

Susan Bernhard
from *Winter Loon*

A hawk spiraled in the blue daybreak between storm clouds, eyes darting, its head hunched beneath the crucifix span of wings. What could it see? Not years into the past, a man and a woman, hands on each other at the moment they fell together, fists on each other when they broke apart. It could not see even days before, a mother and son frantically covering their tracks, trying to stay a step ahead of a father out to get them both. No, the hawk would have seen only me, a white-haired boy in his long johns, curled up tight as a fiddlehead, alone on a frozen lake surrounded by remote miles of woods and farmland and a handful of sagging houses gone dark. The hawk on its feathered cross vanished in the distance. I stayed still, prey playing dead.

I remember looking out over clenched fists, taking in the wide view canted a quarter turn clockwise. Pine trees crowded the edge of the lake and, beneath them, three figures stood on shore. Just out of my reach, a mar, a manhole, dark like spilled ink. That was where the ice had given way and the moonlit lake had swallowed my mother whole. One minute she was coaxing me to go faster, go faster, the next it was like she'd stepped off a ledge, her long hair flapping up in a failed black parachute. She thrashed until her will was spent then struggled to merely hang on, clawing with fingernails bitten to the quick. I could only watch as dying came and rubbed the worry from her bloodshot eyes, like an iron pressing wrinkles out of a dress.

Coming awake on that morning some twenty odd years ago now, I could feel it—the choking realization that I hadn't dreamed the whole thing up, hadn't conjured it out of weariness and terror. I scrambled to my knees and lunged for the hole, reaching for her as if she might have been clinging there, alive somehow. The edge collapsed and my bare hand dipped into the empty lake. I backed away. My movement set the figures in motion and I could hear them calling to me.

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“Hey boy, stay still. We’re coming for you.” So this is it. I didn’t have it in me to run anymore. If my father was there, if he was closing in, I was ready for what would happen next. I balled up on my coat and waited.

Two of the figures drew closer. The other disappeared in the trees. I measured them with one eye closed as they approached. They were no bigger than the tip of my finger and I wanted the hawk to return with its talons and pluck them off the lake. “Leave me be,” I whispered. They grew to the size of my thumb, then my hand until they stood right next to me. One kneeled on the ice and motioned for the other to pass him a blanket. He was a stumpy man with wide-set eyes and a runny nose that he wiped with his sleeve. He wore a hat with ear flaps tied on top and a tank-colored jacket with a county sheriff patch in the shape of Minnesota.

“Holy s***,” the other man said as he handed over the blanket. That man, taller than the crouching one, had a frail-looking mustache that caught bits of frozen tobacco as he spat onto the ice.

“Stop gawking and find out if that ambulance is about here, would you? And scoot that sled over.”

The tall man pushed the yellow sled with his boot. “You got it,” he said then turned his back and talked into a radio he’d unclipped from his belt.

“Son?” the first man said, covering my white shoulders in dark wool.

“You’re not my dad.”

“No, son. I’m not your dad. Where is your dad? Where’s your father?”

Hunting, I thought, the sounds of gunfire still ringing in my ears.

“We’re gonna get you off this ice and find your parents, okay? What’s your name, son?”

“Calder,” I said. “Calder Ballot.”

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“Alright Calder. Do you know where your dad is?”

I shook my head.

“How about your mom? Where’s your mother?”

I looked past him to the last place I had seen her. “There,” I said. “The ice took her.” Just saying the words turned my mouth cold.

The men maneuvered me onto the padded sled that cushioned my frozen bones. Our tiny caravan set out for the shore but she was right beneath me, her black hair swirling in the frozen water. She would be pecking away, I knew, searching for a way out.

“You can’t just leave her here. You got to find her,” I begged through chattering teeth. I craned my neck, watching the ink spot get smaller and smaller. “Please,” I said. The men could only apologize.

I left the ice of Bright Lake on my back, cocooned in blankets, staring blankly at the empty blue sky. My mother was left to the fish.