, in the hands and feet, and then moved up.

People driving along the road above the reservoir must think they should have had more sense than to sit out on the reservoir all day staring down at a hole in the ice. Particularly the women would think that. He was glad he hadn't had to give up everything he enjoyed, at least not yet.

Ed watched the tip of his rod, waited for his first bite. He knew he would get bites. He always did. He knew how to fish. He watched the tip of the rod. He liked that simplicity about ice-fishing. All you had to do was watch the end of your rod. Watch for that slight dip, dip, that meant a bite, and always brought pleasure. You had to concentrate on the tip of the rod. Ice-fishing took concentration, but it let you sink into yourself, too. You didn't have to move. It wasn't like trolling from a boat or fly-fishing.

He looked over at Bob, silent, sitting in his chair.

Les wasn't there. Les should have been there. Later when one of them got a hot hole and the other one would move in, that's when they would miss Les. That's when you talked, although you didn't talk about anything much except the fishing. Perhaps it was hopeless without Les. Ed knew this could be the last ice-fishing trip for him and Bob, something else lost to him. Soon he would be reduced to reading the paper and watching TV. The doctors kept you alive too long now. His parents and grandparents had gone quickly. They hadn't taken a handful of pills night and morning.

He'd heard of fishermen, ardent fishermen, who quit fishing overnight, and it didn't have to be the dying either of a life-long fishing partner that put an end to fishing. A bad fall wading, partial loss of night vision, a nervous wife, inability to launch your boat alone, a slight stroke or heart attack, or loss of your driver's license, and it was all over after going fishing every week, and sometimes two and three times a week, for fifty years, one of the things you enjoyed most in life. You could be in good health one day and in the hospital the next, paralyzed; all it took was one small artery to bust in your brain, the blood spreading, building up pressure, cutting you off. A heart attack was quicker usually. Alzheimers was the worst; old Bill Spencer had sat tied in a chair for seven years.

Ed looked down into his hole. The ice was fifteen inches thick. He liked at least six inches. Some fishermen would go out on three inches of ice. He'd done that, but he didn't do it anymore.

The end of his pole dipped—once, twice.

Ed smiled, felt the satisfaction. He lifted the rod off the bucket. He

took the monofilament line between the thumb and index finger of his left hand; he took most of the slack out. He stood up. He liked a rod long enough that he could stand up to fight a fish.

"Looks like you got a bite, Ed."

He nodded.

The end of the rod dipped. He lifted the rod sharply, setting the hook, and knew instantly that he had a good fish. He loosened the drag to let the fish run, lifted the rod against the fish, adjusted the drag again. The rod took a deep bow against the fish. Up through the line and the rod he felt the heavy fish. He loosened the drag a little more, let the fish run.

"Looks like a nice one, Ed."

"Looks like it." Bob stood beside him.

"Seen it yet?"

"Not yet."

"Hey, looks like you got a nice one."

Ed looked up. A short, heavy fisherman dressed in a red snowmobiling outfit walked toward him.

"Looks like it."

"I've been watching you. I been here for over an hour and ain't had a bite yet. You get a bite ten minutes after you set up. What you usin'?"

"Wax worms."

Ed fought the fish. He tightened the drag. Down through the hole he saw the fish flash. The fish was tiring. He got its head up in the hole, but then it went deep again. He brought it back. Again it went deep.

"There it is. I can see it." The red fisherman was down on his knees by the hole. "It's a whopper."

Ed got the trout's head up in the hole and brought it halfway out. Bob reached down and helped scoop it up on the ice.

"Gee, that's some fish."

It was a brightly marked rainbow of about three pounds. It was the biggest fish of the season. He'd caught bigger fish when they had trolled at Strawberry Reservoir, but then Les had sold his boat last year and that ended that. Ed had stopped fly-fishing after he'd slipped on the slick rocks and fallen twice. The rocks in the Provo River were very slippery. Even with felt-soled boots you slipped.

Ed took the short piece of rake handle from his bucket and hit the big rainbow twice sharply across the head. He didn't like to let a fish flop around on the ice until it died. Beth had told him if he got three or four nice trout to bring them home. She wanted to have a trout supper for some friends. Beth's mother had been Finnish, and Beth had learned to cook fish from her. She did a beautiful job. He took out the hook.

"That sure is a nice fish. Wish I could get one like that."

"What you usin'?" Ed slipped the trout into a plastic bag.

"Just cheese."

Ed took his small tackle box out of the bucket and gave the fisherman a white-skirted jig. He took half a dozen wax worms from the plastic bait container in his pocket, where he kept them so they wouldn't freeze. He explained to the fisherman how to fish the wax worms just off the bottom.

"Gee, thanks. Thanks a lot."

Looking down at his cupped hand, the red fisherman hurried back to his ice shelter. Ed watched him go into his ice shelter. At least he hadn't asked if he could move over and fish by them.

When Ed turned to look over at Bob, he was fighting a fish. Ed stood for a moment to see if he needed to go help Bob, but Bob lifted the small trout out of the hole.

"Well, you got one."

"Looks like it."

Ed turned to bait his jig and drop it back into the hole. He sat down. He had another bite almost immediately. It was a small trout. He turned it loose. He baited up again and sat down. He looked down at the water in the hole. He'd read of two fishermen who had drowned at Scofield years ago ice fishing. The one fisherman had broken through. The other had put his ice auger in a hole and tied off with a piece of nylon rope, tied the rope around his waist, and gone after his friend. There had been a storm. The sheriff's search party didn't find them until the next morning. They found the ice auger with the rope tied to it and vanishing into the ice, which had obviously been broken and frozen over. The sheriff and his men broke the ice. When they pulled in the rope, they brought up both bodies. The fisherman with the rope tied to him held the other fisherman in his arms. The two men were older, both retired. The story about one fisherman holding the other one didn't surprise Ed when he read about it in the *Herald*.

Bob brought over a bag of cookies. Ed took two.

"Thanks."

"Looks like some of them are already giving up early."

Ed turned his head to look across the ice. Maybe a dozen fishermen were pulling their sleds back toward the parked cars and trucks.

"Probably no luck."

"Probably, or they're afraid of the storm. It's getting colder." They both looked up at the lowering clouds. The first flakes of snow were coming now. A pair of ravens flew along the shore.

Bob walked back to his chair and sat down. He lifted his rod off the bucket and then put it back down.

Ed stood up. He walked ten yards out from his hole to urinate. It was a simple pleasure, and one of the reasons he didn't like women on the

ice. The red fisherman in the red outfit came out of his shelter holding a fish. He waved. Ed waved back.

Before he sat back down, he dipped the thin skim of ice out of his and Bob's holes. He heard a raven and turned to watch it.

Ed caught two more small fish; he kept one. He watched Bob catch two fish. The fishing was good, but neither of them had a hot hole. They would not fish close together. Les would have been fishing a hole between them; then they could have talked back and forth. Pulled into his heavy clothes, Ed sat watching the end of his rod.

The wind had picked up a little. More fishermen were leaving the reservoir. Ed turned in his chair to look toward the island. The lone fisherman was still there. The snow would not make the road slick for two or three hours. The heavy truck traffic helped keep the road clear.

He liked to fish in a snow storm. He liked the isolation, the feeling you were the only human being alive on the face of the earth. It was as if he were closed off, dying perhaps, leaving the world. He often thought about dying. He didn't want to die, but he thought about it, even before Les had died. When would it be? How would it be? Sitting on the ice in a heavy storm, able to see only Bob's and Les's vague, dark silhouettes through the wind-driven snow, was a little like slipping off into some unknown world, receding into the enveloping storm, pulling down, down into yourself toward that final point of light or darkness.

Ed brushed the snow off of his shoulders and knees.

On those snowy days, looking out across the ice through the swirling storm, he could sometimes imagine seeing the *Titanic* going down, just the bow slipping under the waves, vanishing, all those men going down with her, the surviving women and children watching from the lifeboats.

He hadn't read the articles in the *National Geographic* about finding the *Titanic* and the *Bismark*, the big German battleship. He hadn't really looked at the pictures. They should leave the two ships alone. Let the dead rest. Beth had gone with her friend May to see the movie about the *Titanic*. She said it was a wonderful love story. The biggest ship ever built sinks, fifteen hundred people drown, and they make a love story out of it. Hell.

Ed looked up. The red fisherman held up another fish. Ed waved.

Ed watched the end of his rod. It was good just to have that to do, to make his life that simple. His hands and feet were getting cold. He got up and stomped his feet. Maybe he was getting too old for this. The snow was heavier now.

He caught three fish as fast as he could lower his baited jig, all about eleven inches. It was discouraging to catch so many small fish. It was as if he didn't have any skill.

The trout were below him under the ice. The eight-inch hole was his only entry, that small circle of water. He had heard that fish were at-

tracted to the light coming down through the hole, every hole a point of light from an upper world. Ed liked thinking about the fish under the fifteen inches of ice, shielded, protected, in their own world in the darkness without light.

He'd heard that some ice-fishermen lowered waterproof flashlights down into the water to attract the fish. It wasn't illegal.

Ice fishing, Ed had at times half-expected a seal to poke its head up through the hole. It would not have greatly surprised him. He thought of himself sometimes as an Eskimo, silent, still, harpoon ready, waiting with infinite patience hour after hour at the blowhole for a seal to appear. Great sheets of ice broke off and the Eskimo hunter was set adrift, or he was attacked by a polar bear, the hunter become the hunted, the white bear creeping up quiet as falling snow. Or the hunter got too close to the edge of the ice and a killer whale leaped up out of the water to seize him in its jaws and wiggle its way back into the cold sea. Killer whales were smart.

Ed looked at his watch. Nearly four hours gone already. Time passed quickly ice-fishing. He wondered how the Y was doing. The game was an hour old. It would help make it a nice day if they beat Utah. Some fishermen brought radios to listen to their favorite game. He, Bob, and Les had never done that. He liked the silence more, and not knowing the score until he watched the tape.

Ed looked over at Bob, who sat hunched in his chair, both hands in his pockets, the snow turning him white. Bob was getting old. If he could see that in Bob, he knew Bob could see it in him. Ed knew he'd had a good life. He wasn't complaining—Beth and the kids, grandkids, friends, a job he liked, good health still, the church. He didn't envy younger men anything, not sex or any of the rest of it. Why did younger men think that the thing older men missed most was sex or that they wanted to be young again? Good digestion was important, and being able to sleep, and being able to walk. Not having prostate problems was important. Being able to remember things. He'd heard of men who suddenly overnight couldn't remember their telephone number, their address, even their own names.

He didn't want to be embalmed or have an expensive casket. He wanted to be wrapped in a clean white sheet, put in a pine box made out of new wood, and buried in clean sand. Actually cremation would be okay, but the church was against that. He figured they wanted you all in as big of pieces as possible for the resurrection. Well, lots of luck on that one. Beth would do what she wanted. None of his dead friends had out-lived their wives, and he didn't suppose he would—didn't want to.

Ed kept watching his rod. Who would be next, him or Bob or somebody else close? Whose little square grey picture would appear in the *Herald* next? Every morning when he went out to get the paper, he stood to look at the obituary page before he went back in the house. It was bet-

ter to get it over with outside in the open air, that mild shock of seeing a familiar face and name, the picture sometimes forty years old but the face still recognizable, somebody he'd played football with in high school or worked with out at the plant years before. Sometimes there was two pictures, one when the dead man was in high school or in the army, and you knew that face.

After he'd read the obituary, there was nothing to do about it except go in and tell Beth and give her the paper so that she could read it for herself. Why did a wife put in the second picture? Probably to convince all the friends, neighbors, and family that her old man had been worth marrying once, as if being young and good looking were more important than anything else. Ed was always afraid he would be asked to speak at a funeral.

His rod dipped. He hooked the fish, but it got off. He baited his jig and dropped it down the hole. He brushed the snow from his hat and shoulders. He got his thermos and extra cup out of the bucket and walked over to talk to Bob and see how he was doing. Bob had three fish on the ice. He had a neighbor who liked trout. The fish were covered with an inch of snow.

"It's okay." Bob stood up from his chair. "About average."

"Want a cup of hot chocolate?"

Ed always brought the hot chocolate. He and Les and Bob would stand around drinking hot chocolate and watching each other's rods. It was almost a joke to tell the other man he had a bite, to see the dipping rod before he did, hear him say "hell" or "damn" and run for his rod, spilling his hot chocolate, the dipping rod more important than anything else.

After they emptied their cups, Ed went back to his chair. He turned to look back at Bob. Ed knew it was probably the last trip; the two of them weren't enough to keep it going. Things were always changing, and not always for the better. You had to accept that.

He heard the coal train coming down from Scofield. He watched it come, maybe eighty or ninety cars, the crushed coal in four large mounds at the top of each car, the train coming slow, not blowing up the snow. They'd probably sealed that mine where the explosion had killed so many miners a hundred years ago, but not if there was still money to be made. You could count on that.

The ice cracked under him, the sound low like faint, distant thunder. He wondered if the sound frightened the fish. Did the sound of the power auger frighten them, or did they get used to it?

He dipped out his and Bob's holes. The skim ice was thicker. When he sat down, he looked up into the falling snow.

He caught two more fish; he kept them for Beth's trout supper. Although they weren't as big as the first two, they would do.

Suddenly the storm became fierce, the wind blowing the snow hori-

zontal to the ice, blanking out everything. Ed couldn't see Bob. Ed didn't think it would snow hard for long. It would let up and snow more gently. It was probably just a squall. He'd watched the weather report on TV last night. At times he regretted that the storm couldn't last for a week or a month, pile up snow six feet deep, a great storm down out of Alaska and the Canadian arctic like they got out in the midwest, so that Utah Valley itself was filled with snow, the whiteness spread across the part of the world he could see. They used to get bigger storms when he was a boy growing up in Provo.

Ed sat watching the ice hole fill up with the wind-driven snow. He did not brush the snow from his body. He sat, not dozing, but motionless, watching the snow through half-closed eyes, his ungloved hands deep in his pockets, only his face uncovered and capable of feeling. It was as if he were fading off, slipping away, turning white, life and the world becoming less important, even less necessary, as if there were some middle world between life and death that he must enter first.

It would be a good way to die, simply sit out on the reservoir all night and freeze. No pain in that. The sheriff would find you the next morning sitting in your chair, eyes open, looking down at the ice hole. Perhaps you would have a fish on. In *National Geographic* they had pictures of men who'd died climbing Everest. There was no way to bury them. Other climbers passed the frozen bodies.

"Ed, Ed, you got a bite."

"What?"

He looked up. Bob walked toward him.

"You had a bite. Your rod was just about touching the ice. Looks like he's gone now. Must have been a nice fish. Too bad."

Ed looked down at his rod. He reached down and picked it up and reeled in the line. He stood up, brushed off the snow. The jig had been stripped clean.

"Looks like the storm blew nearly everybody off the ice."

Ed looked up. He could see across the reservoir. It had pretty well stopped snowing; the wind was down too. In the hour the storm had lasted, most of the fishermen had left, some still making their way to their cars and trucks, lines of dark forms against the snow, men afraid they would lose their sense of direction, wander in circles through the night, until they fell exhausted, although the reservoir wasn't that big. Yet the fear was there when you couldn't see ten feet in front of you. Or perhaps they merely feared the wind.

The clouds hung low, obscuring the surrounding hills and mountains, all the upper and lower worlds turned grey.

Ed turned in the chair and looked out toward the island. The lone fisherman was still there. He was the only fisherman by the island now. The storm hadn't scared him. The red fisherman was gone.

The roads would not be snow-packed yet. The snow squall hadn't lasted that long. Ed heard a raven croaking; he turned but he couldn't see it. He pulled his hand out of his pocket to look at his watch.

"We've still got an hour if you want to stay, Bob."

"Might as well. Who knows when we'll be back. It's getting colder, but it's not bad."

Bob turned and walked back to his chair.

Ed watched Bob and then he baited his jig and sat back down. He leaned forward to dip out the hole.

He turned to look at Bob hunched down in his chair.

He turned again in his chair. There wasn't a fisherman within five hundred yards of where he sat. Far out on the ice toward the island one lone fisherman moved toward them pulling a sled. Ed watched him come. It was the lone island fisherman, the figure slowly growing larger and darker. Ed wondered what kind of a day he'd had. He was leaving early. He would pass fairly close by them.

Ed looked down at his rod. He hadn't had a bite for nearly an hour. It would soon be time to leave. They needed to get out of Spanish Fork Canyon before it got dark. He knew that it would be a quiet drive home. He and Bob would not talk about what a great day they'd had. Before, the three of them had always finished their lunches driving back, joked, told stories, already making plans for the next trip, anticipating that repeated pleasure. Driving back there would be no anticipation now. Neither one of them would say anything about the next trip. They didn't have to.

Ed wanted one more bite before they left. He wanted to feel that pleasure one more time before they left.

He stood up and walked out from the hole to urinate, and then came back and sat down again. Ed watched the end of his rod. He felt the first flakes of snow against his face. The snow was starting again, the clouds dropping.

He turned. The lone fisherman angled off the trail toward them. Ed watched him.

The fisherman stopped.

"Hello, Ed."

"Hello." Ed leaned forward in his chair to try to identify the fisherman. He didn't recognize the voice. The face was hard to see because of the scarf pulled up around the chin and the hat earflaps pulled down low.

"It's Wade Clark."

"Oh, Wade, I didn't recognize you." Ed stood up. Wade had run the maintenance department at the plant; he'd retired that fall. "I didn't know you were an ice fisherman."

"Oh, I just started this year. It's very peaceful up here. That's Bob Ward over there isn't it?"

"Yes, that's Bob."

"Nice guy. Les Johnson used to fish with you didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

"Too bad about Les. Heck of a nice guy. He said you fished together."

"Yes, he was. How was the fishing over by the island?"

"Good. I don't think I caught a fish under two pounds."

"Good for you. It's a little far for me and Bob."

"Oh, it isn't so bad if you take it slow and get on a snowmobile track."

"We've fished it, but could never find where the big ones were."

"They're out there. I had an uncle that told me where to fish. He used to fish Scofield a lot. Dead now." Wade Clark tightened into his sled rope and then turned. "Les really was a heck of a nice guy. Easy guy to talk to."

"Yes, he was."

Ed watched Wade stop to talk to Bob, then continue through the falling snow on toward their two trucks still parked at the edge of the reservoir.

Ed sat back down. He watched Wade move up the side road to his truck. He'd parked on the main road, too. Ed watched him load his stuff in the back of his truck and drive out. He honked as he left, and both Ed and Bob waved.

Ed sat back down. He looked over toward the island. Fishermen who knew where the best spots were usually didn't spread the word.

The snow was getting heavier. It was the main storm. Bob came over.

"About time to pack it in I guess, Ed."

"I suppose."

"You know Wade Clark?"

"A little."

"Seems like a nice guy. Easy to talk to."

"Seems like it. Sounds like he knows how to fish the island."

"That's what he said. Big fish. Said the walk's not so bad if you take it slow. He comes every Saturday. Said we ought to try it."

"Did he?" Ed stood for a moment to look back out over the frozen reservoir. The snow would cover all the holes. When they came back, it would all look new and clean, as if no fishermen had ever been there. The wind had picked up again. The main storm was coming.

Ed looked down at his rod. The end of the rod dipped. He reached down for it, feeling the pleasure again, setting the hook, the fish pulling hard, the last fish of the day.

Later, driving down Spanish Fork Canyon, Ed got behind a big semi all the way. He just stayed back far enough so they didn't catch the spray. If the semi hit a deer, the driver wouldn't stop. Ed didn't turn on the radio because he didn't want to hear the score on the game. They got out of the canyon just as it began to turn dark.

Ed dropped Bob off.

"See you next Saturday, Bob?"

"Yes, I think so."

When Ed got home, Beth told him to go up and take a hot bath and she would have his supper ready. He smelled fresh pies.

"The game's all taped and ready."

He could tell by her voice that the Y had won. But that was okay; he still didn't know the final score. He kissed Beth on the cheek.

"You are getting romantic. The fishing must have been good. Did you bring me some home?"

"Yes. I'll clean 'em."

Later Ed went upstairs to take his bath. He liked the water deep. He liked to lie back so the water was up to his chin; he covered his face with a washcloth wrung out in the hot water. He liked that feeling of being totally warm. It took the chill out of his bones. The warm washcloth over his face, Ed closed his eyes and slipped down until the water touched his bottom lip.