

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

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The Day Titanic Drowned

We were sitting on empty nail kegs next to his icehouse on the edge of Lily Pond in Saugus, Doc Sawyer and me, talking about everything and nothing in particular. It was his way of communicating. In his gray felt hat, shirt collar buttoned but with no tie, Mackinaw open so I could see red suspenders clasped at his paunch, Doc always had time to talk to kids, dropping lore and legend in his wake. "Where you're sitting right now, son, is the geographical middle of our town. It's right under your feet, or," and he chuckled, "under your butt." I felt special, being ten years old, on the inside where real data was concerned.

He was full of tidbits like that. "Bazooka Bobby Burns scored the first touchdown on that field when it was dedicated this past fall," he said, pointing across Appleton Street to Stackpole Field, re-dedicated in 1938, "and young Jackie Harrington scored the second one. You watch that young one now." He could make declarations, too.

It was Saturday. It was cold again, as it had been for a good spell, and the ice cutting would begin today, the temperature holding below freezing for more than a week. On the pond the ice was over fourteen inches thick, thick enough to hold the small army of men soon to be on it. Morning light fell gray yet vivid across the face of the pond, and it raced off toward the island in the middle and the Turnpike beyond. It was a long skate from one end of the pond to the other. Some skating days it paid to bring lunch.

Crows were sending brittle messages to each other out across the frozen surface, over the cliff on Cliff Road, into the woods. Now and then I could hear the tires on a truck as it ran north to Maine or Canada on the Turnpike. Sounds ran over the pond as though they came through a funnel. Old Doc turned as he heard hoof beats on the pavement of Summer Street running alongside Stackpole Field. Like a drummer playing games, I thought.

The biggest horse I had ever seen in my ten years came down the street, and Mitch Crocker was guiding him with a set of long reins, not snapping them but laying them easy on that great back. That horse was so big it even made Doc stand up and take off his hat. He shook his head, light bouncing off his glasses, and said, "Where'd you come on him, Mitch? Win him in a game?"

Horses in those days always awed me, fearsome things, huge as boulders, with great teeth and hooves like catcher's mitts. Horses hauled milk wagons, and honey wagons, and now in winter the clumsy snow plows behind them, dragging on their muscles, calling on their hearts. This one with Mitch Crocker was a tower of an animal, dark chestnut in color. His teeth were yellow and enormous and now and then he'd pull his lips back to show them to you. Steam pulsed from his mouth like any other great engine of a thing.

"What's his name?" Doc said, laying a hand on the rippled neck, rubbing that fur coat smoothly, easily, talking another way, something closeted in his voice.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

"I call him Titanic," Mitch said, "though I don't expect him to answer none. "He don't happen to answer to any name unless he downright feels like it. So names don't make any difference and one's as good's another."

"For the ship?" Doc said. The horse's eyes were a mix of lime green and yellow, and deep, as if he were reading my mind. I figured he had already read Mitch's mind. I looked away from those eyes.

"As well as any I could pick on, specially for size," Mitch said. "It'll do until another comes along. This boy can take care of all your hauling today, Doc." He patted Titanic on his broad chest. "Drag all the floes into place, get them up on to the ramp so's they can be cranked up and stored. Yessir, do it all."

For a few hours that Saturday I watched the strange army of itinerant ice cutters saw and chink up the ice of Lily Pond, saw Titanic with long chains hitched to his leather gear easily haul the huge cakes of ice to the slabbing point and transport up the chain-driven ramp to where they'd get buried under shavings and saw-dust. Easily and steadily he worked, the steam puffing in great clouds from his mouth and circling around his head like halos. Now and then, as if to reaffirm who was really in charge, he'd throw off a head-shaking command and bring attention to himself.

Never a sound came from his throat.

Throughout the morning old Doc Sawyer kept nodding his head, admiring that animal as if he'd never seen his like before.

Noon crawled toward us, still cold, still steamy about that great beast. Then the heart leap came and a fearful noise, a renting, a crashing. It was just before lunch when Titanic went down. I heard a yell, a scream, the unforgettable thundering noise as though a crack was going to sprint the length of the pond, and Titanic was in the water. In the deepest part of the pond. His legs thrashed at the ice, breaking off huge chunks, the noise like an enormous ice machine at work, like an icebreaker in frozen Boston Harbor I'd seen before. The ice under my feet shook.

The day stood still for me.

I'd never before seen a huge creature like him frightened, and his eyes said just that. They were like baseballs. Yellow-green baseballs, all wet and frosty, with tunnels behind them and all kinds of talk in them. He made sounds, too, desperate sounds down in his lungs, deeply bellowed sounds inside that huge canister of a chest and they came blurting out of his mouth along with the torrent of steam. Could have been grenades going off beneath the water.

Everybody leaped to grab chains and ropes, to pull that thrashing and ponderous beast out onto the surface of the pond. But the ice kept breaking under his hooves. And he tired and sank two or three times and came back up thrashing and kicking more, and the steam rising off his great back. The chains snarled and came caught up in ropes, and in his legs I suppose. You could see the lines of them somehow get shorter and shorter. There was no slack in them at all. None of the men could steer or drag that ship of a horse onto the top of the ice.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

Mitch Crocker, just before Titanic went down for the last time, dropped a length of chain from his bare hands. He blew into his cupped hands and tried to rub them. He was wet all over, dark stains growing across his clothes. His thick fur hat bobbed in the water. Then a last bubble came circling around it where Titanic's lungs had let go for the final time.

Doc Sawyer put his arm around Mitch's shoulders. "That was some animal, Mitch. I'm really sorry for your loss." I remember thinking it was like standing in line at the funeral parlor. Everybody sad, their heads down, striking for one correct word, a passable word. Cold and quiet were twin elements around us.

In the water all the bubbles had gone.

Then, about five minutes later, itinerant ice cutters in odd clothes and knee-high leather boots and kids and on-lookers still standing quietly on the ice, about ten or twelve feet of chain, yet laying out on top of the ice as though remnants of a disaster, just slipped off the edge link by link and went down out of sight. Perhaps one last lunge by that great horse.

When all the noise was made about the movie of the same name in these recent years, I thought about the other Titanic going down. I remembered how quiet it was after, how cold, the last hunk of chain, getting dragged off the ice, still making a connection.