1984

A Late Winter-Early Spring Experience

James Osterland
He woke up gradually. It might have taken an hour. He was in a state of semi-sleep, just conscious enough to feel the dizzy, floating sensation. He had to concentrate in order to focus his eyes on the clock on the dresser. Eleven o'clock. Late, but he never felt guilty like he was supposed to. As he pulled himself out of his bed, he yawned, deeply. Standing, feet apart, he reached outward, stretched stiffly then rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with the corners of his fists.

He stripped his "nighttime" underwear off and tossed them. He put on a fresh pair and stumbled out into the hallway. He found his way to the bathroom. When he left, his sixteen year old sister screamed from somewhere, "Flush the toilet!" He was too groggy to think of an appropriate reply, so he went back and flushed.

Once he was dressed, he went down the stairs into the kitchen. A thorough but short search of the refrigerator only produced a medium size apple. It was shopping day and shopping time.

He went to the big window that overlooks the lawn, beach and lake. With a jerk of head and wrist, he snapped off a too-large bite of his apple. It took effort, but he chewed, slowly, reflecting on what he saw. The snow was thinning, melting more each day. Dark spots of grass showed through in some places. The snowman had deteriorated; it was no more than just a pile anymore.

His dog Blackie saw him and began to bark and jump against the chain that restrained him.

orage finished his apple and carefully two-handed the core into the disposal hole in the sink as though it were a basketball hoop on way to the utility room. He retrieved his jacket, ski pants and boots from various hooks and corners and systematically put each on. After he closed the storm door, he pulled his hat and gloves out of their respective pockets and put them on, too.

The glare of the sun made his eyes water. He blinked uncontrollably. It certainly is warmer, he thought. Pretty soon it will be spring, but not soon enough. He chuckled aloud.

By the time he got to the dog house, his eyes had adjusted. The dog was going nuts, pulling against the chain, leaping so violently he sometimes jerked himself to the ground. Once loose, he ran wildly around the yard, barking and charging but missing his fourteen-year-old master.

The boy went over to the L-shaped concrete seawall and jumped on top. The boy turned his attention to the marsh which stretched from the north side of his house and looped around to the rear and past the road toward the west.

"Let's go for a walk," he said to his mutt, who had been on and off the short side of the wall several times. The boy dropped off the wall to the ice below. Blackie wasn't sure about the jump and danced about, wagging his tail. "C'mon, boy," he said slapping his thigh.

Blackie finally made an enthusiastic leap but tumbled and slid with a yelp when he landed. But he stood up immediately and looked around, apparently slightly disoriented.

While his master stood laughing, the dog sneezed; shook himself and trotted off toward the marsh, no longer hyper. His master, still giggling, followed.
The dog started walking toward a stand of rushes. The boy called him back. There'd be thin ice there, he mused.

They walked for the better part of an hour tracking rabbits and exploring muskrat huts. Without giving it much thought, the boy followed the dog into a section of the marsh he rarely explored. Most people called this part the swamp. Large mounds of snow with swamp grass sticking out dotted the desolate desert-like landscape.

The boy sat down on a muskrat hut to rest. Blackie climbed to the top of it and began tugging on the unused hood of his master's jacket.

The boy's gaze drifted to the southwest. Large dark swirling snow clouds were moving rather quickly toward them. For the first time, he noticed that the wind had picked up. "We'll start back soon," he explained to his four-legged companion now lying on the hut. But the boy watched the clouds only a few more seconds. He sprang to his feet and began walking at a brisk pace. The dog followed.

In less than ten minutes, the snow began, not as if falling but driven before the wind, horizontally. The boy zipped up his hood and braced himself against the wind, eyes down. Blue ice! He was on blue ice. He looked up, there were blue spots all around. Why hadn't he noticed? "Oh, shit! We're on thin ice!"

The eerie sound of breaking ice was barely audible.

The boy turned and backtracked. He hadn't gone far before the sound faded. The wind's whistle and the rattling of his hood against his head as well as the blinding swirl of snow nonetheless made him uncertain about his safety.

Blackie was far ahead, out of sight. He considered calling him, but didn't bother. After about five minutes or what seemed like five minutes, he circled in order to get a new angle on his house or at least where he thought his house must be. Suddenly again, blue spots appeared all around him. There was sponginess under him. He tried to get down and spread himself over the ice, but it was too late. He felt the ice give way. He felt himself sinking.

The white of the snow and the howl of the wind was suddenly replaced with the dark utter silence of under-ice.

He tried to control himself, hold his breath, but he panicked and gasped as if to scream, gulping and choking on water. The icy water had quickly soaked his clothes. He felt as if he were being run through by millions of needles. His eardrums and eyes felt as if they were being ripped out.

As a matter of instinct, not mind control, he reached up and grabbed for the hole of light. His two-gloved hands found the edge of the ice. He thrust himself upward without hesitation. He had found primitive strength. His head broke the surface. He sucked in air madly. His hair stiffened and froze almost instantly once exposed to the air.

"Sonofabitch! Sonofabitch!" The boy felt for the bottom. He could touch it with his toes and keep his mouth out of the water, but he could find nothing to step on. "Sonofabitch!"

He tried to collect himself. Think, he begged himself. He opened his eyes in time to see Blackie. Hearing the boy's cries, he had come running. The dog found a thin spot too. "No!" was all he screamed as he watched the little dog disappear under the ice.

He had no time to worry about the dog. His body was becoming numb. He felt his strength snapping. He was dying, he knew it. But he screamed, "No!" again in defiance of the inevitable. But his mind began to wander, he...
felt he must be in a queer dream. The pelting sting of the wind blown snow on his face prevented him from slipping away. But he was getting stiff and his head began to sink from loss of strength. He gulped in some more icy cold water which caused a surge of new life. He thrashed violently.

"I won't die, not here, not now. Help, please! For God's sake help me!"

A fire began to burn from within him and spread to every fiber of his body. Unrestrained, uncontrolled, total rage erupted. He tip-toed, breaking ice inch by inch in the direction of a line of cattail tufts. He knew cattail often lined the canal. He moved into shallower water and began breaking off larger chunks of ice and taking longer strides. He moved faster, gaining ground and confidence. He half-laughed half-choked, vomiting some of the water he had swallowed as he slid onto the ice.

"Damn you, I'm going to make it," he growled.

He crawled to the thicker ice of the canal and stood up. His clothes felt as if they were made of cement. That and the sudden weight of gravity subdued his bravado. "I got to get home. It's not my time." He tried to jog believing the water in his inner clothes would warm up.

He was so tired, his arms hurt, his lungs hurt; his head ached. He was so tired. He barely felt his feet hit the ice. He moved in ever slower motion, once again only hoping he had gauged the direction of home correctly.

The ice came at him with unreal speed. It slammed into the boy, stunning him. His nose bled and the pain was sharp but a reverie seized him. His thoughts blurred. He thought of his family and how much he loved them. He remembered playing tag on the bridge a long time ago and baseball last summer. He could see his friends' faces, hear their laughter.

He opened his eyes. The snow and ice in front of him was crimson. His jacket, ski pants and gloves were stiff and white. "I got to get moving," was what he wanted to say but his mouth couldn't form the words. He rolled over. "I don't want some dumbass fisherman to find me in the spring."

As he started to move, ice on his clothes shattered and fell off in flakes. He got up on all fours and slowly stood up. The ice seemed to shimmy. He stumbled to an old dike and with great effort scrambled to the top. Looking across the marsh, through the falling snow, he thought he could make out the ghost-like outlines of the houses.

Suddenly the dike seemed to heave and the boy lost his balance and rolled down the other side and smashed into a muskrat hut. Though his legs felt like rubber, he stood up immediately. His legs gave way again and he fell. He turned in midair so as to land on his side and prevent some of the hurt. His legs burned with pain.

He began to cry. "It hurts so much. If you're going to take me, please make it quick."

The wind had slowed and the snow had thinned out. He crawled to his feet again. "Time's up," he said trying to laugh. "You had your chance." He tried to jog, but he had to be content to walk. Once moving, his legs didn't hurt so much.

The ice still swayed trying to trip him but not so violently. His feet were still numb but he felt some tingling. His hands and arms still hurt, a little more than before.

He was on the ice spread-eagled before he realized the ice has cracked. "Not again! You bastard!" He crawled away from the breakthrough in a frenzied scramble, not realizing that he had broken through an air pocket. When the
ice seemed firm under him, he carefully stood up and continued, without looking back.

Senses dulled, he doggedly shuffled for another fifteen minutes. When he finally spotted his house, fatigue engulfed him and he sank to his hands and knees.

"Ha's home. I hate to hear what she's going to say." He laughed at the stupidity of what he had just said and stood up again.

Just a couple hundred yards more, that's all. He comforted himself. But it seemed to take forever.

He bent over the seawall and rolled onto it. He pulled himself to his feet one more time but turned to face the marsh before going inside. He pulled the glove off his right hand and defiantly saluted the marsh with his middle finger, though the adjacent fingers were too stiff for any witness to know what he was signifying.

The boy's moment of triumph was lost, however, in the next instant, because when he turned again to go in, he was confronted with the empty doghouse. His eyes filled at once. He now had time to worry about Blackie.

James Osterland