

It Can Hold Us All

by Meagan McAlister

Today I take our son ice fishing. Sean's fellow second graders all talk about going fishing on the frozen lake. I've never been before and neither has Chris. But Chris won't touch one foot on the ice. He won't even watch safely from the shore as his wife and son shuffle out to the small fishing hut. I know at least that much. That we need one of those plastic tent shelters. Ice fishing isn't just a hole in the ground. Although the hole is hard to cut. I use an ice auger that I bought from Gander Mountain. The salesman showed me how to make it sputter into life by yanking the chord like a lawn mower. I hold it like I would a jack hammer and it rotates like a giant drill.

I probably should have asked quiet Stan from next door or Howard from the office. We could have asked one of Sean's friends if he could tag along with their family. That would have been easier. Any one of these natives of northern Wisconsin probably would have taken us out. But we don't know them very well. We don't really know many people here at all yet. Our skin is still thin from southern Missouri winters. Chris isn't sure of the stability here. He talks about the snow mobiles that fall through the ice. He wanted me to rent the auger. Will we ever use it more than once? I told him we were going to start a tradition. He doesn't like being excluded, even by his own choice. He says he'll take Sean hunting next year on the opening weekend before Thanksgiving. He's only half kidding. Great, give our son a gun to kill things with.

Our ice shack is only 20 feet from the edge of the lake. We can see the trees that are submerged ice like they had been submerged in water. I give Sean a ladle with holes in it to scoop out the slush and skim the film of ice that reforms. I tell him the safety rules for ice fishing. Look out for rotten ice. If you fall in, pull yourself out like a seal. Take off all your clothes and get to shelter. Chris quizzed me on the safety rules himself before we left. You have ten minutes before you lose the use of your limbs, he reminded me.

Further out people have pulled their trucks and parked next to their fishing shanties. A little orange flag wobbles above one of the uncovered holes and a teenage boy comes sliding over, grasping the line with his bare hand. He jerks up and sets the hook in the fish's mouth. Sean is watching closely. Blood around a fishing hole is a sign that fish have been caught here. The boy pulls up a fish and it smacks onto the ice.

We have short little poles and a bucket full of glimmering minnows. Sean makes me loop the hook through the flesh behind their skulls and watches them wriggle, poking them with a finger. I ask Sean if he wants to pull the fishing tent over our hole so we can stay warm. He shakes his head. He says he wants to see the other families catching their fish too.

We come home triumphant with two tiny fish. We probably shouldn't have kept them. Sean wants to eat them. Maybe we can get dad to fry them I tell him. Chris receives the fish with enthusiasm and Sean watches as he cuts miniscule fillets off little bones. He dunks the four bits of fish in whisked eggs and then shakes them in a bag of bread crumbs. He hands Sean one of the bags and they turn them over and over in their hands. We eat the small crunchy fish sticks and we are warm from the frying oil.

Did you see any ambulances while you were out, Chris asks after Sean goes upstairs. I tell him no. Everything seemed fine. Well the news said two men died on the lake this morning. Carbon monoxide poisoning. They fell asleep with the heater on in their hut.

