

ICE: A MEMOIR

By Carla Hagen

I.

You reflected me skating on the rink under the neighbor's yard light, blades scratching your surface. You creaked occasionally but did not complain.

You sustained my drunken friends and me, along with a quarter ton of 1960s metal driving the road plowed across the Rainy River to Canada, land of dances with live bands from Winnipeg and bars that didn't card. We were fools and you were merciful, letting us cross back and forth without ever cracking and sending us to frigid, watery death.

You froze my wet hair into rigid dreadlocks, terrifying my grandmother, who evoked her Norwegian God, *Gud i himmelen!* swore I would catch a cold, get frostbitten, contract pneumonia, die. But I was walking from house to car, not fjord to fjord, and I never got sick.

You were treacherous, and all of us in that tiny border town knew it. If we slipped, we could break wrists, legs, feet, ankles, backs, hips, even skulls. If you cracked on the river or lake, immersing us in glacial water, we would expire in minutes if someone didn't extend a hockey stick or branch to pull us out. Parents and teachers schooled us in ice rescue the way people teach desert children to survive heat and sand.

At the same time we feared, we prayed for your long life, so we could keep playing hockey under blue January skies or by moonlight. You gave us glass-covered trees, icicles to suck, a firm base for dogsleds to fly us down the river.

For a mass of frozen matter, you were noisy and restless. First silence as you skimmed creeks and ponds, then tinkling bells as waves on Lake of the Woods smashed sheet after sheet of water against rocks. You persisted and triumphed, spreading across the inland sea, creaking and shifting, sprouting fault lines that cracked, heaved and swallowed reckless people who

ventured out too soon. You grew thick and ponderous with responsibility: home to colonies of colorful ice shanties little bigger than large outhouses, trucks, cars, snowmobiles, skaters, skiers, people large and small, deer and moose.

But we were fickle. After waiting for you, measuring thickness, using you for fun, we got bored. We longed for the thaw, strained toward it like a hard-to-reach orgasm. For two days you melted. The beater car someone always drove onto the Rainy River foundered. *Almost there.* We held outdoor parties, shivering in cutoffs, clutching cans of Molson Canadian with numb hands, looking down at the free-flowing rapids and winter's detritus: waterlogged moles, saturated stocking caps, lost gloves, the eternal beer bottles. Then you froze up again. *Not quite, not quite.*

No wonder you tired. No wonder you grew dull, gray, pockmarked, thin as an old person's bones. Water gurgled beneath your surface. You developed fissures, sighed, became cranky and unreliable. Finally you gave up, shattering bit by bit, a relief to finally surrender after months of weight and expectations. Bells sounded again as you splintered into crystal shards and nose-dived into the waiting water, taking along neglected icehouses, cars and dead animals.

II.

In my early twenties, I escaped to Mexico. Palm trees! Flowers year round! Orange juice stands on street corners! My Mexican friends did not understand. They trekked up Popocatepetl, a sleeping volcano above Mexico City, just to see your miraculous fields. They loved the cold, the rosy glow of their cheeks, the slippery feel of you. On the rare winter days when snow fell, they rushed out to celebrate. Dilettantes. They didn't know you like I did. I confined you to cubes made in my apartment from purified water. But over time, you wormed your way back into my affections. Mexico City was not tropical—on cold winter mornings, my breath froze in the air—but it was dry. I started asking for *una Coca bien helada* at Don Pancho's store on my corner. He would fish a bottle out of a cooler that looked like a converted watering tank, filled with blue-white chunks.

Absence made me nostalgic and soft. I made an exploratory trip back to Minnesota. But it was like reuniting with an old boyfriend who was always wrong for me, even though I could never quite forget him. A week or so of chilly November days swept away the amnesia. *You* were coming soon, sexy and spectacular, implacable and death-dealing. I fled to Texas, where people also spoke Spanish and I didn't need a work permit.

Austin was warmer than Mexico City, but winter was unpredictable: warm, silky air followed by a fast moving norther that dropped temperatures 40 degrees in a day. I was driving my 1962 Ford Econoline van to visit relatives wintering on the Gulf Coast when you caught up with me as freezing rain, one of your nastiest personas. The Great State of Texas didn't stock salt for the roads. Worse, my truck had weak defrosters and no heater. You had no pity, crept across my windshield forming an opaque shield every five to ten minutes. I got out, tried to remove you

with twigs, the wooden heel of my clogs. My ice scrapers were back in Minnesota, along with my Sorels boots and buckskin choppers.

You ruined my trip but seduced me again when Texas summer arrived, squatting on the city like a big, hot bully, determined to stay there until October or we cried *uncle*. You became a necessity. I added you to lemonade, tea, even milk; indulged in honey vanilla and carob, 1970s flavors of Häagen-Dazs ice cream. I snorted every time I passed what Texans called an *ice house*, a roadside store that stocked food, beer and other cold drinks. If only it were the real thing, an igloo I could crawl into until I remembered what it was like to feel cold.

III.

Are we like swallows, pelicans, Monarch butterflies, driven to return to wherever we're from? I knew it was irrational, but I moved back to Minnesota, sharpened my skates and bought cross-country skis. I married a South Dakota prairie boy who wilts in the heat and would rather die than leave here.

But Minnesota has extreme weather, and global warming is converting our clichéd *theater of seasons* into melodrama. Right now, on this 99-degree July day, I'd take you in a heartbeat, chunks floating in my bathtub, a whole chair I could sit on until you melted. But when the heat wave blows out of town and I no longer need you in this sick, dependent way, I will forget, choosing, like Scarlett O' Hara, to think about it tomorrow. Because you are returning in a few months, not for my delight but to test my endurance, my balance, my decision to come back to this arctic land.

Still, I can't deny we are enjoying a temporary truce. You have opened a new space for me: the Menopause Room. I never thought I would love you so much, consume you every day in all things liquid, bless you every time I drink iced coffee, discovered in the stifling summer of 1970 in Avignon, France. My then-boyfriend, Étienne—slender, brooding, hip—ordered *deux cafés glacés*. Fresh off a Minnesota farm, I thought he was joking. It arrived, darkly delicious and cooling, changing my life forever. Now I can't remember the last time I had hot coffee. It's cold press, iced lattes, blended combinations that taste like coffee milkshakes. I guzzle glass after glass of water, filled to the brim with you. I freeze bananas. I rub cubes over my face and throat, like Susan Sarandon with the lemon slices in *Atlantic City*.

It won't last. When summer is over, after the hot flashes, I make no promises. I'm already hatching my January escape plan, though occasionally I get misty-eyed. Could we go back in time, just me, my skates and you in the winter night? But you've moved on, reflecting others in your clear expanses. And I am no longer a child. Still, it's a bond not easily broken. Someday when I am an old expatriate sitting at a café in Oaxaca, you will come to me in a daydream of northern lights and frozen rivers. And I will either resist your siren call or pack up my broad-brimmed hat and follow.