

A Silent Scream

by Daniel J. Evon

A half foot of snow sat on top of the old roof of the cabin, it was a faded red, and some of the paint had begun to chip and show a dull yellow. Around the cabin was a large platform that at one time had been planned to become a deck, but no work had been done after its initial foundation had been laid. Above the platform was a pair of large windows that looked down a small steep hill that slid down to the lake, but only parts of the lake were visible through the forest that separated the cabin from the water. A path of footprints, one leading to, one away, weaved its way in and out of the trees to a broken down pier that was half buried in snow, then out on to the frozen lake where a man stood drilling an auger into the ice.

He was small standing against the vast emptiness of the lake, working diligently at his hole. His wife sat at a table inside the cabin and looked out one of the large windows down toward the lake. She could see him when the wind blew the right way and opened up a small hole in the trees. She sipped a cup of coffee and waited. It would be an hour or so before he returned, so she pieced together a puzzle that she never planned on finishing.

The work was slow and painful for him. His biceps began to burn and his breath came in measured increments, holding for a moment while his muscles worked, then releasing into the cold air in a puff of hazed smoke. The lake was empty, and the constant sound of ice grinding carried its way all the way back to the cabin where his wife sat. She put on a fresh batch of a coffee then sat down to wait, watching him when she could, and working on her puzzle when she couldn't. It was a picture of a flower, a dozen roses she imagined due to the pieces of red that she had already pieced together.

She sipped her coffee and waited for her husband to come back to the cabin. His fishing gear was sitting on the table, strewn about in what looked like disorganization. A slab of wood that connected to a bright red flag that connected to a bunch of string and a hook. It was silly, but she knew not to say anything.

He had spent nearly all morning drilling the hole and when he finally broke through the water had pushed up on to the surface and wet his boots that now lay by the fire place.

"Always had good luck today" he said.

It was the last day of the season, and for the past four years he had caught a fish. One of which stayed frozen against the wall in an exaggerated form of ferocity, mouth open wide, teeth blazing.

"Never gone with out a fish."

He talked to his wife who stirred in the kitchen fixing a cup of coffee. She was still in her pajamas, a pair of flannel pants and a buttoned down shirt, and paid no attention to him.

"Yeah you'll see, by the end of today, we'll have dinner for a week."

She brought over a cup of coffee and took a seat next to him. They both looked out of the window that looked toward the lake.

Occasionally the trees would part and they could see the small hole that he was set to fish at.

"Do you want to come down?" he said.

"I don't see why?"

The man worked to get the string straight and wound against the small cylinder that attached itself to the bottom of the flag.

"I suppose it isn't your place," he said.

She started to speak, but stopped, and sorted through the remaining pieces of her puzzle.

"You're boots should be dry soon," she said.

"Only the soles were wet, a new pair of socks and I'll be fine."

He smiled as if he had said something funny, but when his wife's eyes didn't meet his, he returned to work on the string.

"You see, I'll set the hook with, with a minnow I suppose, the liveliest one I can find, and send it do the bottom living. Then when I get what I want, this flag will sit right up, and we'll have our dinner."

"Good," she said.

"You alright?"

"It's early."

"It has to be," he said. "These fish know the day as well as us."

She sat quietly and sifted through the pieces of her puzzle.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

"A puzzle."

"A puzzle of what?"

"Flowers."

"Flowers?"

She didn't say anything, just sorted through the remaining pieces and looked for anything red. He moved toward the kitchen, and removed a large Styrofoam container.

"Not here," she said.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll bring it down to the lake."

The Styrofoam container was filled with a dozen minnows. She hated the noiseless dying sound they made as he stuck the hook through their eyes. She always wanted for them to scream, but they never did. They didn't even blink.

"You sure you don't want to come?"

"I can watch from here."

The man took his flag and his bucket of minnows and walked outside. She watched him as he made his way toward the lake down the steep path of deep footprints, stepping as well as he could into the path that he had already made. She watched him take his time as he fed the line through the icy hole into the deep of the water. It didn't make much sense to her, the thought and care that he put into it. But he did. He measured the speed that he lowered the string, he measured the depth that he let it rest, and he felt the current that moved slowly underneath the six inches of frozen ice.

When he was satisfied with the position of his bait, he lowered the slab of wood across the hole and set the spring loaded flag into its hook. He stood for a moment and watched, admiring his masterfully placed contraption, then headed back up to the house.

"I've got a good feeling," he said.

"Would you like some more coffee?"

The man took a seat and grazed his eyes over the puzzle his wife had been constructing.

"Yes," he said.

His wife sat down with a pot of coffee and poured him a glass.

"Can't we go somewhere warm next year," she said.

"Sure," he said. "Sure we can."

She remembered the same answer from the year before, when he promised a trip to the Bahamas, and the year before that to Europe. But still, they always managed to find their way to the northern point of Wisconsin. But she never complained. It made him happy to be alone out in the woods. Alone but with her.

"Do you need help?" he asked.

"No, I'm all right. You fish."

"Ok," he said.

The man sat in his seat and stared out of the window.

"Exhausting," he said.

His wife looked up from her puzzle and smiled. It was a pretty smile that she didn't use often. The man sipped his coffee and watched the wind blow the snow around in front of the window.

"They're pretty," he said. "The flowers."

"They're poppies, I think."

"Oh."

"I wish I had some."

"Can you grow them," he asked.

"I suppose."

The man put his coffee down onto the table. The steam still rose from the cup and made balls of sweat on his cold hair.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'll get you some poppies."

"No, no, I can grow them, its OK."

"They are pretty," he said.

"Yes, yes they are."

The poppies sat in a small pot that sat on the ledge of a window dressed in purple curtain. The window sat in a brick wall, whose red was dull compared to that of the poppies. It was a simple picture that still had some oddly shaped holes in it.

"Got one!" the man said.

The flag that sat invisible in the middle of the lake flung opened and stood tall against the snow.

"You coming honey?"

“No, no you go.”

The man rushed out the door, and down the steep hill towards the lake. The woman watched him barely holding to his feet as he made his way down the icy slope, and once he reached the cover of the trees and disappeared out on to the lake, she returned to her puzzle. It was almost finished.

The man took a knife out of his pocket and used the broad end to crack the thin layer of ice that had covered up his hole. It was easy, and the ice popped with a small gush of water. He removed the flag, his gloves, and grabbed the string with his bare hands. It was cold and he could already feel his hands numbing.

“It's small,” he said.

He could feel the slight tug at the end of the string.

“Probably a perch, feels like a bluegill though.”

He took the string and wrapped it twice around his wrist then locked it tightly between his thumb and forefinger.

“Come on,” he said. “Take it.”

The man held the small string tensely, waiting for the fish to take the minnow and run. His hands hurt from the cold and he wanted to rub them together, to breath on them, to stick them back inside of his gloves, but he didn't dare move. And then it came. The small tug that was slightly bigger then the rest, and the man snapped his hand upward and set the hook.

He could feel the fish screaming on the other end as it tried to get away. But slowly, the fish came closer as the man drew in the string.

“Alright,” he said. “First fish and its early.”

When the fish reached the hole it was bigger then he thought it would have been, but still, it was nothing to brag about. It was a bluegill whose body stretched the length of his hand without the tail.

He held the fish up to try to show his wife if she was watching. It was a blue fish that wore its tail fins like a mohawk. He took his free hand and slid it down the line and over the fishes head to smooth down the spiky fins on his back, then gripped it firmly as the fish tried to wiggle its way free.

He picked up the flag, and headed back up to the house.

"Not inside," his wife said when he reached the door. "Keep it outside."

The man took the fish and threw it onto the deck.

"Big?" she asked.

"Big enough, but no. I think I'll use him for bait. "

"That's terrible," she said. But he didn't pay attention.

"Just have to re-fix the rig."

He took a seat at the table and began to wind the string again around the spool. The woman walked to the door and looked outside at the fish that flopped around the on the cold wood floor of the unfinished deck. She could feel it suffocating. She wanted for it to scream.

"Won't it die?" she asked. "I mean, before you can use it."

"Nah, I'm almost done. They can last a surprising time on land, and they always snap back into it when they hit the water."

She watched the fish's lips move, gasping for air.

"Well hurry," she said.

The man picked up his flag.

"Done, honey, don't worry."

He put the flag down next to the fish and knelt down beside it. She couldn't see through the door, but she knew what he was doing. He had shown her once before. He put the hook through the fishes mouth, then pushed it up through the hard piece of skull at the top of the head. 'It's the only place that wont rip off,' he had said. She closed her eyes and waited for the fish to scream, but it never did, and when she opened her eyes, he was gone and on his way back down to the lake. She took a seat at the table and looked at her puzzle. The poppies were so beautiful. The picture was so warm. She was out of pieces but the picture still wasn't finished. There was one hole of maybe three pieces that sat on the ledge of the window next to the flowers. She couldn't help but feel that something was missing.

The wind blew the trees and outside she could see her husband dropping the fish back into the freezing water and laying the flag

across the hole. The wind stopped and the trees rested in a place that hid her husband.

"Poor fish," she said.

Her husband returned with a big grin on his face.

"This time it will be a big one."

But his wife didn't share his excitement. She sat and stared at the red flag that sat on the lake. Waiting. She always waited.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. She wanted to scream, but "nothing," was all she said.

She never screamed.

