Forces

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The Winner

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THE WINNER

by Linda Pinkham

Blanche was one of the few white faces from the Eskimo village of Kotzebue, Alaska. That probably meant one of her parents was a "sourdough," an imported Caucasian. She was very athletic and a good person to have for a friend if you were another 10-year old sourdough girl in a hazardous country. It was a hazardous country—unforgiving in the extreme.

Mistakes were deadly. All children of the icy regions learn cold, hard facts early. There are rules that cannot be broken. You never go out without telling someone where you are going and how long you will be gone. You never approach an animal, not living that close to the frontier. You never, ever, skate on gray ice. Those who made mistakes were sometimes found in the spring when the thaws came—or sometimes not found at all, like Blanche.

We were racing on ice skates, an art perfected by children of the north—the Aurora Borealis gang. Skating is a real trick when the ice doesn't freeze smooth—it has small wavelets in it. Approximately four to five inches high, they can throw you flat on your face. When you land, their brothers slice your hands like razors through cheese right through your mittens. There is a technique known to those children of the north (forced knowledge through experience): you skate on your toes. Never let your full blade touch the ice. Full-bladed skating is for smooth, sissy skaters who will return bloody from their encounters with the crystalline wavelets. Always skate on your toes. Not skating at all, really. Progress is made in a jerky, running, stumbling lurch across the eager mini-Alps of ice (awaiting their human sacrifices, almost undulating in their eagerness for wool, skin, blood).

We were racing. Blanche was winning, of course. I had been trying to beat her at any act of physical prowess since we had become friends. She was maybe two yards in front of me, skating (running, lurching) hard and low, her arms swinging in a racer's gait. I was pushing myself to catch her when she disappeared before my eyes.

It was sudden, but not instantaneous. She was there, winning one minute, and the next minute—in sharp combination with the cracking pop of gray ice—she was gone. I instinctively jumped in the air and spread eagled. I remember thinking how far through the air I was sailing with my legs and arms outstretched like a flying squirrel as that black spot of death, the lethally cold water, rushed closer. I was lucky. I landed, fully extended, on the gray ice. It groaned, but my body weight was spread out and I didn't sink.

The ice was mushy under me. My terror tasted like aluminum in the back of my throat. I wanted to yell to my friends, my companion skaters to help me, but I was afraid the added weight of a deep breath would send me underwater. I heard someone calling that they were going to the station to get help. I began to think about how hot my body must seem to this gray ice—ancient, white, hard, safe ice on its way to becoming water to greet the spring. I hoped that it would wait just long enough for someone to throw me a rope and pull me away from that black hole. I was afraid to move. I could hear one of the girls crying. One of the boys asked me if I could see Blanche. I was frozen in place. I couldn't turn my head for fear of death.

They got the rope. The gray ice held. I was saved. Blanche was gone. The Bering Strait's current was swift and her body was never found.

My parents wouldn't let me go to her funeral. I raved, "But I was there. I saw her die. Why can't I go?" So, I stayed home. The kids were subdued for perhaps a week. In school the next week, they sidled up to me and whispered, "Did you really see her go under?" "Were you scared?"

Just think, I could have been winning.