

# Black Ice

by Esther Weidauer

A short story, inspired by the horror anthology podcast  
The Magnus Archives

Content warnings: agoraphobia, autophobia, tachophobia

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Statement of Marie Helbert, regarding an experience while  
ice skating with her sister

Statement given May 14th 2007

I have always been a winter person, you know? Used to love it, all of it — the clean smell of the winter air, the muffled silence of a snow covered landscape, the sharp feeling of cold wind on my face. I lived in the Austrian alps for most my life, only moved away recently, and we had some serious winter there. The town I grew up in was near a small river and a few lakes that often froze over during the coldest weeks of January. I don't remember exactly but I think I learned how to skate on ice shortly after I learned to walk properly. My sister Luise taught me. She's a few years older but we've always been close. We went ice skating every winter. Got really good at it too. Some weekends our parents barely saw us except for breakfast and dinner. We would pack some food and a thermos of cocoa and we would spent all day out on the lakes. We weren't the only ones. It seemed like half the town was there if the weather was nice enough.

As kids, we used to wait until the lakes had a thick sheet of ice on them that was safe to stand on. The local fire department usually put up warning signs around the lakes when it was still too dangerous and most families waited for them to come down before going out on a lake. The river always had the signs up. Bodies of moving water can be unpredictable so it was never really considered safe. But later when we were both teenagers we were eager to take more risks.

You know what black ice is? Also called congelation ice. It's when still or slow moving water first freezes over with a perfect sheet of ice that has no air bubbles in it and is clear as glass. Below it you can see nothing but black. It's relatively thin but because it's so pure and supported by the water below it carries a surprising amount of weight. When you skate on it, it makes these

amazing sounds, like giant strings being plucked, echoing and reverberating through the entire ice sheet. It's really beautiful, but you have to be very careful. God, if our parents had known that we were out on the river like that, they would have been so worried.

It became kind of our thing. It's dangerous to do this alone in case the ice breaks somewhere and you fall in, so we always went together. By the time we had finished school we knew the river and lakes near our town inside out. After graduating we both moved to different cities but we returned home for the winter holidays every year. And each time we tried to go black ice skating if possible. Our parents knew what we were doing by then but what were they going to say? We were adults now after all.

It was shortly after Christmas last year, when we were at our parents' place again for the holidays as usual. It had been pretty cold for a couple nights after a few warmer weeks, the best conditions we could hope for. We packed the usual things — skates, camera, snacks, hot chocolate — and went out early in the morning to check the river.

It was perfect, completely frozen solid all the way up to the next lake, and not a single spot in the ice sheet, no air bubbles, no cracks, just a smooth, pure black surface. The sun was just coming up over the tree tops and it all was mirrored perfectly on the ice, except the sky in that mirror image wasn't bright blue but pitch dark. Remember those photos of astronauts on the moon, where the sun is shining but the sky just empty? It reminded me of that and I must have stared into it for several minutes without noticing. Luise started making fun of me because she already had her skates on and her boots packed up while I was just standing there. By the time I had put mine on she was already out there drawing wide circles on the ice and the familiar but eerie sounds had started echoing all around us from below.

I got on my skates too and soon enough we were going up the river next to each other, taking in the sounds, feeling the stinging cold air on our faces. We usually didn't speak a lot while out on the ice. You have to pay a lot of attention to the surface and on the other person too for safety. This time however it was difficult to keep an eye on my sister. Somehow my eyes were drawn to look at the ice further ahead and I felt an urge to go faster. A couple times Luise called out to me that I shouldn't go too far ahead and asked me if everything was ok. Normally we kept the same pace without any trouble. I tried to go slower but this pull forward became harder to resist the further we went. The echoes from the ice vibrating and cracking seemed to always travel ahead of me, bouncing around between the river banks. I wanted to catch up with them, to hear the ice singing up close so I picked up more speed. It must have been shortly before we reached the lake, where the river becomes wider. That was quite far from the point where we had started our route and we shouldn't have been that far up the river yet. I must have gone really fast for some time but I hadn't noticed. I remember hearing Luise's voice from behind me. She was shouting something but the ice around me was ringing and rumbling so loudly that I couldn't understand her. I think I also didn't care. All my attention was on the singing around me and the black depth under my feet. I was going so

fast that that the trees became a blur in the corner of my eye and as the river became the lake my vision was filled with nothing but the bright blue sky above and the bottomless darkness below.

Skating out onto the middle of a lake is dangerous, and doing it alone is reckless. I couldn't have known if the ice out there was strong enough to carry me and at that point, I had no idea where my sister was. But it didn't matter to me. With every meter I moved I was drawn to go farther out, to pick up even more speed. I don't know where I was trying to get or what I would find there, I just had to go further and faster. Out on the lake, the ringing became deeper and the echoes longer and slower. I realized couldn't see the edges of the lake anymore. It really isn't that big. You can easily see the other side from anywhere on the shore. I'm not exactly sure but maybe it's a kilometer across at its widest point so I should have seen the trees. At least I should have seen the mountains on each side of the river valley that we were in. But no matter where I turned, the black glass-like surface stretched on forever, in all directions.

That's when I realized something was very wrong. I had no sense of where I was anymore and no idea of how far I had gone or where Luise was. I tried to shout her name but the air rushed against my face so hard that I couldn't get a sound out. I was moving way faster than I could ever skate on my own. Then I noticed, I was going downhill. That was why I went so fast. But it didn't make sense. Water on a lake doesn't have a noticeable slope. I tried to change direction in order to stop gaining speed. The sun was still there so I made a wide turn until it was on the other side but I still felt the decline forward. How could I move downwards both ways? I didn't understand. I tried not to panic. If I made a mistake and fell at this speed, I could seriously injure myself. So I tried to at least keep a stable pose.

The oncoming air pressed ever harder on my face. By now it really hurt my eyes but I still couldn't look away from the vast emptiness and I had to keep looking if I could spot anything familiar in the distance. My eyes were full of tears by now from the cold wind and it became hard to breathe with the wind pressing against my mouth and nose so hard. I drew short breaths as much as I could but I started to feel lightheaded. With my vision blurry from the tears and the dizziness taking hold I wasn't sure what I was seeing anymore. I couldn't even tell where the sun was. I could only fixate on the dark ice. At some points it seemed to fill my entire field of vision, but maybe I was already starting to black out. The black surface of the lake curved towards me even though it clearly felt like I was still moving down a slope. I tried to look at the sky but I couldn't find it anymore. I was completely surrounded but the surface, the deep cracking and ringing coming from all around me. Suddenly the wind was gone too. There was nothing left but dark emptiness, the cutting cold and the echoing plucks and rumbles of the infinite black ice screaming. I started screaming too. I screamed at the top of my lungs and my voice lost itself in the endless singing, cracking and thundering.

I don't remember how long it lasted. I couldn't see anything. I only felt the ice still moving under my skates at break-neck speed. My throat was dry and sore and my limbs stiff and hurting from the cold. But I started hearing

something else, something distant. At first I couldn't make out what it was but it seemed to come closer. After a while I recognized my sister's voice. She was shouting my name, "Marie", over and over again as she came closer. Eventually it sounded as if she was right behind me and I felt a hand grabbing my right arm. I looked down and recognized her bright red glove. The ice under my feet no longer felt moving. I was standing completely still, Luise right next to me. She came around to face me and wiped the tears from my eyes with her gloves. Only then could I see her face and also where we were. It was the middle of the lake. I could see the shore with the trees around us, the mountains towering behind them. She asked what the hell I was thinking, going out to the middle of the lake all by myself, and if I was ok. She said I had gone too fast for her to keep up and she had found me just standing there at the center of the lake, looking down at the ice. I didn't know what had happened or what to tell her and my entire body was shaking.

We slowly made it back to the shore and I collapsed as soon as we were on solid ground again. I told her what had happened to me and of course it sounded like complete nonsense. It still does today. But she listened to all of it while making sure I drank the entire thermos of hot chocolate to warm up again. Afterwards she didn't say anything for a while. Eventually she called our parents and made up a story about how I had gotten dizzy from migraines and they came to pick us up. We never told them anything else.

I moved to southern Italy in spring, about two months ago, and I hope to never see a frozen lake again.