

Below the Ice

By Amy Bowler Allen

Being buried alive was the most terrifying thing I could imagine, until today.

In all my days of ice fishing, I've never much considered the perspective of the bass and pickerel below the frozen layer of the lake. I find the dark the most surprising. I guess I always thought that light would filter through. It doesn't.

The few who come to the lake in the winter to fish, like myself, think they have nothing to fear — except maybe a day with no flags. They're wrong. The neighbor, the quiet one they sometimes see at the little country store at the end of the dirt road, buying bait and beer, has plans for them all.

The first icy stabs give over to shivers, a quake that starts in the middle of my heart and like a tsunami, grows with each wave until... nothing. I feel nothing. I'm the most alert I've ever been. Fully aware of my situation. Fully aware of who did this to me. Fully aware that I'm dead, but not yet.

A friendly wave hello, an exchange of small talk, an offer to help drill a hole and step inside the old wooden ice shack to warm up for a minute — turns to terror. After the pleading and the fear, once reality hits, the finality of it all, "Why?" is the final question as they slip beneath the surface.

Why? Curiosity. Disdain. Laughter from summer gatherings — never invited. Echoes of childhood taunting that bounce off the glittering surface of the lake. The same surface now frozen and trapping me below, while my body stiffens and refuses to make the effort to save itself.

I'm not the only one. I know that. When the ice goes out, a horror awaits my summer neighbors. That's part of the why. Bodies, bloating as they thaw, will wash up on the shorelines, awaiting unsuspecting camp owners coming to check on their property now that the snow has melted. Expecting perhaps a downed tree or — at worst — signs of a break-in by a winter nomad seeking shelter. A grin tugs at the corner of my mouth, destined to be preserved for evermore in my frozen tomb.

Why? It's the privilege that comes with knowing how the story will end.

I've put some thought into the worst ways to die. Buried alive, perhaps, with all that time to think. But with air to breath and a tolerable temperature. No, there are worse ways. Without air. With stabs of pain only the harshest of conditions can create. Panic. Paralysis. Knowing what you need to do to survive — knowing you could save yourself, if only you could move. Yes. This is the worst way to go.

I take a final glance up, imagine the hole already filling with ice and slush — and the three words I scrawled across the wall of my ice shack. The very spot I invited the others, the place where they realized my plan for them.

"It was me."