

CAROL DINES

On Ice

Ice sings. Like everything miraculous in life, it happens only during a concurrence of unusual circumstances: a dramatic thaw after a harsh winter. You must be lucky to hear the waves slap millions of ice particles against the rocky shoreline, shards of ice small as diamonds. If there is traffic, the sound is lost. If you stand too far away from the shoreline, the sound will blend with the world and escape. So you must be lucky to hear those watery bells, a chorus of broken edges, wind-worn textures, each with its own perfect note.

I didn't expect to hear the ice sing. April first arrived, and I expected this to be the worst day of my life. I stopped to listen, and that is when I noticed something dark moving out on the ice, what was left of the ice. That is when I saw the dog—Chiapas.

I thought it was Chiapas anyway, although the dog was merely a brown lump on an island of ice maybe a hundred feet from the shoreline. I watched the dog. It was acting strangely. It rose, limped a few feet, then curled into a ball. I saw a group of people on the north shore, nearer than I to where the dog was huddled, and I could hear their voices. I could not see anything but outlines of fur (the dog) and coats (the people). Still, I had a strong feeling it was Chiapas. And believing it was Chiapas, I immediately felt responsible. I felt like a step-parent who had no legal rights but for whom there was a moral obligation, especially since I knew that Ari and Stu were out of town, and they had hired a medical student to take care of Chiapas. I heard people in the distance calling in their urgent, pleading voices, "Here, doggy. . . . Here, boy. Come. . . . Come!"

I took my large standard poodle, Freda, around the southern edge of the lake so I could get a closer view. When I reached the crowd, I recognized several of the faces as regular walkers. One woman, an anorexic with a tight face and thin hair, who even in summer wore layers of black clothing which creased dramatically around her thin legs, told me, "The poor dog's been out there two days. We think it was hit by a car and made its way out on the ice. It's probably starving."

It occurred to me that she, more than most, would sense the signs of starvation. I stared at the water lapping between shore and ice. I was certain the dog could make it if he tried. "Chiapas!" I yelled. "Come, Chiapas!"

"You know the dog?" she asked. "You should call the owner right away."

"He's away. His name is Ari. Anyway, I don't know where he lives, and I don't have his phone number." I turned to the woman. "I doubt the dogsitter knows he's out there."

"He must've gone out there before the ice thawed. It's been so warm this last week, the ice this side melted overnight. Maybe he's too hurt to swim."

I had a vision then. I saw the iceberg growing smaller until the dog accepted its fate, gave up hope, closed its eyes, and waited to sink into the water. "Chiapas," I yelled. "Here's Freda. Come play with Freda." I called to the dog the way I might call to a child, pointing out that his best friend was waiting for him. "Come. Come, Chiapas."

The dog stayed curled in a brown ball. He did not look up, not even when Freda, sensing the urgency in my voice, began to bark and jump. I prayed. I prayed to the forces of nature that there might be a cold spell, a sudden growth of icy surface, enough to allow him back to shore.

When I look back on that winter, the winter I knew Ari, I think of that wide expanse of frozen lake. It was the only time of my life I ever wanted to die. I was 42, but I felt much older. I could look back and see that I had lived a full life. I had published a book of short stories. I had taught fourth- and fifth-graders at the neighborhood school and creative writing to refugees at a community college. I had been married fifteen years to the same man who still loved me and told me so. But I did not have the courage to get out of bed. I would wake up and think about all the days and years ahead of me without a child. I would think of all the hours left in the day that I would have to stay awake. I would close my eyes and try to fall asleep. I did not want to leave the house. I would stare at shadows on the wall, and I would remember being a different person just a year or two before, when I could still picture a different life ahead of me, when I was someone who still had the energy to invent my

own meaning: trips, books, projects in the community. Now, curled tightly into myself, I would hear the schoolbus stop at the corner, and I would automatically imagine a mother kissing her child before the child got on the bus, as I'd imagined myself in the future, kissing my own children goodbye. I would count the buses, each going to a different school: Catholic, public, private. I could hear mothers calling goodbye, each mother sending me deeper under the covers. I could not rally myself towards sunlight. I couldn't drum up the energy to push back the blankets. Finally, Freda forced me out from under the blankets, her long, needy nose pressing into my nest of hair. She would stand next to me and shake her collar until I rose to take her for her morning walk.

"There's a dog trapped out on the lake," I explained to the woman who answered the Humane Society's emergency number.

"I know," she said. "We've had several phone calls, but there's nothing we can do."

"He's been out there two days," I said, my voice rising. "He'll freeze to death if he doesn't starve first."

"It's too dangerous," she explained. "We don't have the equipment to do rescue operations on thin ice."

"I know the dog. Chiapas. He's a border collie. His owner is on a trip. I'm sure he has no idea. Someone, maybe the dogsitter, must have let him get out of the yard. It's not like the owner to let the dog run like that."

"Dogs are smart," she told me. "It'll probably figure out a way to get to shore when it gets hungry enough."

I didn't agree. I told her, "Maybe he's wounded and can't swim."

After a moment of silence, the woman said, "Call the fire department. They have the equipment to do rescues on ice and open water. They have a special boat."

I hung up and dialed the fire department. When the man answered, I said, "There's a dog—"

"You're the third person who's called," he said.

"Don't you have one of those boats for ice and water?"

"We can't rescue a dog. Only people."

"What if someone tries to go after the dog? Then would you rescue the dog and the person?"

“I wouldn’t try it if I were you. We’d rescue the person and then slap him with a large fine. There are warnings posted not to go out on thin ice.”

“What if a child sees the dog out there and tries to rescue it?” My voice rose: “What if a child *dies* trying to rescue the dog?”

“Look,” he said. “I wish we could do something. But we can’t. It’s taxpayers’ money.”

“What if I offer to pay for the rescue myself?”

“We don’t operate like that.”

“Please?” My voice trembled. “Please do something?”

“I’m really sorry,” he said.

I could tell he meant it. He didn’t hang up on me. He waited until I hung up first.

That winter had seen the coldest temperatures on record, week after week when the wind chill was minus-twenty degrees, not yet cold enough to freeze our eyelids shut, but cold enough to warrant layers of long underwear, shirts, sweaters, face masks, and at least two scarves, one to cover our mouths, the other to wrap around our hats and hoods for additional warmth. By the beginning of December, the ice on the lakes had been frozen for a month. We had been shoveling snow since Halloween. It was possible in Minneapolis to stand in the middle of the city, in the middle of the lake, in the middle of winter, and see no one for quite a long time. It has always been for me one of winter’s greatest pleasures—to stand in a city of a half a million people on a windless afternoon and hear no sound except the wind, the only visible movement on that frozen tundra, dances of blowing snow whipping the empty space.

It was such a day when I’d first met Ari. He came crunching across the ice toward me. I was standing in the middle of the lake, thinking about the nature of silence. I was thinking that a world absent of children would always have a particular kind of silence, a winter silence. I was thinking if I could learn to think of that silence as beautiful, that childless silence, then I would survive this period in my life. Freda rolled on her back as soon as the border collie trotted toward us, lunging. The dogs rolled and chased, their paws slipping comically as they tried to turn or stop on the ice, tumbling over each other.

I immediately sized up Ari as a new arrival on the lake: A

Nordstrom's sale tag blew from the back of his scarf; I wondered if I should tell him. Besides, his winter attire lacked the matted look of washed wool and past winters. (No oil stains from snowblowers, no mismatched gloves, no frayed edges on his scarf. His Sorels still had their original laces.) It was obvious: Someone knowledgeable about Minnesota winter, someone with good taste, had outfitted him—browns and golds to accentuate the expensive down coat that hung to his calves.

He approached, calling to me over the wind, "I've always wanted to stand in the center of the lake, but I was too afraid to come out here by myself. Mind if I join you?"

"It's wonderful, isn't it? I haven't seen your dog here before," I said. "He's beautiful."

"He was an early Hanukkah gift, a bribe to keep me here."

"Where are you from?"

"Chicago," he said, turning his back to the wind. "It's not as cold there, even on the lakefront."

"Did you move here for work?" I asked.

"My partner's here. I'm Ari." He extended his gloved hand, nodding toward his dog with fresh snow around his mouth. "The Santa Claus look-alike is Chiapas."

"Ellie," I said, reaching my mittened hand to grip his glove. "And that's Freda."

We met at the end of December. I didn't tell Ari right away that I was trying to have a baby. I didn't tell him that my husband and I had agreed to quit trying if nothing happened by April first. Even the therapist who met with women like me, women who spent their waking hours dreaming of motherhood, even she said that sometimes deadlines were useful. "Necessary, really. Because with all the options available to us today, it's hard for women, for couples, to move on. Sometimes it's the best thing they can do for their marriage. I've seen couples let the disappointment destroy them."

"I'm ready to quit trying," my husband had announced in November, during one of our weekly sessions. He reached over and squeezed my hand, explaining, "I know it's harder for Ellie, but for me, this is what's hard. Living with this unattainable goal that's squeezing the life from us."

"I'm not sure I can ever quit trying," I whispered, letting go of

my husband's fingers. "How do you quit hoping for something that means everything?"

"It's not like we haven't tried. My God," my husband said, pressing his hands into his knees.

"I can't imagine my life without a child," I told the therapist. "I can't imagine going on the way we are."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Just the two of us." I looked at my husband. "I can't keep taking vacations during every holiday, just so we aren't around families. But I can't stay home either, only to celebrate with nieces and nephews."

"We need some sort of resolution," my husband said. "Four years is a long time. It's changed us. You've changed," he said to me. "It's made you somebody else. You used to be so brave. You used to love to do things."

"I've realized my limits," I said softly. "For the first time, I feel the limits of my body."

My husband reached out and touched my elbow. "There are other ways to live, Ellie."

"Snorkeling?" my voice rasped, referring to our last trip when my husband had persuaded me to go snorkeling in an underwater national park. "Snorkeling is no replacement."

I stared at the therapist. I had read her book. I knew that she had been unable to get pregnant because of a medical condition. Judging from her references to a son and daughter, I gathered that her children had been adopted.

My husband said softly, "It's killing us, Ellie." He looked at me, then at the therapist. "It's killing her. Sometimes she doesn't get out of bed. She sleeps in her clothes now so she doesn't have to change them. It scares me to see her like this."

The therapist observed me, asking, "What would seem a reasonable amount of time for you to keep trying, Ellie?"

"Another year."

"Another year!" My husband gasped.

I sighed. "Six months?"

My husband scowled. "Why? What's the point? We've been trying for ten years."

"Not really trying. Not the whole time. We've only been coming here for four years." I looked at the therapist we'd begun seeing when we started our treatments at the fertility clinic. "That Italian

woman was 62 when she had her first baby.”

“She wasn’t married to me,” my husband replied. “God, think of the poor kid.” My husband glanced at me, shook his head, then said, “We can’t continue like this. I can’t.”

“April first?” the therapist asked. “That’s six months away. What do you think, Ellie?”

I stared at my hands.

“That gives us time to prepare,” she added, waiting for me to nod, and when I did, she looked at my husband. “But for the next six months, I want you to try even harder to make it possible for your wife to become pregnant.”

Ari had no children. He loved Stu and Chiapas. He loved his fireplace and his antique bathtub where he liked to sip Orvieto wine and eat the Baci chocolates that Stu had brought him from a medical meeting in Rome. He said he also liked the heightened sense of seasons in Minnesota, the extremes through which people were forced to live. Having a dog, having to walk the dog three times a day, had forced him to confront his ignorance of the natural world. “Icicles, for example. Look at them.” He nodded at the large Victorian homes along the shore with huge icicles hanging from the eaves. “I didn’t know they could get that big.”

I looked forward to our brief meetings on the ice. At first we met in the afternoons, just as the sun was setting. Then, we began meeting mornings, carrying our Yeti cups of Dunn Brothers coffee. Isolated by the cold, we were two bundles shivering as we told our lives, waiting for our dogs to tire themselves in subhuman temperatures. Gusts of wind iced our eyelashes. We sniffled, trading clean Kleenexes from our pockets. Across the surface of the ice, we waited to see the steam rising off the wet fur from the heat of our dogs’ bodies.

“I’ve never been unemployed before,” Ari confided during one of those first afternoons. “I’ve never had to depend on someone else. I now know what it’s like to be a dog,” he laughed. “Forces you to love someone all the time. I’m not sure idleness is healthy.”

I nodded, then told him about an article I’d read: “The interviewer asked a group of villagers if she could interview one of the oldest people, and this hundred-year-old woman told her he should interview her mother. People in this village lived beyond 100

because, no matter how old, they worked all day, cultivating food from their plots of land, carrying water from the well—

“But it’s also genetic,” Ari said. “They probably were wired for longevity. Stu thinks everything’s genetic. It’s not easy living with someone who believes everything was mostly determined at conception. Even before conception, generations ago, really. Makes any relationship seem almost miraculous, you know?”

Dusk and shadows darkened across the ice until we could no longer see where the dogs were running. The ice fishermen had already lit their kerosene lanterns in front of their huts along the southern shore, and we could see the lights dot the darkness.

“I can’t stand Stu’s slippers,” Ari told me. “They squeak when he gets up in the morning at 4:30 a.m. I’ve asked him to buy new ones. I’ve even given him different slippers as a present. But he insists on wearing these awful German slippers that squeak. Every morning, they wake me up. Kills my day.”

“Is it the floors or the slippers that squeak?”

“Both probably.”

“Do you have wood floors?”

“Yes.”

“Sprinkle baby powder across the wood floor and sweep it back and forth until it disappears between the cracks. That might help.”

“That’ll keep them from squeaking?” Ari asked. “How do people know things like that? Did you have one of those grandmothers who made her own candles? Everybody in Minnesota seems to know how to make candles and knit scarves and freeze homemade pesto with a layer of oil on top to keep it green. Nobody does stuff like that in Chicago.”

I smiled, a smile he couldn’t see under my mask. “Our Realtor sends out a monthly newsletter with tips for old homes.”

It is a peculiarly American phenomenon—we tell our secrets to strangers. I soon learned that Ari’s partner, Stu, was a pediatric neurosurgeon and often traveled to medical meetings. “Which is kind of a relief, actually,” Ari told me. “When he’s away, he doesn’t wake me up at 4:30 in the morning. I can be my flawed self, sleep in, eat cold pizza for breakfast.”

“Why don’t you go with him?” I asked.

“What would I do? Carry his notes? Besides, I don’t want to leave Chiapas. And I need to keep interviewing. I need to find a job.”

Ari often told me about Stu’s phone calls from Brussels or Paris or New York.

“Stu can’t sleep when he’s away. He has horrible nightmares. He’s terrified something will happen to his hands. He dreams that when he wakes up, his hands won’t move.”

“How frightening.”

“He dreams in an Australian accent, too. Stu was born in Australia. He lived there until he was fourteen. He’s very smart. Too smart, maybe.”

“You really think someone can be too smart?”

“Definitely. His brilliance overwhelms everyone around him. There’s no equality in his life. No one can feel his equal. He’s never had a lasting relationship because people can’t live with him. I’m the longest: four years. I think that’s why he dreams about his hands. He dreams about failing. Makes him more human. Reminds him he needs people.”

It occurred to me that he’d known Stu for the same amount of time I’d been going to the fertility clinic.

“I don’t ever remember my dreams. Do you?” Ari asked.

“Sometimes,” I told him. “Sometimes I dream I have a tail. It’s like an oily appendage coming out right above my tailbone. A pink nub. I think it’s a dream about having a baby, only it never develops. The tail refuses to grow.”

“That’s sad,” Ari said, facing me. “That’s so sad.”

“Hands are emotional,” I told him, referring to Stu’s dream. “I used to teach fourth grade, and sometimes I’d look at my students’ little pudgy hands drawing or writing, and I wanted it to be the hand of my own child. It became hard to be around other people’s children. That’s why I quit.”

Ari lifted his scarf away from his face. I could see now by the lines around his mouth, the loose flesh at his throat, that he was older than I’d imagined, mid-forties, early fifties, maybe. Unshaven, his beard sprouted red. He glanced at the dogs panting towards us. “How long ago did you quit teaching?”

“Two years ago.” I brushed the snow off Freda’s back.

“Do you miss it?”

“I thought I would,” I said. “I wanted to clear a space for my own life. I was always exhausted when I taught.”

“Will you ever teach again?”

I shrugged under layers of wool. “Maybe.”

“I hate not working.” Ari said, reaching down to pull ice balls from Chiapas’s paws. Chiapas licked Ari’s eyes, licked the snow on his eyebrows. Ari looked at me and said, “I can’t make decisions anymore. I can’t decide what brand of toothpaste to buy. Crest or Aim? That was my biggest decision today.”

All that winter, my husband and I were quietly and separately counting the weeks until our deadline, April first. My husband postponed all his business trips. He told his boss he could not travel. Family matters, he explained. He took an interest in a way he never had before, when I would call him at work and tell him he needed to meet me at the clinic. He’d rush over and I’d be waiting. We had harvested eggs, embedded sperm, then planted them back in my womb. Three times, three failures.

When that didn’t work, we were advised of other options: adoption or surrogacy.

We considered the options and what they would require—taking out loans, asking our families for money, the months of waiting to be matched, the travel involved, and then the possibility of even more disappointment. In the end, I’d reached a level of sadness within myself that couldn’t withstand other ways of becoming a mother.

All winter my husband followed my cycles, circling my fertile days on his calendar. When my temperature rose, he called in sick. He took it upon himself to read the directions on the ovulation testing kit, to linger in bed in the morning and rub my back. He put music on the stereo and massaged my feet. I was aware that he was following the therapist’s instructions. Do everything you can, she had told him. Everything possible to make her pregnant.

I had become utilitarian in our lovemaking. Purposeful. But I also knew that arousal might be important. Passion might play a role in making a baby. It could have something to do with warming cells, or stirring juices, or creating momentum in my body, momentum that would guide the sperm to my eggs. There was no scientific reason why I had not become pregnant. I believed that there were deep unknowable forces at work here, forces that had thus far eluded me.

When Stu came back from London in February, he brought Ari cashmere pajamas.

"I'm not the cashmere pajama type," Ari laughed. "Especially beige pajamas. Beige is the ugliest color in the world. It makes everyone look dead."

"Cashmere pajamas sound luxurious," I told him.

"Stu always comes home with a gift and a new plan. Now he wants to install a gas fireplace in our bedroom for warmth."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Gas? I hate gas fireplaces. They scare me. What if there's a leak and we're asphyxiated? I'd rather have a wood-burning stove, one of those French ones with the beautiful enamel surfaces. But the insurance company would double our payments if we burned wood, so I told Stu we should wait."

"For what?"

Ari kicked at the snow. "I can't stay unemployed forever."

"If you don't find a job here, then what?"

"I'll go back to Chicago. I can always go back and work for my father."

"Have you told Stu you might go back?" I asked.

He nodded, telling me, "He told me to take an art class. He bought me a set of watercolors."

I laughed. "Stu sounds like a wonderful person."

"He is."

"Sounds like you can talk about everything together."

"Not everything." Ari stared at the dogs who had become two dark dots, racing in wider circles with nothing out here to impede their speed. "I think there are always things you can't say out loud." Ari stamped his feet and dug his gloved hands deeper into his pockets. "Chiapas adores Stu. I'm the one who feeds him, walks him, bathes him. But he adores Stu. Sometimes I have the feeling my whole life will be like that."

"Chiapas adores you too."

"Not like Stu. There are fundamental differences between people, you know. Dogs sense them. I truly believe this. I don't believe in equality, especially in relationships. Equality is just an ideal that makes most of us feel depressed all the time. It's not an actual emotion. How do you feel equal? I'm not talking about money and fame and fortune. I'm talking about fate. Stu could be a pastry chef, and he'd somehow create a pastry that would change the world. He

could mend shoes, and he'd mend them to last forever. He'd be the one to mend God's shoes. Dogs know who's better. Chiapas knows. It's still Stu he runs to when we both walk in the door at the same time."

February passed. The therapist listened as my husband told her, "Feels like we're in our bodies again. For a long time, I felt I couldn't even find Ellie when we were in bed. She was off in the future, waiting to see if she was pregnant. Now she's back."

I could tell she thought my husband was a very sensitive man. I imagined she had met many husbands, and probably most of them blamed their wives for not getting pregnant. Sometimes I wished my husband would blame me. But he was not like that. He had always been wise, unsurprised by life's inevitable disappointments. He translated poetry of German Jews whose works survived because they were smuggled out of the country and hidden during the war. Sometimes he showed me a poem that was so beautiful I couldn't speak.

"Isn't it a great poem?" he asked me. "To think that it might never have been read."

"What happened to the poet?" I asked.

"She was 32 when she wrote the poem," he told me. "She was killed a year later in the camps along with her husband."

"Did she have any children?" I always asked.

"A son. He died of typhus in the camps."

As I wiped away tears, he held me tightly. He thought I was crying because the poem was so beautiful, but I was crying for everything else, for everything that would never find its way into words or memory or time. I was crying because even though the poet suffered a terrible death, even though she had lost everything, I believed her exquisite poetry could only be written by a mother.

"How are you feeling, Ellie?" the therapist asked. "Do you agree with your husband's view of how things are going?"

"We're different." I glanced at his face, his thick features and piercing blue eyes. His hair was turning gray and curled slightly over his collar. I was aware of his feet twisting, one wrapped around the other, as he leaned forward, a strange, unmanly posture, pants lifted, exposing the white flesh above his socks. I had to remind

myself that he was a good man. I had to remind myself of who I would be without him—a jobless, childless, husbandless woman. I had to remind myself that he meant well, my husband, that it was not money or power or fatherhood that motivated him. It was a greater, nobler good. Texts that would have sunk into oblivion were now brought back to life. But it was exactly that, his love of meaning, his ability to comprehend time, a wholeness beyond our individual lives, that separated us.

“I don’t believe we simply cultivate beginnings and endings to suit our psychological health,” I told the therapist. “I don’t think life happens that way.” I glanced at my husband. “I can’t simply decide on a different future, a different identity. I’ve always wanted to be a mother.”

“You got married. Wasn’t that a choice, a chosen beginning?” The therapist looked at me, and for the first time, her voice lost its maternal softness and became a solid, clinical voice: “Sometimes we want to hold onto the pain, Ellie. It’s a way of keeping the dream alive, isn’t it? Remain defined by our sense of loss?”

“I have no vision of the future other than motherhood,” I told her, my voice more defiant than I wanted it to be. “I can’t help how I feel.”

“You don’t mean that, do you?” she asked softly. “Think of all the wonderful women who have never had children.”

“You imagine that we control our feelings?” I asked.

“I think we have a certain amount of control over how we respond to life,” she told me. “Do you want to stay in this cycle of grief?”

“I am trying to stay honest. I am trying to explain how I really feel. Not how I would like to feel, but how I do feel. I know everything you both say is true,” I said, glancing between my husband and the therapist. “But for me nothing will ever replace having a child. And that absence feels bigger than everything else.”

My husband turned to me: “I love you, Ellie, but if you want to keep trying to have a baby, you’ll have to find a new husband. We’ve tried long enough.”

By the middle of March, the weather had turned unseasonably warm.

Ari trod carefully across the ice toward me, shouting, “Are you

sure we should still be out here?"

We stayed closer to shore, listening to the ice crack and burble under the slushy surface. Ari no longer looked like a new arrival. His jacket was open, his scarf tied and flapping in the wind. His uniform had become blue jeans, a Harvard sweatshirt, and rainboots. His face revealed a two-day beard, stubble of red. As he reached down to unhook Chiapas from the leash, I saw his hands without gloves for the first time, his fingernails bitten raw.

"How was Chicago?" I asked.

He pulled out a piece of paper and unfolded it, handing it to me, a crayon drawing of himself and Chiapas. "My niece drew it," he said proudly. "She loves my stories about Chiapas. He always saves the princess." He folded it and put it back in his pocket. "I have a second round of interviews next week," he added. "I haven't told Stu yet. I was going to tell him last night, but we had a huge argument." He stared at the dogs in the distance as he explained, "I made this incredible apple pie, a Martha Stewart recipe," he told me. "The whole thing from scratch. My first pie, ever, trying to do my Minnesota thing, you know? For me it's like Siberia here, but I'm trying, okay? So I bring out this gorgeous pie. Stu says he'll have a bite, but not too much, says he's too full. So I eat half the pie out of spite, and then, later, I find him sneaking one of those chocolate puddings. Not even the homemade kind, but the little cups you used to see Bill Cosby advertising?" Ari pulled his scarf away from his neck, stuffed it in his pocket. "You know what's scary? I've become this person who cares if someone eats my goddamn pie. That's my goddamn pitiful life! And then I think what the hell am I doing here, if he won't even eat my handmade pie?" Ari pulled out a Kleenex and blew his nose. "I mean, would your husband do that? Would he forgo a pie you'd worked on for a whole day and sneak a pudding instead?"

I smiled. "My husband loves pie."

"I'm so sick of trying to make this work," he said. "I should never have moved here." Ari reached down, balled up a handful of snow, and threw it for the dogs to chase. "I have to decide—do I leave Stu and move back to Chicago for a job? Or stay here and bake pies and pretend it's an actual life?"

"This is my last month to try and get pregnant," I admitted.

Ari stared at me, surprised. He was usually the one to make shocking statements.

"My husband and I have been trying for years," I explained. "I

used to think that if you wanted something badly enough, you could make it happen.”

“I used to think that too,” he nodded. “When I was 35, employed, and valued my work more than anything else.” Ari shrugged, adding, “Now I’m fifty, unemployed, and I have no idea what I value or how to make my life count. Or, rather, everything seems equally unimportant. Flower-arranging seems no less meaningful than law. Watercolor-painting on par with U.N. negotiations. It all seems important, you know. Honey in my tea. Decent biscotti. Warm socks. The frivolous has its place.” He shaded his eyes with his gloved hand, staring at me. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not the same.”

“Maybe it is,” I said.

Ari said, “My father wants me to come back to Chicago and work for his firm.”

“Would you want that?”

“Maybe. If I can’t find something else.” He shrugged. “Commuting weekends might be easier than baking pies.”

“What does Stu say?”

“He doesn’t think I’ll leave. He goes to work and performs surgery on babies’ brains inside the mothers’ wombs. He saves lives. Parents name their children after him. He doesn’t understand why I’m upset over a piece of pie.”

As we turned and headed back toward the shoreline, he told me, “I’m going to my nephew’s bar mitzvah next weekend. I’ve got another interview the Monday after. We’ll see what happens.”

My husband stayed home during my fertile period in March. We made love twice a day. He lit candles, massaged my back. I kept my eyes closed, trying to feel aroused. But it was no longer a sexual act. It was something else. Sometimes my sense of failure kept me from feeling anything. I lay there as he kept going, whispering deeply and repeatedly into my ear, “I love you. I love you so much,” as if to convince me his love existed with or without a child. What he was giving me now was meant to prove his love. It was also meant to save me. It was not for the baby; it was for me. He was trying for my sake. And that condemned us to fail.

When the end of March arrived and I told the therapist I had started my period, she said, “I’m so sorry, Ellie. I know what this means to you.” She let the room fill with silence, and then she said,

“You need to think of how you want to ritualize the ending.”

“What do you mean, *ritualize*?” my husband asked.

The therapist looked at me. “What would make sense to you, Ellie? What would symbolize an ending for you?”

“I still feel like there’s a chance,” I said. “I keep thinking once we stop trying it will happen.”

I could hear my husband sink into the cushion of his chair.

The therapist reached over and put her hand on mine. “There is nothing wrong with hope . . . unless it keeps us in a permanent state of disappointment. You can’t construct your life around something that doesn’t exist.”

“Ellie,” my husband said. “Please listen to her. We have to move on.”

“There are lots of ways to be a mother in this world,” the therapist added. “Lots of people who need mothering. Some of the best mothers are not women who have babies. And some of the worst mothers are women who have children. You need to find a way to be a mother in the world without having a child.”

“She should go back to teaching.” My husband sat up. “She was a great teacher. The children loved her.”

The therapist told me, “You need to do something to signify this ending, Ellie. Maybe you need to write a letter to the child inside you that will never be born. Maybe you should light a candle every year on April first and just allow yourself to grieve for the loss. You’ll have to decide what will allow you to move on.”

April first arrived, and Chiapas was out there, a brown ball of fur on the shrinking ice.

I spent the afternoon going back and forth between my house and the lake, hoping he’d be gone each time I returned. He moved twice, a few steps each time, before curling into himself.

Earlier, the anorexic reappeared, this time with binoculars. “He’s still moving. He’s still alive.” She wore a big furry black hat that accentuated her thin face. Her back was rounded with early signs of osteoporosis. She was no older than I was. She would never have children either, I thought, as she took out a small bag of candy and offered it to me.

“No thanks.” I shook my head.

When I turned and walked up the hill, she called after me,

“You aren’t giving up, are you?”

It was close to five when my husband turned in the driveway and saw me loading the car. He glanced at the trunk—sleeping bag, duffle with firewood, and our small hibachi grill. “What’s going on?” he asked, handing me a large bouquet of tulips.

“The dog is still trapped on the ice,” I told him. “I need to try to get him to shore.”

He lifted a plastic bag of food from the car. “I picked up your favorite noodles and spicy shrimp.” He tossed the flowers on top of the sleeping bag. “I thought we were going to discuss what today means?”

“The dog won’t survive another night,” I told him. “I want to light a fire and cook some meat. I want to see if I can lure him off the ice and get him to a vet before he dies.”

My husband’s eyes were full of doubt. I could see him wondering who I was at this moment in time. I could tell by the way he breathed heavily, shoulders lifting and staying lifted, he believed I was finding ways to avoid an ending.

He held up the bag with takeout, his voice bereft and uncertain. “Do you want to eat before you go?”

I shook my head. “I want to go while there’s still some light. I’ll drive to side of the lake closest to him.”

He watched me get in the car and start the engine. Then, tapping my window, he asked loudly through the glass, “Do you want me to come with you?”

I shook my head and backed out of the driveway.

I carefully planned my fire so the wind would carry the scent of meat toward Chiapas. I waved a rolled newspaper to fan the flame. As the fire grew, I pulled the sleeping bag around me and laid a piece of steak over the hibachi. I imagined Chiapas sniffing the open water as the smell of meat drifted out to him.

I was there for maybe a half-hour when I heard footsteps behind me.

“It’s me,” my husband called, as he descended the small hill, pulling the rubber boat we kept on the rafters in our garage. I had forgotten about it until now, as he stood next to me, reaching inside the deflated boat and pulling out an air pump and waders. “What do you think? Is it worth a try?”

“You don’t have to do this. I don’t even know if the dog is still out there or if he’s still alive.” I looked at my husband, six years older than I and not a strong swimmer. He had a ski hat pulled down over his ears, and it pressed the flesh around his jowls. He looked old and tired. “No,” I said. “It’s too dangerous. We don’t even know if this boat still floats.”

Freda was jumping at his feet. He started pumping the bicycle pump so that the rubber boat grew round and full of air. He pressed on it and listened for the whistle of air escaping.

“What if you sink?” I asked.

“I won’t sink. I’ll take the steak and row around the edge. I’ll throw pieces of steak and try to lure him to the boat. I brought an extra life preserver. Maybe I can get close enough to get him in the boat or wrap a strap through his collar and pull him with the life preserver.”

“His name is Chiapas.” I handed him the tinfoil with cooked steak wrapped inside.

My husband pulled on the waders and waded out until the water was deep enough to allow the rubber boat to move under his body weight. Then he rolled onto the boat, sat up, and began paddling.

I sat on a log, feeding kindling to the fire, listening to the wooden oars slap water. “Be careful,” I called, watching him disappear into the darkness.

For a few minutes his voice carried across the lake. “Chiapas, where are you, boy?”

Then silence, except for an occasional car on the nearby street and sirens in the distance. A damp chill slowly climbed my body. An airplane flew high above us, its lights visible while its sound lagged. I watched the plane overhead, lights blinking. I thought of Ari spending his last night in his niece’s house, telling her a story about Chiapas. I thought of Stu, far away, showing slides of babies’ brains. I wondered if Chiapas had already accepted his fate. I wondered too if I could accept my fate, or if holding onto the dream of a baby was more important than my marriage.

“Michael?” I called, listening for the sound of oars, and when I didn’t hear him, I stood and called louder: “Michael!”

“I’m here.” His voice came out of the darkness, calling to me. “I went the whole way around, Ellie. He must’ve swum to shore. He’s not there anymore. Nothing’s there.”