

# Walking on Water

By Janette Turner Hospital

In places where the wind had flayed the snow into fantastic waves, they would come upon barrens of black ice, smooth as agate. Earth's vital fluids, seen through a glass darkly. And sometimes fish with startled gills, who had surfaced too close to the edge of winter, would stare at them out of the clear ebony.

Poor things, Gillian would think, cupping her leather mitts and calling to the others. "Another one! Here's another frozen fish!" Only the suggestion of her shouting would reach them, an intimation of being hailed, her voice flaking and blowing in a thousand directions. Her husband and children would pause and turn, stamping feet laced into heavy mukluks, pounding out on the frozen lake a weird basso counterpoint to the coloratura shrieks of wind. They were anxious to keep moving, to get it over with, but she refused to let them treat the crossing in this grimly dutiful way. She insisted it be memorable, an *occasion*: enjoy yourselves! Savour these extraordinary and freakish sights!

On the line of her will she reeled them in, and reluctantly they turned back, sighing into their scarves but obedient, crouching beside her on the ice and feigning an interest in snap-frozen smelts.

"See!" She had to shout above the wind. "It's mouth is open. It was so sudden."

"His death of cold!" Allison's words came to them in a blather of snow so that the sound stung their cheeks. "You could *say*"—she gasped as the air scoured her lungs—"he caught his death of cold."

Gillian laughed and hugged her younger child for the act of cooperation, for the conscientious effort to wring pleasure from February. She glanced at her son, but James merely frowned and cradled his mittened hands under his armpits. Gillian averted her eyes quickly in case he saw the begging in them.

Of course it was no laughing matter, this instant glaciation. It happened, they knew only too well, to people too. There were local faces cratered into braille records of unplanned exposures (the car stalled in a blizzard; the cross-country skier stranded with a broken ski); a nose, an ear, even lips lost to frostbite. And the boy in a snowbank just a few weeks ago, found smiling in a sleep from which he would never waken.

It was not a climate that made allowances for human error. James was staring back at the fish with spooked and sombre eyes. Suddenly, scooping up handfuls of snow from a baroquely curlicued drift, he brushed a shroud over the tiny death suspended like an air bubble between winter and spring. His movements were quick and unconscious, small acts of instinctive decency.

His father intimated, though not by squandering breath and body heat on words, that they should keep moving.

Cats, Gillian knew, forgot their progenitors entirely and mated with them. Birds left the nest to find private slipstreams. Every parent knew that high school was a country of aliens, but James was not quite 15 and how could it be happening already? And if he had to leave, why the rush? Why in the dead of winter, when planes skewed themselves on icy runways and fell out of the sky with a full cargo of deaths, splattering across the front pages of newspapers? Why now? California would keep until summer. Or at least until spring.

All this had been said, of course.

"I'll be *back* by spring," James would point out. "And you can phone me any day of the week."

What objection could possibly be made to his spending half a term in a California high school, living with her own brother and his family?

She could not say: There is something about the suddenness of this arrangement that makes me uneasy.

She could not say: The driving is bad; you might be killed between here and Toronto. There will be ice on the wings of

your plane; you might not survive takeoff. Or landing: there is nearly always fog over Los Angeles, and the flight patterns are too heavy, and what confidence can one place in substitute air-traffic controllers?

She could not say: I am overwhelmed by the fragility of human life, my children's in particular. I fear this first separation as I would fear amputation. What if you never come back? What if you come back a stranger?

"Why do you want to leave home?"

"*Leave home?*" He would echo the words with a lift of the eyebrows. As if he were an exasperated language teacher who found her misuse of idiom shoddily unacceptable. "Six weeks is leaving home?"

Well then. At least they would keep this family rite before he went. She had insisted, although they all thought it slightly foolish of her. One of her eccentricities, the annual lake-hike.

"My wife has a thing about ritual," Bill would tease at parties. "She thinks it will work like a witch doctor's charm. The family that performs secret ceremonies together stays together."

"Very funny," she would say, flushing.

But were not these the events that glued their years together? When, inevitably, they moved on again, when the time came for them to ask, "How many years did we live in that place, that cold place on the lake?" then an answer would come: "For three winter crossings." Or four. Or whatever it turned out to be. Remember how the wind...? they would ask. And the way the fish...? Nostalgia would warm them like an old blanket smelling of past happiness.

It was not even seriously cold, given the month and place: only 5 below, no more than 20 below with the windchill factor. Choosing the right day was an art: far enough into winter for the ice to be safely thick, yet not so bitter a day that exposure was deadly. She thought of the crossing as interestingly arduous.

And so would the others by tomorrow. *Walked across Lake Ontario*, they would say casually at office coffee-break and in the school cafeteria. *As far as Wolfe Island anyway*—sheepishly, self-deprecatingly, as if admitting to reading comic books or watching *Lassie* reruns. *Walked to the U.S.A.* They would bask in the murmur of tribute, yet next winter would demand again: "Do we *really* need..."

"Please," she would cajole.

And annually they would humour her, enjoying mainly the feat accomplished.

She, drunk perhaps on the profligacy of oxygen that barreled along the Great Lakes from prairies to ocean, had always felt a taut hum of exultation above the pained protest of her body.

Below us, she would think, where the sluggish lower currents buffet the lake silt, there is French gold stamped with the image of Bourbon kings and lost since the days of Cartier and Frontenac. Below us are greedy fathoms that have swallowed ships and men and centuries. Here and there, stirring like sleepers far below our padded boots, lie American and British gunboats that foundered in 1812, and Iroquois canoes slicked with algae, and snowmobiles that skated on the margins of last year's thaw.

The thrill of the anomalous had become an annual addiction. Walking on water. Walking on history.

And walking south—toward the sun and the countries of their past.

She turned to look at the town they had left. Domed and spired and provincial, a huddle of pretentious limestone, it leaned back from the lakeshore as prissily as a society matron testing the waters with a well-manicured toe. Smugness rose from its streets in a fog of steam.

It seemed very distant now. It had nothing to do with them.

*This* defines us, she thought. This no-man's-land, this mere crust of hardened water temporary as a few weeks of winter, this dissolving border between nations—in both of which we have lived, and on three other continents besides. This is where, if anywhere, we belong—trekking over the bones of other wanderers, French explorers and Indian scouts, the

flotsam of history. We are of that new tribe, the 20th-century nomads, who live where rarefied specializations and high technologies demand, transitory as the glaze on the lake. We have passports, but where is home?

The symbols of our culture are airports and transit lounges. Our independence is so stunning that we dream of trees doing headstands on water, their roots trailing into the sky like seaweed. And therefore this walk across the lake is our Christmas and our Hanukkah and our Thanksgiving and our Fourth of July.

She would have liked to join hands with her husband and children, to form a magic circle and offer incantations: Here we four are, solitary between border posts, held by a wafer of ice between the empty sky and the unstable bowels of earth. We have each other and the memories we have told and retold, meting them out to ourselves like a lifeline.

If she could have said that, they would all be safe. Then James would change his mind, postponing experiments and adulthood.

James had invented a private term for the way things were: penalty-shot time. There were only seconds of play left, packed stands, a tied score, and he in the hot spot with the ball in his hands. Everything depended on his getting a basket.

Each morning when he woke he thought: this could be it, and the end of the game. And he would pull the sheet up over his eyes to block out Stuart's face smiling blue and mournful from its snowdrift.

It's so unfair, so crazy, he would rage silently to his ceiling. Why me? I scarcely knew the guy. Why should I have to be one of the last to see him alive? And by such a fluke, by such bizarre chance.

James had discovered randomness and found it totally, obscenely unacceptable.

Benched for five minutes, he had made for the water fountain in the lobby. Just for a sip, to moisten his salty mouth, to recharge himself for the last quarter of a hard night's game against their archrivals.

And that was where he and Stuart—a kid he knew only from his science class—had had their last conversation. "You can't come in," two senior girls were saying. "School rule, and you know it perfectly well. You're drunk." "Am not!" Stuart protested angrily. "Am shertainly not! Hey James! Tell th' ladies here I'm poziv-ityly not...?" He leaned over the desk in front of the girls and laid his head gently on the small metal box full of dollar bills and closed his eyes. "We'll get the bouncers," one girl said. "He'll be okay." James knew him only as the quiet kid four desks away in science, an A student, diligent and shy. Not the athletic type at all. "You won't need a bouncer. He's not the type. I know him." "Oh man," Stuart groaned, sliding onto the floor. "Not my day, James. Definitely not my day. C'mon ladies, lemme into the warm. 'Sbeen a rotten day."

He was groping for something by which to pull himself up and clasped the leg of one of the girls. She gave a shriek of shock and anger and signaled the bouncer, who hailed one of the taxis outside the gym. When the doors opened, the icy air rushed in like a brace of linebackers. Stuart glanced back at them all and laughed and made a defiant sign with his finger. Disturbed, James hesitated, entertained fleetingly the thought of pulling team player's rank, of insisting Stuart be allowed in. Then he went back inside to the game and instantly forgot about the boy in the lobby. Which was like forgetting the ball in your hands during a penalty shot in the last second of play.

Afterward he thought: If I had insisted they let him in...If I had been there when he told the driver: "This will be okay, I'll walk from here. Cold air will sober me up. Wouldn't want my mom to see me like this." If I had walked with him by the lake...If I had been there to shake him when he lay down drowsy in the snow...

*Hypothermia.* It was a word that had fastened itself onto his consciousness like excess baggage. He dragged it through waking and sleeping. And at night in the dark, after all the other questions, shameful thoughts would surface. If I had gone to the water fountain just five minutes earlier. Or five minutes later. If I had been in a different science section this

year. Then it would have nothing to do with me at all. Nothing at all. And then he would begin to get angry. (But at whom?) Why me? he would demand. Why should I feel so guilty? Where were Stuart's friends, why didn't *they*...How could he, James, possibly be held responsible? How could he *not* be responsible?

He knew now that death was not just something that happened to other people in newspapers. It waited like a spider on the wall of his 14 years, velvety watching, malevolent. Every day, every waking moment bristled with dangers, anything was possible. In another second, perhaps, the lake ice would yawn open beneath their feet and they would sway rigid in their deaths till spring, gaping like the fish. On any day his parents might say: we are getting divorced; we are moving to China; you will have to change schools; you will have to change languages—your father has been transferred to Germany. Tomorrow a policeman might knock on his door: an accident, your parents and sister, you are all alone. What would he do if he were suddenly all alone? He had lived in five countries. Which was home? Who would take him in?

He hardly knew the grandparents who lived beyond an ocean, or the uncle and aunt and cousins in California. In sleep he stumbled over Stuart, lost his hold on the certainties of each day, careened through unknown places, down, down. Free-falling through Himalayan abysses, past the tundra layers, past the steaming tropical strata of other years of his life, past empty spaces into a dark nothingness. But then. He had pulled a cord at his chest, and a silken parachute had bellied into the wind and snagged itself on a way station, an explorer's cabin. Yes, he thought waking. I need safety devices, I need way stations. And he had written to his uncle and aunt in California, ports in a storm. He would establish a chain of defences, he would be prepared. He applied himself with a sort of pleasurable savagery to the walk across the lake. If the ice held them up this time, if the wind did not shroud their still bodies with snow on this crossing, it would be like an immunization. A small and salvific draft of risk that might ward off greater dangers.

In the restaurant on the island, they drank hot chocolate and decided to go back by ferry from the dock two kilometres farther down. Enough was enough. A point had been made, their eyes were bloodshot, their hands and feet white with pain.

Watching the under-ice cables and pressurized air smash open a channel for the ferry, Gillian said with awe: "When you see how easily it breaks..."

"You *know* that the fishermen can make holes with only a handsaw," James accused. "We could have dropped through like winter bait."

Gillian was stung. "It's not nearly as dangerous as flying at this time of year. *Why* can't you wait until..."

"It's not safe to wait."

"Not *safe* to wait?"

"No one can ever tell when. Don't you see? I have to get used to living without you. We don't even know our own relatives."

What if you and dad were killed? What if you split up...?"

"James, what on earth are you talking about? If we split up?! We have no intention..."

"Yeah. Everyone's parents said that before the divorce."

She was shocked, dumbfounded.

"Is *this* what you ...? Are you actually afraid that we...?"

But now he was red-faced.

"No, no. Sorry, Mom, I'm raving. It's just...I have to feel safer. I'm sorry, I'm just...lately I'm not...It's Stuart's death."

"Stuart?"

"Stuart Anderson."

She squeezed her eyes shut in concentration, and the name surfaced from a newspaper headline.

"That boy who died from exposure! You never said anything. I didn't realize you knew him."

"Only slightly. He was in my science class. I guess it shook me up badly, that's all. I just want to...hedge my bets. I want to know my relatives better. I have to feel safer."

"But James..." She was going to protest that his plane might fall out of the sky. That California was so very far away, that the Los Angeles freeways coiled lethal as snakes through her imagination, that he would be beyond her protective reach.

Instead, she laid her cheek momentarily against his because it came to her that all four of them, tentative as waifs, must walk their own stretches of water.