

MARK RIGNEY



THE SKATES

A BENNER & QUIST ADVENTURE

 SAMHA

Dedication

For my Traverse City family, without whom Renner & Quist would never have come to pass.

Every contact leaves a trace, or so says Dale Quist. Nor do I have any reason to doubt him, beyond the admittedly petulant fact that I do not care to concede the point. I do not, in fact, care to concede anything to Dale. Concessions in general are a slippery slope, and with him, it's a point of honor.

As to every contact leaving a trace—a forensic truth, perhaps, but hardly a topic we dealt with in divinity school—I will say this: I truly had no intention of garage-sale-hopping that morning. I never go to garage sales. All that junk strewn about, the sad cast-offs of strangers' humdrum lives? It's depressing. And yet, in the middle of breakfast I was struck by a fierce urge to go and shop for some sort of antique to hang on my office wall.

As goals go, this was not, perhaps, entirely absurd. The church, by and large, is well decorated; my busy-body board members see to that. But my office they leave to me, and since I have very little patience for such things, I have left the walls entirely alone, except where they are lined with shelving on which sit my many rows of books: Buber, Gibran, Tillich. More than a few of my parishioners claim that if I had my way, that is how all walls would be covered, with books. They are very likely correct.

So there I was, Godsmacked—as my Australian friends might say—by this shiny new idea. I wolfed down what was left of my excellent meal—one banana, one blueberry scone, one cup of steaming ginger tea—and then I set off at a trot under a promising early June sun to acquire...something. A framed Edwardian print, perhaps? A folk-art woodcut? Or, more in keeping with my Unitarian, Starr King tradition, perhaps a prayer shawl, dragged home from Tibet by some long-grown collegiate backpacker? That would be a find, yes. Décor with spirit; spiritual décor.

Instead, after three sales of finding nothing but heaps of stale clothes, mangled toys and barely touched exercise equipment, I found myself hooked, hypnotized and fascinated by a pair of ancient ice skates, so primitive and peculiar that I barely recognized them as skates at all.

Of all things. Skates.

They were hardly skates in the modern sense. There was no boot, no shoe. Rather, each skate was built of two metal platforms, the heel being the smaller, with the vertical rail of the skate running beneath. The front of each blade curled delicately upward, like elf-shoes or something out of an Oz book. Both plates featured a sort of toothy metal clamp designed, presumably, to clip directly to a shoe or boot. All in all, they looked impractical in the extreme.

Now it's true that I live in Michigan. In Traverse City, even, far enough north to guarantee snowy winters and readily available outdoor skating. But I am not by birth a northerner, and come winter, my nose runs and my toes freeze and the skin on my hands turns white and cracks. By January, my arid, salt-flat knuckles bleed freely. The notion that I should take a sudden shine to ice skating was beyond incredible, it was inconceivable. I have never been skating in my life.

But every contact leaves a trace, remember? And since meeting Dale Quist three years ago, just before that nightmare-inducing business with the thing in the Benzie County peat bog, I have become—how shall I say it? Attuned. Attuned in a most unpleasant and reliable way to all those things that are not supposed to exist and that typically go *bump*—loudly—in somebody's night. Once I was a Unitarian Universalist minister, plain and simple. Now? I am a magnet for spirits, a dousing rod for haunts. All things enchanted or otherworldly gravitate, like it or not, to me. Some men are born great, yes? Others have greatness—or something—thrust upon them...

The skates lying on that garage sale table had clearly been marked. *Touched*. I knew it as surely as I knew the day was warm, the sky blue.

I walked away immediately, of course. I walked quickly and with purpose and even rounded the block, breathing in the heavy spring scents of loam and mulch. I said cheery hellos to passing

strangers; I waved to an old woman sitting on her porch; I patted a terrier that raced over for attention. To treat a dog with kindness is to ensure that the world contains one less dog ready to bite. Much the same applies to people, thus the everyday kindnesses demanded by the Golden Rule.

None of my delaying tactics did the least bit of good. My feet led me right 'round the block, and there I was again, planted in the crumbling drive of that yellowish house, staring with undisguised annoyance at those confounded skates.

I examined them afresh, feeling vaguely nauseous. All the various metal surfaces had tarnished badly, and the blades, in particular, were pitted as if they'd been spattered with acid.

"I'll take fifty for the skates," the woman in charge of the sale announced. "I can see you like 'em, or I'd ask more."

I gave her a startled look. Fifty dollars? Cocooned in a dumpy bathrobe, the woman sat sprawled like abandoned laundry in a pine green camp chair. With her mass of steel-wool hair, she might perhaps have been a grandmother (of the kind no grandchild wants to have), or she might simply have been old, slothful and greedy.

I made these judgments in a snap, then sighed, berating myself as I always do for sinking beneath my best self. I am a man of the cloth, a man of responsibility and faith. I know I should do better, *be* better, so, in an attempt to be humble, I considered what she might see in considering me: a man so petite he does half his shopping in the teen section, a man with effete round glasses, rimless, and a long scarf 'round his neck, despite the undeniable warmth of the sun. A man of tics and nerves, especially when confronted by ice skates costing fifty dollars that he does not want, and yet must at all costs have.

"They're old?" I asked, which was a knuckle-headed question. I already knew they were old.

"Old as the hills," said the woman. "My grandfather brought them from London. Sailed on the *Queen Mary*, way back when. What he told me is that these were dredged up out of some pond. They were doing some work, see? Making the pond shallower. And they found these. But that was a *long* time ago, you understand? Victorian, these are. From when Victoria was queen, see?"

"I can't afford fifty dollars."

"They belong in a museum."

"I don't run a museum."

With a huffy look, she crossed her arms and settled farther into her chair; presumably I wasn't the serious buyer she'd thought. With a determined effort, I, too, walked away, but despite visiting four other garage sales and walking for what must have been three miles, I migrated right back to that off-yellow house and the table with the ice skates. I had even taken steps to visit an ATM along the way.

"How about forty?" I said.

The bath-robed proprietor shook her head. "If they don't sell, I throw 'em back in the box."

I wanted to leave the skates behind, I truly did, but they *called* to me. They made my whole body vibrate. Damn that Dale Quist. Too much contact, that's what it was. First with the thing in the peat bog, then the headstone incident with the Schweickart girl, and then, only last summer, the dead Bosnian couple wanting to get married. And it was hardly a week after that that we found a Green Man (of all things) lurking inside Myrtle Owens' inherited Christmas tree farm. Even setting aside my ministerial duties, it has been, by any standard, an unusual couple of years.

So thinking, I muttered a prayer and reached for my wallet. Fifty dollars, on my salary, would assure me another month's worth of macaroni and cheese.

On my walk home, with the skates clutched to my chest, I spotted a large black mutt watching me from behind a shaded clump of burning bush. Its tongue lolled over its wide pink jowls, and it panted

just like a normal overheated dog, but it had the oddest aspect, a sort of level-eyed frown, as if it were watching me and only me. Sure enough, once I'd passed it and crossed the next street, I looked over my shoulder and there was the dog, padding along after me with a bulldozer's conviction. I looked away and increased my pace. The dog (collarless) sped up to match, but made no attempt to close the gap between us. It simply followed, all the way to my little brick house.

Once in the door, I dumped the skates unceremoniously on my spare desk, the one I strewed junk on when said junk has no other clear or immediate destination. The skates, being heavy, started an avalanche and slid to the floor, dragging an unruly strata of magazines and flotsam after them. Intent on lunchtime macaroni, I elected to stress the skates' unimportance by simply leaving them there, covered in back issues of *Shambhala Sun*, the *New York Times Magazine* and a rainbow of mismatched socks.

All that afternoon, I managed to lose myself in the work of sermon-writing—a skill at which, it must be said, I am exceptionally facile—but come evening, as I took a look out my back window, I stopped in my tracks. There was that same black dog lying sphinx-like beneath the overhang of my gone-to-seed honeysuckle. For a moment, I considered bursting out my back door and yelling at it to shoo, but a second look at its heavy head and powerful jaws made anchors of my feet. Besides, the dog *wouldn't* go; I knew that for a fact. I had the skates, and somehow that meant I had the dog.

Next day, in an effort to distance myself from my new pet, I drove the skates to church. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Grand Traverse sits as it always has in the belly-up antique mall at the intersection of state routes thirty-one and thirty-seven. Huddled there on the scraggly edge of town, it is not an ideal venue for a church, true, but remember that mine is a splinter congregation, and that we UU's (as we're called) know without being told that we must take what we can get. Besides, being essentially an inclusive group, we have no need of a towering steeple or a massive sanctuary in which to house a cross. What we require is a meeting space, one with plenty of available seats and an extra room or two for a nursery, coffee hours and, of course, an office for the minister. Me.

I had not brought any sort of hook or peg, so I simply dumped the skates in a corner near the waste basket and got to work fielding emails and phone calls from parishioners whose needs ran the gamut from the intriguingly spiritual (“I think maybe I'm not a UU; I think maybe I'm Baha'i.”) to the gratingly stupid (“My husband is an idiot. I'd really like to hear your suggestions.”). Eventually, I got thirsty and thought I'd walk to McDonald's for a sweet tea. I rose, bid adieu to my office and got the shock of my life when I exited the building and nearly tripped over the large black mutt, which had parked itself on the rubber welcome mat just outside of the door.

If I screamed, I like to think no one heard me.

The dog, entirely unimpressed, kept its head resting firmly on its paws and shot me a reproachful look, as if to say, “Would you mind keeping it down?”

I live, by design, several miles from the church. I had been at work for perhaps an hour. For the dog to have covered that distance in that time—and assuming it had been able to track, with a bloodhound's accuracy, my particular rattletrap Subaru—was nothing shy of supernatural.

Every contact leaves a trace. My proof was staring me in the face and drooling copiously on the blacktop.

With a sigh, I withdrew my cell phone. I could have used speed dial, but there is one number I have committed to memory (and no, I don't mean my mother's, although yes, she is alive, still, and wreaking what havoc she can in the otherwise peaceful enclave of Palm Springs). That number belongs to Dale Quist, all six foot four of him.

The dog watched my fingers as if he, too, were committing Quist's phone to memory. "Stupid dog I said."

The dog looked away, staring past me and in through the door of the church. Toward my office. Toward the skates.

Some days, I think I should tear the whole dang phone line out of the wall and chuck my cell into Grand Traverse Bay. Who needs telephones? I only get two kinds of calls, anyway. The first is from potential guests wantin' to know if I've got a cabin available, which most weeknights I do, and most weekends I don't. The second is from Reverend Renner, and he only calls when there's some kind of emergency, which don't exactly make me feel loved. Although it's true, I only call *him* when I've got an emergency. No gettin' around it, that's the kind of friendship we got. A sort of business relationship, predicated—he'd like that word—on the kind of things neither one of us can explain.

Maybe things'd be different if I actually liked Renner, but I don't. First off, what kind of name is Renner, just all by itself? Is it his first name? His last? It's pretension, that's what I say. Pure upper-class pretension. Besides which, he's a self-righteous, anal-retentive pipsqueak. And I don't cotton to any of those things, neither.

When he called, though, I listened carefully. Some rigmarole about skates and a dog. It sounded pretty hare-brained at first, but the longer I listened, the more that prickly feeling started working its way up my spine, and when it slithered over to my shoulder blades, I knew Renner had stumble-bummed his way into something downright unpleasant.

"Whoa, Reverend," I said, hoping to stop his scatter-brained rambling. "Have you put the skates on?"

"Dale, it's summer."

"So did you put them on?"

"No."

"Good. Don't. Where do I meet you?"

One place I never thought I'd go is Renner's crackpot church—instead of a nice, clear-cut creed, these bozos believe in *everything*—but an hour later, sure enough, there I was. And just like Renner said, there was a great black Baskerville dog planted on the welcome mat. As I got out of my truck, I slipped a hand under my jacket and let it rest, just in case, on the butt of my Glock. Yes, I carry a gun. Sue me. I keep it in a left-side shoulder holster, always. And as for dogs, I have a history. The next one that tries takin' a bite out of me, I'm gonna blow it into next week.

This dog didn't pay me any attention at all. Barely lifted its head. Not that that kept my pulse rate down. Cripes, but I hate dogs.

I found Renner in his crypt of an office. One poky window and too many books by half. As for the rest of the building? Too many post-hippie wall hangings, and way too many save-the-world, do-gooder fliers. It was like a forest in there, a forest dedicated to making demands. Give me the Roman Catholics any day; at least they don't pretend to make sense.

"Your dog's out front," I said. "Where's the skates?"

"Hello to you, too," he said, setting aside what looked like a Bible but might just as well have been the Book of Mormon. "They're in the corner, there."

I followed his pointing finger to a sad little metal heap in the corner. I s'pose they wouldn't have looked like much to most people, but to me, they might as well have been a neon grenade with a pulled pin. My hackles rose like nobody's business, and if my shoulders had gotten any stiffer, I'd

have turned into some kind of hyena.

“Reverend, why in the name of all that’s holy did you buy these things?”

He gave a little shrug that wasn’t near apologetic enough for my liking. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“Oh, come on. You couldn’t just walk away?”

“I tried. Twice.”

Maybe it was the fact that his ridiculous round glasses did not, for once, slip down his nose, but whatever it was, I believed him. I didn’t want to, but I did.

“Well,” I said, “my view is, we research the hell out of these, and then once we know how, we destroy them.”

“What, like *Lord of the Rings*?”

“Reverend, be serious.”

Renner gave me one of his condescending sighs. He’s a real marksman with those, deadly at a range of fifty paces. “Fine,” he said. “So we need to learn about them, where do we start?”

For a man with Renner’s education to start asking how to do research struck me as just plain bone-headed, but then it occurred to me to take this as a compliment. He was deferring to me. Wasn’t that what I wanted?

I cleared my throat and studied the skates sidelong, as if they might jump at me. “Are there markings on ’em? Anything to say who made ’em?”

Renner shrugged as if he didn’t remember, which meant one of us would have to pick them up. Me. I decided, since they’d chosen him. With what I hoped wasn’t overly obvious reluctance, I reached down and seized the topmost skate between thumb and forefinger. Renner watched, peering past me as I dangled the skate at eye level, checking for what I wasn’t sure.

“Dale. I already researched them. On the ’net. After I called you.”

I glared. “You just asked me where to start.”

“No, I meant—I thought you had something, um, less traditional in mind.”

Sneaky little bastard. Leading me on like that. “Well, now,” I grumped. “You feel like filling me in?”

He led me to the computer and clicked his way past the screensaver, a golden, candle-topped chalice. “Here. Read this.”

According to the web page Renner showed me, the skates were a hundred and fifty years old, maybe more. The fact that they had clamps placed them as being newer than 1848, but possibly not by much—*toe-kicks* were all the rage by the 1870’s, but this pair was still as curly at the front as a goddamned pig tail. As for where they’d been made, Renner had no idea.

“Well, then,” I said. “You guessed right, Reverend. Time for something a little less conventional.”

“And that would be...?”

“It’s time,” I said, almost purring, “for a *séance*.”

He argued up a storm, of course. Railing about cults and disproven theories. I just sat there and let his bluster run its course. “Who,” he spluttered, “would even *do* a *séance*? In this century, in Traverse City, for goodness’ sake?”

“You leave that to me, Reverend. I’m way ahead of you.”

He blinked like some schoolmarm owl. “You actually know such people?”

“Look,” I said, “you go ahead and laugh, but these people I’m talking about, they’re not clowning around. The spirit world, for them? It’s like pulling back a shower curtain.”

With a swift, disbelieving laugh, Renner said, “I can just picture it. The monthly meeting of the Grand Traverse Mentalist’s Club. Instead of poker and bridge, you stand around playing *Light As a*

Feather, Stiff As a Board.”

I shot up from my chair, halfway to snarling. “Reverend, you’re talking to a man who can damn near bend a spoon with nothing but his mind, you get me? With nothing but his mind!”

Renner started cackling so hard, he damn near wet himself. Me, I was out the door and gone in thirty seconds flat.

That night, I was sleeping peacefully, the way I always do, when the bedside phone started ringing off the hook. I called it a few choice names while trying to find it in the pitch darkness—see, I read once where real dark is the only thing that truly rests the eyes, so I’ve got blackout drapes and aluminum foil over the windows—but I finally got hold of the receiver.

It was Renner—of course—and boy, was he having some kind of red-eyed conniption. “The dog!” he kept shouting. “The dog, the dog!”

At that hour, I swear I’d forgotten all about the dog, the skates, everything. “Reverend!” I yelled into the phone—shouting so loud I made myself jump, which surprised me—“Calm the fuck down. What’s wrong?”

First came a raggedy breath that made the phone crackle, then a swallowing noise. “It’s here,” he breathed. “The dog is *here*.”

“Here where? Where are you?”

“At *home*. In *bed*.”

I swung my feet to the floor and felt for the light switch. “The dog’s in the bed?”

“*On* it. I woke up, and it was just *there*, lying on the bedspread.”

“Renner, where are the skates?”

“In my office.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. We left together, remember? And I haven’t been back. So they’re—Holy Mother.” He let out a tiny, choked-off gasp.

“Reverend? What’s going on?”

“The skates. They’re on my feet!”

Now this here’s a fact: I generally drive like a bat out of hell, but I tell you what, I have never driven into Traverse City as fast as I did that night. The cabins I run, Shelter From the Storm, they’re a twenty-minute trip to the near edge of town, but that night, it was barely ten minutes from when Renner said “feet” to the moment that I damn near pounded down his front door. Good thing the police—God love ’em—were out scarfing donuts.

I could hear Renner inside, yelping and bumping into things, but he wasn’t getting any closer to the door, so I shrugged off my jacket, wrapped it around my fist and punched out the glass. Reaching in, I grabbed hold of the knob and threw the door open. “Reverend!” I yelled. “Hang on, I’m comin’!”

I’d never once been to his house, but it wasn’t large, and as I burst into the half-lit living room, Renner staggered out of his bedroom, taking hobbled baby-steps like some bandy-legged stork. He wore snow boots on his feet with the skates clamped to the soles; the poor guy was swaying on the blades like a tightrope walker three sheets to the wind. Behind him, through the door, I could see the dog watching us with half-hearted interest, its heavy head up, its tongue drooping over canines big enough to punch through tin.

“Dale,” Renner breathed. “Help.”

I kept staring at his feet, like they might at any second transform. “Didn’t you try to get them off?”

“My fingers won’t work the clamps.”

“What, are they stuck?”

“No. I mean I can’t get my fingers to even *get hold* of the clamps. I want to. I can’t.”

~~Nodding, I bent down to see what was what. “Don’t kick me, okay? I’ll give it a try.”~~

For me, the clamps came undone just like that. Lucky. If the skates had been cursed—seriously cursed—they not only wouldn’t have come off, they probably would have sleepwalked Renner straight to the bottom of Lake Michigan.

We sat on the floor, breathing hard, piecing together what must have happened. Renner figured he’d been driven (in his sleep, no less) all the way to the church, picked up the skates and driven back. The dog—somehow—had followed him inside.

Renner made coffee while I went outside and stuffed the skates into the saddle box in my flatbed, shoving wrenches and screwdrivers out of the way to make room. No surprise that the dog came out to watch, and when I hopped down from the flatbed, the dog jumped in. I slammed the tailgate, and wouldn’t you know it, that dog, cool as a cucumber, curled up next to the toolbox and dropped its broad head on its enormous, pudding-foot paws.

In some ways, the dog’s behavior was a relief—it meant that it was interested in the skates, not Renner. I headed back inside to tell him, crunching over broken glass in the hallway. Renner was already headed that way with a dustpan and broom.

“Sorry ’bout your door,” I said, “but I didn’t know what was going on in here, and I was in kind of hurry.”

A gloss of reflections swam over Renner’s glasses, hiding his eyes. “It wasn’t locked,” he said, finally. “Never is.”

By ten a.m. that morning, I’d assembled the team we needed. Those that had to took sick days and didn’t ask questions. I don’t call in my cards often, and they could tell from the get-go that this was a featherweight request.

The Grand Traverse Mentalist’s Club, that’s what I was calling to order, and boy, did it steam my clams that Renner had guessed the name. We typically met once every two weeks at 401 Monroe Street in a nineteenth-century two-story that was some kind of kissing cousin to the Addams Family residence. There was a tower, a widow’s walk and a secret passage. The attic had bats in just stupid numbers, and the place gave all of us, even its owner, Meryl Grimley, the willies. For one thing, you couldn’t get near it without feeling that the house wasn’t a great big Victorian at all, but was in fact a tiny little hovel, with barefoot kids squealing in the yard and chickens flapping at their heels. Meryl claimed these were the ghosts of the property on which they’d built the larger, grander house. Maybe I’d learned not to doubt Meryl. Dressed in shimmering, rainbow-hued layers of robes and kaftans, she was built like a cross between a quarry truck and an opera diva, big chested and short-necked. Her glare could freeze a river solid. Everyone in the Club, including me, worked hard to keep on her good side.

Not Renner. He seemed to think she was funny, and after she’d met us at the door and started leading us upstairs, to the Chamber of Spirits—a converted bedroom where we did all our best table-work—he had a look on his face like he’d been chewing a lemon. Tugging on my sleeve, he whispered, “Is she for real?”

“What do you mean, real?”

“Well, I mean...gosh, Dale. She’s a walking drag show.”

I damn near missed the next-to-last stair. “Renner,” I said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about and I don’t think you do, either.”

After keeping the skates locked in my saddle box for the night, I’d brought them along in a canvas Oleson’s grocery sack. The dog had tried to worm its way into the house, but Meryl had interposed

herself, and in the end, he'd slunk back outside to flop beneath a spindly red maple.

There were seven of us, a number Meryl pronounced to be "auspicious". Besides me, Meryl and Renner, there was Isadora Lamb, the oldest woman I'd ever met, and Jonas Redtop, a graying mechanic who said he was a Chippewa and said it a lot. To round out the party, we had Tim and Tina Wolving, a brother-and-sister pair whom I frankly never saw apart and thought maybe they weren't siblings at all but clandestine lovers. Their morose, pudgy faces always made me think of lard, but you can't judge a book. I'd seen Tim levitate a toaster, and Tina could bend spoons like nobody's business.

The room itself was covered in velvet wallpaper, the fuzzy kind, deeply red. Run your finger over it on a cold, dry day, and you'd give yourself a static shock. Modern cellular blinds combined with enormous plush curtains, black velvet, to shut out any unwanted light, which always made me feel right at home. In the center of the room, Meryl had the requisite round table, ample chairs and, held on a copper stand shaped to resemble a dragon's claw, a crystal ball. If you pressed her, she'd own up that it was mostly for effect. "It sets the right tone," she'd told me, when I'd first come to a meeting. "The important thing is to be well above the ground. Conduct a séance in the basement, and it goes nowhere. Spirits move well through air, but are deflected and confused by earth." She'd smiled hugely, like a Roman senator with a belly full of wine. "It's the little things, you know. The devil's in the details."

She called us to order with a single violent hand-clap and we took our places. Renner sat on one side of Meryl and I sat on the other. Everyone joined hands. With the exception of Renner, we all looked deadly serious. Renner looked as if he'd just sat on a whoopee cushion.

"Spirits of the four winds," intoned Meryl, eyes closed, "we ask your patience and your blessing on our work. Look kindly on us as we probe the mysteries. Join and guide us as we pass through the eternal veil."

Past Meryl's formidable profile, Renner looked up, halfway to startled. As Meryl continued, invoking each of the four winds one by one, he gave up giggling and took to studying her like a safecracker in the presence of a brand new lock.

Now, I've done my share of séances, and the fact is, most of them are a crock. Even the folks who know what they're doing—the people who chuck orthodoxy out with the bathwater in favor of whatever works—people like Meryl—well, your typical séance is just another word for nap. But that day? Forget about bumpings and thumpings and floating tables, we got a visitation that kept Meryl's cronies talking for the rest of their natural born days.

Meryl requested that I place the skates on the table. The second I did, Renner's dog, still on the front lawn, started howling, a real hound dog's bawl. Meryl, ignoring the din, asked us all to focus on the skates. "Consider their form," she murmured, and her meaty fingers tightened on mine. "Consider their shape, their keen edges. Consider their age. Consider the journey on which they've been."

Well, we must have done a pretty powerful job of considering, because next thing I knew, there was a man standing on the table, one foot on either side of the crystal ball. He wore black overshoes, gray checked trousers and a heavy topcoat; jammed tightly on his head was a stovepipe hat big enough to hold a raccoon. What with his heavy sideburns and twisty mustache, there were no two ways about it, we were being visited by an honest-to-God Victorian.

"Holy Mary," breathed Jonas Redtop, the mechanic. "We've never seen nothin' like that before—have we?"

We had not. The most we'd ever conjured was a filmy, bad-smelling cloud that had dashed around the room and rustled the curtains before vanishing with a breathy shriek.

"Quiet," demanded Meryl, and her grip tightened still further. She looked up and faced the strange

who seemed to be staring off into forever, as if he wasn't really in the room with us at all—which I figure he likely wasn't. "Visitor!" she cried. "Tell us your name."

Instead of answering, the man smoothed out his mustache with a quick, practiced move—fingers and thumb—and withdrew a slim leather-bound book. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, in a clipped British accent. He had a cheerful, nervous voice, like a salesman in a slump. "For my first reading this morning, I shall offer something quite new. I humbly introduce a recent effort, 'The Shocking Murder of a Young Wife'."

Tina Wolving looked like she was set to lose her breakfast. "I don't think I want to hear this."

"Tina, be quiet. Sir. Please begin."

The stranger opened his little volume and cleared his throat. Eyes firmly on the page, he began to read in a highly affected, actorly tone:

*Good people all, I pray attend
And listen unto me;
While unto you I do relate,
A dreadful tragedy.
Committed by George Broomfield,
As you soon shall hear,
Upon the body of Caroline Colborne,
In Shirely, in Hampshire.
George Broomfield is my name,
I am brought to grief and shame.*

"Stop!" commanded Meryl, and without breaking the circle, she stood. In the half-light of the candles, the threads of her outermost kaftan glimmered like tiny fireworks. "Stranger, poet, are you George Broomfield?"

For the first time, our visitor took note of us. With a hard, offended stare, he sized up Meryl. "Nay, I am not," he replied. "And may I enquire, madam, as to what, exactly, you are wearing?"

Before she could answer, Renner stood. "My name is Reverend Renner," he announced. "May I ask yours?"

"Henry Disley," said the poet. "At your service."

"We are sorry for the inconvenience," said Renner. He, too, still had hold of the hands around him. "Would you please tell us what you know of the ice skates at your feet?"

Henry Disley peered down as if over an impossible distance. "Should I know them? They aren't mine."

"What about a dog?" Renner pressed. "What about a dog that follows these skates wherever they go?"

At this, Disley's eyes narrowed. Looking Renner's way, he said, "What color?"

"Black."

"Quite large? A mutt, but with a heavy head and more than a touch of hound?"

Outside, the dog let out its most god-awful bawl yet.

"That's the one."

"Skates are skates," said Disley, with a shrug. "But the dog I have seen, and if you will permit me, will relate the circumstances of my encounter."

"Please do," said Meryl Grimley. "And we," she went on, turning her fearsome glare on Renner,

“will sit down to listen.”

Henry Disley flipped to a new page of his book, cleared his throat again—the man needed an allergy shot—and said, “This, my most famous work thus far, is entitled, as I’m sure you know, ‘Terrible Accident on the Ice in Regent’s Park, and Loss of 40 Lives’.”

*The fifteenth of January,
That Tuesday afternoon,
Some hundreds on the ice took their station.*

*Young men and boys,
In Youth and bloom,
To the park went for healthy recreation.*

*But soon it gave way,
More than forty lost their lives,
The widows and poor orphans will distress them.*

*God bless those gallant hearts
To save life did strive.
And those now in Heaven—God rest them.*

*’Twas near four o’clock,
How dreadful to relate,
The ice broke up in every quarter.*

*Two hundred fell in,
Oh, what a sad fate!
All struggled for their lives in the water.*

*They clung to the ice,
Until, benumbed with cold,
The ice in their grasp broke asunder.*

*One lady on the shore,
In grief did behold,
Her husband exhausted go under.*

*A poor faithful dog,
Saw his master disappear,
And never left the park since that evening.*

*No food will he take,
By the water stays near,
For its master the poor dog is grieving.*

Proud as a peacock, Disley came to the end and made a little bow. Nobody clapped. For my part, and I'll admit I'm no judge of poetry, all I could think was that surely those poor people on the ice that day deserved better.

"So," said Meryl, slowly, "you suspect these skates belonged to the master of this dog? And the dog's master drowned?"

"You have deduced the very heart of the matter," exclaimed Disley, raising an index finger skyward. "And now, if you'll permit me, I shall continue, for your enjoyment, with my latest venture an ode of great seriousness and tragic import, a humble trifle which I have entitled, 'On the Dreadful Murder of Five Persons and the Capture of the Murderer'."

Kicking back her chair, Meryl abruptly rose again. "Spirits of the wind!" she called, like it was suddenly an emergency. "We are ready now to be unjoined!"

"Wait!" cried Disley, clearly flustered. He snatched off his hat and pressed it to his chest. "I really haven't finished!"

"Spirits of the north wind, spirits of the south—!"

"Just the opening, madam, please, if you could but hear!"

"Spirits of the east wind, spirits of the west—!"

Disley found his page and started reading double-quick, firing out words like a fast-moving typist. "Of all the crimes we ever heard, of all the dross that did not glitter..."

"Spirits! We are *done!*" roared Meryl, cutting off Disley and yanking her hands free of mine and Renner's. In an instant, the figure of Henry Disley vanished, evaporating outward in all directions simultaneously. If mist could explode, that's what he did, with his hurt expression the last thing to go.

The curtains rustled in the corners. Outside, the dog bawled once more. Across from me, Isadora Lamb rose on arthritic legs. "My," she said, grinning with every tooth in her wide, wide mouth. "Mr. Quist, you should bring things for show and tell more often. That was exceptionally diverting."

Back at the truck, I locked the skates in the saddle box, and Renner and me hurried to the cab while the dog leaped into the tailgate, nimble as a cat. As I drove toward Renner's place, the reverend looked over at me and said, "Dale, thank you. That was fascinating."

"If you like bad poetry, sure."

"No, truly. Your friend Meryl Grimley, the way she conducts her service—sorry, *séance*. It's almost pagan."

I threw him a look. "I thought you were Unitarian."

He shrugged. "Yes. But what that really means is that we honor an entire spectrum of faith traditions, paganism included. I just never thought that people like *that* would be using those same rituals."

"People like that," I reminded him, "happen to be my friends."

"Of course." He nodded, adjusted his glasses and shifted his whole body behind the mesh strap of the seatbelt to better face me. "What do we do now?"

"I take you home. And I keep the skates locked up—with a lock where you don't know the combo."

"And then?"

"Don't know. Looks like I'm gonna be adopting a dog."

He laughed, which I didn't think he would—the man has practically no sense of humor. "Dale," he said, "that poem was all about Regent's Park. You know where that is?"

"Canada?"

"No, London. England. I think these skates need to go back there."

He stopped, as if he was expecting me to say something, but all I could think of was how I had

cabins to run and no time to go traipsing off to the far side of the globe.

“Dale,” Renner went on, suddenly smug, like he knew the answer already, “have you ever been to England?”

“No.”

“Come with me.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“Thought you were in the poorhouse.”

“Oh, I am. But for travel, I have a special fund.”

I puffed out my cheeks with a frustrated breath. “The answer is N-O no.”

Renner laughed again, and shifted so he was once again facing front, out the windshield, toward the trusty pines and Michigan maples. “I’ll see about tickets. It’ll be a nice vacation, and you’ll get a kick out of looking after me.”

In the end, it was cheaper to drive to Chicago and get a direct flight, which, two weeks after Meryl Grimley’s peculiar excuse for a séance, is precisely what we did. Quist drove, and at a quite reasonable speed, I might add, and the skates rode in his flatbed saddle box in back, with the dog (to our mutual dismay) lying next to it.

“You do realize,” I said, just south of itsy-bitsy Buckley, “that the dog can’t come with us. On the plane, I mean.”

“You do realize,” said Quist, “that Fido back there goes where he pleases, and there’s nothing on God’s green earth gonna stop him.”

To my intense relief, the dog was nowhere to be found when we arrived at the airport’s long-term parking lot. This did not prevent Quist from putting on a show. “Here boy!” he cried, facing first this way, then that. His voice echoed and boomed off the dirty gray beams of the concrete garage. “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Passing through airport security took an unexpectedly long time, as Quist had brought all manner of prohibited objects with him: a penknife, a twelve-ounce bottle of shampoo and a Leatherman tool so elaborate that it was a wonder it didn’t come equipped with a mini-bar. The very patient TSA supervisor explained that all these items could be mailed back to Shelter From the Storm, but Quist fussed and argued in that alpha male way of his for fifteen minutes before surrendering.

“Who pays postage?” he demanded.

The TSA man gritted his teeth. “Santa Claus.”

I’d booked Quist an aisle seat in the center section, which turned out to be a wise move. We were on a 767, luxurious as such things went, but we weren’t anywhere close to first class, and I caught the occasional chemical hint of industrial soap from the lavatory as I stowed (on tiptoe) my carry-on. Quist never once offered to help, and only put his bag up once mine was in place. I’ll admit, of course that his was the more important of the two: his contained the skates, which TSA had allowed only after I’d pulled my “I’m-a-man-of-the-cloth” card and used every placating trick in my considerable arsenal.

With a grunt, Quist finally settled into his too-small seat. “So how much more was first class, anyway?”

His eyebrows rose in a very gratifying way when I told him. “Got it,” he said, and then he squirmed this way and that, trying to get comfortable. I dodged his elbows and prayed the chair on my right

would be filled by a ballerina or a midget.

On time for once, the plane taxied slowly toward the runway. Each time the public address system came on, Quist startled. When a flight attendant paused by us, Quist immediately asked for whiskey, neat. The woman, all solid German features and dishwater hair, smiled kindly. "I'm sorry," she said, her accent strictly Stateside, "but we can't serve drinks until we've taken off. I just wanted to remind you to put on your seatbelt."

As the flight attendant retreated, a bell went off in my head. "Dale," I said, "you've never flown before."

The engines roared to life as I spoke. Quist scrunched himself higher in his chair and stared wildly across the aisle toward a window. "'Course I've never flown," he said. "Do you see wings on me? Feathers?"

"You should have told me."

"Why? So you could lord it over me? I've traveled plenty on the ground, let me tell you."

"Have you ever been out of the country?"

"'Course I been out of the country."

"Where?"

He swallowed as the plane swung around, nose toward the runway's end. "Well," he ventured, "I've been to Tijuana."

"Really? I never got there. What's it like?"

The 767 shot down the concrete; even Quist was pressed back in his seat. His hands held fast to the armrests, clamped for dear life. The blood drained from his face so fast, it looked as if he'd been doused with bleach.

"Dale," I said, my voice low and earnest as we jounced along. "This is the worst part, right here, and I'm trying to help you through it. Answer me."

"What? What was the question?"

The nose of the plane tipped up. Quist let out a groan.

"Come on," I said. "Tell me about Tijuana."

"I can't!" he yelped. "I was so damn drunk, I don't remember going, I don't remember being there and I sure as hell don't remember leaving!"

"Oh. Then how do you know you were there?"

He favored me with a hot glare. "The buddies I went with told me. So there's that. That and the three tattoos that I can't otherwise explain."

He suddenly looked so sheepish that I burst out laughing. Clapping a hand over his arm—Good Lord, but that man has biceps—I said, "Dale, I'm proud of you. You got through takeoff. We're airborne."

Quist, with a long, tired exhalation, deflated. "When do they bring the whiskey?"

The flight went smoothly until just south of Greenland, that fabulously misnamed sheet of rock and retreating ice. The moon was up, and every so often, even with all the people blocking my way, I could catch a glimpse of the plane's silver wings sliding through the frigid, transatlantic air. Most of the passengers, Quist included, had drifted off to sleep. In his lap, his big hands gently enfolded the remains of his second helping of Jack Daniel's. A movie, something involving car chases, had just ended on the many tiny screens, and the credits were rolling. The woman to my right—not a ballerina but not so large as to spill out of her seat—was snoring softly, a copy of a Hebrew Bible splayed face down across her stomach.

For my part, I'd taken refuge in an iPhone playlist of Yoruba trance drumming, but the last track

had finally played out, and as I drifted in its polyrhythmic afterglow, a new sound caught my attention, a rolling series of gasps and cries, distant at first, but growing both closer and louder. The sounds seemed to be coming from behind me. I plucked out my ear buds and swiveled in my seat.

Padding up the aisle like some great black barge was the enormous dog, looking, if anything, larger than before. It was on its way from the rear of the plane some ten rows back, and as each new section of passengers became aware of it, people were all but scrambling away.

I could hardly blame them. No one expects to see a dog on a plane, especially a dog standing three feet high at the shoulder, a height that left its head well above the armrests. Had it chosen to take a snap at someone with those prodigious, weighty jaws, they would likely have lost the use of whatever body part the dog got hold of.

Unlike my fellow travelers, I had no fear the dog would bite. It had lived at Shelter From the Storm for the two weeks that Quist quartered the skates and hadn't bothered a soul, not even Quist, who generally loathes dogs. Was I surprised to see it? Certainly—but then, it made sense. The skates were on the plane, too.

The dog arrived at our row and stopped. It peered first at the overhead compartments and then across Quist's lap at me. Its dark, gel-wet eyes were trusting, almost amused.

"Shoo," I told it, suddenly worried that if I didn't find a way to get rid of it, it would follow the skates straight to customs, where we would surely be turned back. "Go away."

The dog opened its mouth a little wider, hesitated, then let out a single heavy-chested bark.

Pandemonium on an aircraft is probably never a pretty thing. It's certainly an experience I don't need to go through twice. That dog's bark had passengers screaming bloody murder for as far as the eye could see, some of them panicked more by their neighbors than by the bark. The woman to my right awoke with such a start that she threw her Bible off her lap; it flew over the seats ahead of us, hit a bald man on the head and disappeared. To my left, Quist's eyes popped open and he tried immediately to stand. The seatbelt, which he'd insisted on wearing even though the "Fasten Seat Belts" sign had long since been turned off, slammed him right back down again.

"Reverend!" he yelled. "You brought the dog?"

People were escaping into distant parts of the plane by stepping on the laps of their seatmates. Someone opened an overhead bin, perhaps to locate a weapon, and everything in it tumbled out in a heap. Two flight attendants, attempting to claw their way through the crowd, were actually borne backward and disappeared temporarily behind a bulkhead.

"Dale," I snapped, "you know perfectly well I didn't bring the dog."

"Damn skates," Quist snarled. His fingers worked at the seatbelt buckle. "You know what? If it wants the damn things so much, fine. Let's give 'em over."

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm giving the dog the skates!"

Quist rose to his feet, slammed his head on the overhead bin and swung out into the aisle, shouldering people out of his way as easily as if he'd had practice at it—which, given his history as a linebacker, I suppose he probably had. In the midst of that comic sea of shrieking, frantic people, Quist planted his feet, held his ground and got the latch open. He hauled out his bag and dumped it like a boulder onto his seat, where he and I both scrabbled at the zippers.

He got there first, and with a triumphant cry of "Gotcha!" he dragged out the canvas sack in which we'd packed the skates. But when he turned to offer them, the dog—clever thing—was nowhere in sight.

It took the flight attendants more than an hour to bring the cabin back to some semblance of calm,

to dispense the necessary free drinks, to listen to everyone's (mostly inaccurate) tales of the melee. We learned later that the pilots had considered diverting to Reykjavik in order to quell "a business-class riot".

Of course we were questioned, since a good many of our neighbors had heard enough of our conversation to guess that we knew more about our erstwhile visitor than anyone else aboard, but we both denied all culpability until we were blue in the face. The same flight attendant who had first asked Quist to buckle up did the bulk of the questioning, and the more we stonewalled, the angrier she became. Her lips flattened out until they disappeared into her mouth; her eyes narrowed to cat-like slits.

"Gentlemen," she spat, "you do realize you cannot bring unauthorized dogs onto the plane."

Now Dale Quist can be a charmer, when he wants to be. His honeyed baritone reminds me of Hoyt Axton, and he's got a Marlboro Man look that's led at least two of my parishioners—and how I know this is strictly between me and my God—straight into his bed. But, like most of us, he has a flip side, and that flight attendant had finally pushed his buttons.

"Ma'am," he said, with a defiant flash, "I'll swear on anything you like that we did not bring a dog on the plane."

"Is that a fact?"

"It is, and I'll tell you what, you sure as hell don't know me well enough to call me a liar—"

"Oh, don't I now—"

"—but if you'd like to get that kind of personal, then I suggest you shut your trap and get me my next whiskey so I can relax enough to enjoy your fine company. Do you copy, Little Debbie?"

So much for politically correct behavior on transnational flights.

"Sure thing, smart guy," she said. "I copy. But I know you're lying"—and here she threw a glance at me for good measure—"and I hope to God neither of you has a wife or a girlfriend, because frankly women deserve better."

For the rest of the flight, Quist was wide awake. Being smack in the middle of an aerial rugby scrum had lifted his spirits no end. All fears of flying vanished, to be replaced by a voluble, talkative mood that didn't let up until we'd taxied to a Heathrow gate. Blinking back my own exhaustion, I learned more about him in those three hours than in all our previous associations combined: his growing up on the grassland plateau above the Anza-Borrego desert, his days on a sports scholarship at the University of Texas and his twin careers in Los Angeles, first as a repo man, then as a private investigator.

"There was this one case," he began, just as the plane finally shuddered to a stop, allowing for the flight attendants to babble inanities about "cross-checking". "The one where I..."

I glanced over. His mouth was still working, as if he were chewing his way through a meal's worth of wrong turns just to find the right words.

"I wasn't always like this," he said at last. "You know. 'Sensitized'. Until this one case..."

"How about later?" I asked brightly. Everyone around us had risen to their feet, pressing toward the aisles. "Let's get out of here before our favorite pooch decides to check up on us again."

"I *knew* it," said the woman to my right. "I just *knew* you had something to do with it."

Quist rose slowly, like some huge toppled redwood reversing its fall. "Lady," he said, "eat my shorts."

We cleared customs and recovered Quist's enormous checked suitcase by eight in the morning. Outside, in line for the sluggish queue of taxis, it was a beautiful day, almost a mimic of the sunny weather we'd left in Michigan. I perked up immediately, excited that here I was in London for the first

time in eight years, and it wasn't raining.

Quist, however, was flagging. "Coffee," he murmured. "Coffee and bed."

"We need to do what we came here to do."

"Yeah. After coffee and sleeping."

My plan had always been to proceed directly from the airport to Regent's Park—"to get the dangerous part over with," as I'd put it back in Traverse City—but thanks to Quist's enormous and entirely unnecessary suitcase, that course now seemed impractical. I had made reservations at the Hotel Gawaine, not far from the park, and that is where we instructed our taxi to take us. The driver, from Congo, knew the place well. "Yes," he said, in his broad, Lingala-inflected British, "you will love it. All the college kids stay there for visits. The party does not stop."

Quist shot me a look intended to kill. I sighed and looked out the window. So much for Internet reviews.

By late afternoon, we had both slept and managed a pub-fare meal at the Allsop Arms. The Gawaine was just a block off of Baker Street, but Quist, as we walked north toward Regent's Park, seemed much more interested in the fact that had Sherlock Holmes' Baker Street Irregulars been active today they would have been racing around the formal lawns of the London Business School or—much worse, to his mind—the columnar minaret and fat golden dome of the adjacent Central London Mosque.

"Ridiculous," Quist muttered, as a woman with a headscarf and two baby girls in a double stroller pushed past us. "Why can't people stay in one place?"

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "At least two of your ancestors knew better than to fall for that question."

"The world had more room then," said Quist, unperturbed. "I don't care which culture these people come from—although sure, if push comes to shove, Islam's not my style. What I'm talking about is that this island, this England place, it's the size of a postage stamp. Only just so much room, you know?"

"Maybe," I said, "everyone should move to Michigan."

"Dammit, Reverend, why the hell can't you have the decency, just once, to concede that I might have a point?"

As I've said, conceding anything to Dale Quist is an eventuality to be avoided at all costs. Nor had he made any concessions himself—to his surroundings, for example. Here he was, on the far side of an ocean for the first time, and he was as incurious about the place as if he were at home, trolling Home Depot for drywall screws or paint thinner. Just crossing into Regent's Park over the Outer Circle Drive was an entirely foreign experience: we traversed a zebra crossing, avoided a lorry driving (of course) on the left, and when we altered our path to give way to a cyclist, she saluted and said, "Cheers!"

Did Quist comment, make any remark? No.

Perhaps I'm being too harsh. He had the skates, after all, and I could see he was tense, his eyes scanning every direction at once.

"What's wrong?" I asked, as we broke through a thin line of trees and came onto the wide, sloping lawn that led down to the Boating Lake.

"You know. I'm just wishing I had my gun."

On past London visits, I'd been to Hyde Park and Hampstead Heath, but I had never set foot in Regent's Park. I now regretted my oversight. Bordered by emerald grass and verdant trees, the Boating Lake, at least on such a lovely day, was an urban Garden of Eden, wanting only for a menagerie of happy, lazy animals to complete the picture. There were certainly plenty of idle, lazy people. Some la

reclined on beach towels, soaking up the rare British sun; more active folk, pedestrians and joggers, crisscrossed the landscape in all directions. Those on the lake potttered around on teal-colored two-seater paddleboats, pushing gamely with their feet and making sloshing sounds as they bulled through the water.

“So,” said Dale, “is this where I take out the skates?”

I nodded.

“And we just...throw them in?”

I had done a fair amount of research into Church of England eulogies, burials and funerals, but all of these had seemed inextricably linked to place, and out in broad daylight like this, far from the cloistered quarters of a chapel or the subdivided plots of a cemetery, none of them felt right. So I nodded again and said, “Dale, I want you to pitch those skates just as far into the lake as you can.”

“And what happens if you jump in and start swimming after them?”

“If that happens, my friend, you are twice my size. Tackle me and sit on me until the need passes.”

“Tackle you and sit on you.”

“Yes.”

Quist shook his big head in wonderment. “You have no idea how hard it is not to do that just for the hell of it.”

He reached into the canvas bag and withdrew the skates. I certainly felt compelled to stare, but I did not, blessedly, discover any urge to clamp them to my feet, race to the water and hurl myself in. What I did feel, however, was perhaps worse, a kind of rising static in the air, a sudden chill. The sunlight dimmed; the temperature dropped.

“Reverend? Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

Out on the lake, out on the ice—for it was ice now, ice atop rippled sunny water, as if winter had established itself as an overlay—a quartet of men skated into view. Their dark green uniforms and round, shiny black hats reminded me of hotel doormen, but after watching them clamber to the bank and take up long wood-handled tools that looked for all the world like pole-arms, I concluded they must be groundskeepers.

As to the question of whether anyone else was being treated to this scene, I forced myself to glance right toward two nearby sunbathers lolling on matching lime-green towels. Even as I shivered, the closer of the two women scrunched her shorts still farther up her legs, to a positively indecent degree. No question, then, that the spectacle on the lake was for Quist’s and my eyes alone.

“What,” I whispered, looking back at the men below, “are they doing?”

“Breaking the ice,” breathed Quist.

And so they were. Along the shore they moved, smashing up the ice with their metal-tipped poles. The sun was very low on the horizon, weak and faint. Puffs of chilly breath gusted from the men as they punched and stabbed at the ice. In their wake, a family of ducks appeared—in the most ghostly manner imaginable—and, quacking happily, they settled into the newly available water and took up dabbling.

We heard a single loud *crack*, different from the glassy crashing noises made by the groundskeepers. They heard it too, and stopped as one in their work. I saw no difference in the sheet of ice before us, but the sound seemed clear enough in its source—the groundskeepers, in their enthusiasm to give the ducks a wintry swimming hole, had fractured the larger ice field beyond. Invisibly. Treacherously.

In an instant, the sun was higher and the groundskeepers were gone, replaced all across the snow-dusted ice by skaters. First one, then several pairs, then dozens, perhaps hundreds. All wore Victorian

clothes, with long dresses for the women, the sleeves of the richer ones ruffed with black fur, and the men in coats that flared in a curve to the backs of their knees. Round and round they went, this way and that. A young man pushed a much older woman on what looked like nothing more than a household chair, the chair's feet serving as skates. Twenty or so scrubby-looking urchins had set up two tin buckets for a goal, and were sliding their way through what I suppose was a primitive game of hockey. Two London bobbies glided in tandem through the throng, their brass buttons gleaming, their midnight blue helmets anchored by chinstraps.

Beside me, I felt more than saw a shape approaching. I looked down and was not especially surprised to see the huge black dog trotting to my side. It licked my hand with a tongue like rough Canadian bacon, then sat down and stared intently at the lake.

At my opposite shoulder, Quist cleared his throat. "Seems like we oughta try and warn them."

His words held all the conviction of wet laundry. He knew just as well as I that this scene had transpired more than a century ago, that we were simply rubber-necked tourists, helpless to change history's tides. And if we did start yelling out warnings? We'd frighten a bevy of perfectly innocent, present-day Londoners; the modern police would likely throw us out of the park for our trouble.

So we watched, tensing slowly, our breathing growing more shallow, our fingers alternately clenching and releasing. It was like viewing the most excruciating of horror films, the kind where every moment of delay and digression only adds to the unbearable dread of the carnage that you know for a fact is coming. The oblivious skaters were chattering and laughing, cold but delighted to be out and active, pleased to be making sport of the otherwise interminable British winter. One woman slipped and fell, landing hard on her backside. Her pop-eyed look of pained surprise became, in an instant, a belly laugh so infectious that a dozen people around her, most of them strangers, were immediately laughing with her. In the distance, an impromptu ice-top choir had formed, singing "Silent Night" in chilly, crystalline harmony.

Without warning, we heard a second *crack*, louder than the first, a brittle fracturing that fed on itself in a series of rapid-fire pops that exploded from one side of the lake to the other in an almost visible line. The skaters teetered, wobbled, shot questioning looks at the ice and each other. Before they could do more, the ice sheet shuddered as if it had been dropped from a great height. Then, with noise like all the world's icicles snapping at once, fissures and lines shot through the ice in every direction until it resembled a windshield cracked not in one place, but in hundreds. All across the lake the skaters, as one, screamed.

The first to go under were those halfway to the shore. The ice they were pushing across upended in jagged sections, flipping the skaters into the water with alarming speed. One man actually disappeared entirely as the ice he was on tipped and dunked him, then closed above like a manhole cover.

Despite myself, I started forward. Quist stopped me. He seized my shoulder with a huge hand and rumbled a warning. The dog, too, rose, but it stayed by my side. It cocked its head, shook itself and let out a thin, troubled whine.

The panic on the ice had spread to all quarters. From the shore, people splashed into the shallows, straining to help those in reach, but the lake was deceptively deep, and anyone ten feet from the edge was in water over their heads. The skaters struggled and kicked, but their heavy winter clothes and the metal of their skates conspired against them. I could almost feel the cold seeping into their bones, stiffening their joints and freezing their fingers. Those that clung to the hunks of floating, rocking ice began to lose their grip. Those that were swimming were going under.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," muttered Quist, next to me. "Do we have to watch this?"

"Close your eyes," I said. "Close your eyes."

But neither of us could manage that. The chaos on the lake was reaching a fever pitch. The shrieks and wails, the cries for help, the sloshing of people lurching through the shallows, together with the more ominous sounds of deeper water churning between heavy chunks of ice, the sight of all those confident skaters reduced to pathetic, flailing swimmers—it was all too much. Before I knew what I was doing, I broke from Quist’s grasp, stepped slightly to the side to get a better angle and punched Quist as hard as I could right in the tallywhacker.

Eyes wide like a startled horse, Quist let out a terrific yelping grunt. Me, I made a grab for the skates.

“Hey!” he gasped, in what I’m sure he meant to be a roar. “What are you doin’?”

Sprinting for the lake, that’s what I was doing. The screams of those already on the ice or in the water were suddenly no deterrent at all—it was a beautiful day for ice skating, and I was not going to waste another moment on shore.

Quist was hot on my heels, of course. Even so, he would not have caught me but for the fact that I had to stop and sit down to get the skates on my feet, so in no time, there he was. He made a couple of grabs for the skates, and I fended him off for a moment, but he was too big for me, and with a solid yank, he snatched the left-hand skate out of my grasp.

“Give that back!” I cried, very indignant. “Get your own, if you want them so badly.”

“Reverend, so help me, you are not goin’ near that water.”

“Of course I am. Give me that skate.”

It was very odd—I knew I was speaking, but the words didn’t seem to be mine. On the ice, the panic continued. Heroic men, heedless of hypothermia, were throwing themselves into the choppy water, trying to strike out and swim to rescue others; the police were arriving in droves on the far shore; the smallest of the urchin hockey players was clinging desperately to a goalpost bucket, but it kept rolling over, betraying him again and again.

“Reverend,” Quist said, my skate dangling in his grip, “you remember I told you I’d sit on you if I had to? Well, I’m about ready to do it.”

“But, Arthur,” I said, as if that were the most natural name by which to address him, “I thought you were joining me!”

“Arthur? Who the fuck is Arthur?”

I was feeling exceptionally muzzy, as if I’d just awoken from a hot midday nap. Nonetheless, with my first skate clamped firmly on, I stretched out my hand, asking again for the other.

Quist backed away. “Not on your life.”

The dog arrived and nuzzled at my neck, almost pushing me over. An especially high, tremulous wail drifted from somewhere across the lake, and nearby, a woman was screaming repeatedly, “My husband, my husband, somebody help my husband!” I was aware of these things, yet entirely oblivious in any practical sense. All I knew was my consuming desire to skate.

“Very well,” I said, lurching to my feet and trying to disentangle myself from the dog, “I shall skate one-footed. I shall look ridiculous and I shall likely fall, but if you insist on being an obdurate boor, then one-footed it shall have to be.”

“Reverend, if you take one more step...”

I ignored Arthur—full name Arthur Cunningham, a barrister at a firm quite near to mine—and set off with a lurching gait toward the ice.

The next thing I knew, I was down—face-down on the lawn—with Arthur on top of me. I kicked and I struggled, but there was so much mayhem all around me, I’m sure no one noticed. Certainly Arthur—Quist—whoever—was not put off. Despite my pleas to let me go, he caught me around the

waist, flung his legs over my torso and wrenched off my skate. In another moment, he'd leaped to his feet and hurled the skates in a great arc out into the middle of the lake.

The dog let out a terrible bawl, then bounded straight over me in pursuit of the soaring skates. As the skates hit the water, so, too, did the dog, and it crashed through the icebergs, swimming with real power toward the spot where the skates had gone under, bawling as it went.

All at once, the scene changed. The skaters and rescuers vanished, all but one. In the center of the lake, at the same point where Quist had hurled the skates, a single figure was struggling to clamber atop a ragged section of ice. Blond-haired and bare-headed, he was clearly nearing exhaustion, and he tried waving one arm in a piteous attempt to summon help. The dog, closing by the moment, was still at least thirty yards away, with multiple sections of floating ice to navigate before he could reach his master.

With a last effort, the man tried to drag more of his body out of the water, but the ice he clung to suddenly burst down the middle, and the man, with a shivering cry, slid between the pieces and sank.

All across the lake, the ice disappeared. Quist and I stood again on a sunny June day in modern Regent's Park, watching the shimmery, sky-flecked water. The dog, however, remained. It was still swimming, shoving itself through the water toward the lake's very center.

"Reverend?"

I ignored him, my eyes on the dog. Having reached the middle of the lake, it swam in a tight, concentric circle, glanced once in our direction, then dove like an otter for the bottom. The water closed over its head, then its shoulders; for an instant, I could just see its tail. And then it was gone.

"Reverend, I'm talkin' to you."

"Yes? What?"

"I swear to Christ, if you ever mess with my crown jewels again..."

I blinked at him stupidly. "Your crown jewels?" I said. "What on earth would I want with those?"

Out on the water, a fat brown mother duck led a line of fuzzy, half-grown ducklings from a sheltered cove along the shore, guiding them with encouraging quacks into deeper water. For a moment, I could almost believe it was winter again, and that some helpful soul might just take it into his head to break some ice, to keep the water open for the mother duck and her family. It would be a kind thing to do, yes? Kind and good and decent, free of repercussions. What could be simpler?

In the end, over Quist's many objections, we stayed five more days. I forced him to Tate Britain to see the Turner collection. I dragged him to the National Gallery to see Van Eyck's tiny, perfect wedding portrait. I all but kidnapped him for a tour of the Globe. Quist repaid me by stopping at every pub we passed, where he sampled, at length, every available beer while moaning bitterly that "the food Limeys" had yet to discover refrigeration.

While we were certainly not ideal traveling companions, to say the trip was unpleasant would be false. The Lord, it is said, works in mysterious ways, and I will vouch, to my own surprise, that we left the Albion Isle as something we were not when we arrived: friends.

Once back in Traverse City, my life returned, as all lives must after travel and adventure, to what passes, in my profession, for normalcy. But I would be remiss in my reportage if I did not mention a call I received some six months later, in the dead of dark December, from the otherwise absent Dale Quist.

"Reverend!" he began, cheery as a puffed-up robin in spring. "You'll never guess who I met in line at the bank this morning. Actually, I didn't get her name. Older woman, hair like steel wool. Anyway

we got to talking about this and that—helluva line they had today, helluva line—and she suddenly goes all weepy. Tears flyin’ out of her eyes. I say, ‘Ma’am, what’s the matter?’ and she says, ‘I lost my dog.’ Next thing I know, she’s tellin’ me all about her dog, her big, black dog with a huge head and big paws. A hound-dog mutt that lived with her family for—now get this—eighty fucking years.”

“Dale, please.”

“No, I know, pardon my French. But here’s the kicker. The dog up and vanished this past June, on the same day as this woman had a garage sale. Eighty years, she said. The dog lived through three generations of her family. I said, ‘That’s a mighty long life for a dog,’ and she says, ‘Oh, I know—around the neighbors and the vets, they never believed me, they just figured we kept having puppies, but that wasn’t it, see? He was like a fixture. And where we got him? England. He came over with my grandfather after a trip, see? I always loved to think of it. My dog, sailing on board the Queen Mary.’”

“I said, ‘Ma’am, if you don’t mind my asking, what was his name?’ and she gets a misty look in her eye and says, ‘Prince Regent. Silly name for a dog, I suppose, but it fit him. Anyway, he’s gone now. I suppose it was just his time.’ Poor woman. Once we got through at the bank, I walked her over to Amical and bought her lunch. I know I didn’t fix her life or nothin’, but I think it kind of cheered her up, don’t you think?”

I assured him that it had, and after we hung up, I returned to the business of composing my next sermon, newly secure in the knowledge that for friends and strangers alike, it remains ever true: *every contact leaves a trace.*

About the Author

Mark Rigney is the author of numerous plays, including *Ten Red Kings* and *Acts of God* (both available from Playscripts, Inc.) as well as *Bears*, winner of the 2012 Panowski Playwriting Competition. His short fiction appears in *Witness*, *Black Gate*, *The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Long Story*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and *Black Static*, among many others. Two collections of his stories are available through Amazon, *Flights of Fantasy*, and *Reality Checks*, and a previous Renner & Quist adventure may be found in *Not One Of Us*, Issue 48, 2012. His website, including links and contact information, is www.markrigney.net.

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