

The Two Hundred Steps

by Marc Beurteaux

It was a part of the lake that never froze no matter how cold it got. No one set foot on that narrow channel between the mainland and a small private island, not even the keenest ice fishermen or the most daring of midnight ski mobilers. Everyone in town knew to keep off that spot except, that is, for Mitchell Greenwood, the new owner of the island property.

Mitchell or “Mitch” as his friends called him, was an American that bought the property after his early retirement from IBM. What better way to get away from that corporate hell than to buy an island on a lake near the pretty town of Marmora.

This was Mitch’s first winter as a year round resident. He was standing on the shore of the frozen lake looking across to his island property during the first serious cold snap.

Mitch stood there wondering how best to get home. Everyone else in town had skidoos or pickup trucks to cross the frozen lake but Mitch was never quite prepared for the life of an islander. He hadn’t even aquired proper snow tires for his BMW. He thought all- weathers would be fine, but they weren’t, which is why his car had skidded sideways on the road and now lay hood deep in a snow bank.

Luckily he wasn’t too far from his island. He had walked a short distance from his car, bushwacked through some dogwoods and had found himself quite close to the island - only a narrow channel on the lake seperated him from his comfy home.

With night falling, no one around and no cell service thanks to the spotty Bell network, Mitch had no choice but to somehow get back to his island home. Usually he would walk across on thicker ice further up the shore but since his car got stuck he couldn’t be bothered walking all that way.

Now Mitch was no dummy he just didn’t have enough rural experience for this lifestyle. Which is why the locals called him a “cidiot” (city+idiot) behind his back. It wasn’t really his fault, he had just spent too much time in boardrooms and testing facilities for the IBM corporation in numerous cities across the United States. Rarely had he taken holidays. He had never done so much as a canoe trip in the back country, let alone have any Canadian winter experience. But that didn’t stop Mitch from wanting to live on a lake in eastern Ontario.

The first person to warn Mitch not to cross the narrow channel to his property was Gary. Everyone knew Gary, he was a friend to all whether they liked it or not. Gary was that guy. He liked to talk. A lot. To everyone, no matter how busy they were and no matter whether they cared to hear what he had to say. He would discuss politics at church, gossip during a funeral service and tell you all about people you didn’t even know. pg.1

Gary was a born and bred local, and knew the area as good as anyone. He had warned Mitch right at the beginning of freeze up to never cross the narrow channel.

Mitch stood on the shoreline, shivering a little and thinking about a half finished bottle of whisky sitting in his kitchen. All he could think about was going home. However, lurking at the back of his mind was Gary's tobacco-croaked warning.

Mitch started to calculate how long of a walk crossing the channel would be. He stared across the snow covered ice and stepped out the journey in his mind.

It was only, give or take, 200 steps.

He reached for a broken stick of elder poking out of the snow, broke it to a length of about four feet and using this prodded the ice beyond the shore where he stood. The ice was firm. He took a step and brushed some of the snow with his foot. Looking down at the ice he saw thousands of little bubbles encased in the frozen water but it looked thick.

Hell, guys towed their ice fishing huts out to the middle of the lake and no one ever broke through. In fact, no one had fallen through the ice in years according to Gary. Anyways, how deep could the channel be anyway? Even if he did fall through, he could probably pull himself out, people did that all the time.

Gary lived on an island on the lake and he was a huge man - he never fell through. Of course, Gary had a wife who would go first when they crossed the ice on foot. With a rope tied around her waist and the other end of the 20 foot rope held by Gary, he could pull her out if she fell through. Mitch often wondered about the logic of this, being that Gary's wife was half the size of Gary. She could walk over much thinner ice than he. Regardless, they never fell through.

Then there was Gary's son, Tyler, an ox of a man. Tyler had an ingenious way of crossing dangerous ice. He would push his canoe onto the ice and jump into the bow. With an axe in one hand, Tyler would swing the axe as far in front of the canoe as he could. When the axe head cut into the ice and became stuck, Tyler would pull on the axe handle pulling himself and the canoe forward. Repeated about a thousand times, he would slowly cross from his parent's property to the mainland. There was nothing quite as spooky as hearing Tyler's axe smashing into the ice as he pulled himself across the frozen lake on moonless nights.

Lost in thought, Mitch had found himself about halfway across the narrow channel already. Unconsciously he realised he'd been counting the steps and indeed he was about a hundred steps across. He felt elated. This wasn't so bad after all, and anyways what did the locals know? He was an IBM engineer and a Harvard graduate, he knew a thing or two about this world and it's physics.

Then something startled him, he looked down through the ice where the wind swept away the snow and his heart skipped a beat. Looking up at him was the lifeless eye of a deer encased in ice. Mitch froze on the spot, his swift brain realized that if a hundred and fifty pound deer had fallen through recently, then he might be in a spot of trouble.

To make things even eerier, as the temperature dropped and the lake ice contracted with the cold, the sound of the ice cracking from one end of the lake to the other sounded like lasers from a sci fi film. The cracking sound sent vibrations through his feet.

Suddenly Mitch felt very alone.

It was deathly quiet, the wind had dropped, not a sound could be heard, not even a skidoo. Mitch took a deep breath, straightened his back, remembered who he was and how successful he'd been throughout his entire life. Then he commended himself on how smart he was to be wearing hip waders so even if he did fall through, the buoyancy of the trapped air would keep him afloat. He hadn't passed his physics course at Harvard with honours for nothing! But just to be on the safe side, he prodded the ice with his stick. It felt firm. The frozen deer had just had very bad luck. And animals, thought Mitch, were dumb anyway.

He continued on his journey though a little bit slower. To keep his mind occupied he counted out loud.

"...one hundred and five, one hundred and six, one hundred and seven..."

He was going to make it. The ice was firm and by the time he counted to one hundred and seventy, and with only thirty steps to go, he could almost taste the satisfying burn of Golden Weddings whisky at the back of his throat. Being not much of a drinker he had never bought whisky but this bottle was left for him by the previous owner. He had no idea that this whisky could also be used to remove paint.

"... one hundred and eighty, one hundred and eighty one, one hundred and eighty two..."

Not much to go now, just a few more steps, he could swim the rest of the way if he had to. However the ice was a little darker here and then he remembered what Gary said about currents on the lake hugging islands and causing the ice to never freeze properly. But Mitch quickly forgot that piece of information because Gary was only a local with a grade six education - what did he know anyway?

"... one hundred and ninety four, one hundred and ninety five, one hundred and ninety six..."

Four more steps, Mitch thought, and he was home free. To celebrate, Mitch decided to finish the crossing in two big exuberant bounds. He did this not only to prove to himself how right he was about everything, and how worrismatic the locals really were, but also to prove to Mother Nature and maybe God himself that you just don't mess with a Harvard physics graduate, an IBM engineer, and one hell of a smart guy.

It was with his first bound that he should've noticed the ice cracking underfoot but he was too busy thinking how great it was to yet again prove that man could overcome nature. And with the second bound, with only two feet to go from the rocky shore of his island home, he fell through.

It didn't go as Mitch would've hoped. The water was much deeper than he had expected. In a split second he was in over his head.

Unfortunately the waders did not keep him afloat but instead filled up with frigid water that burnt his body with cold. The shock forced him to involuntary scream, filling his mouth with water. His mind went blank and a beautiful peace, one that he had never experienced before, came over his body. Mitch felt his entire being rising and a lone thought came to him: "I am ascending to heaven".

In reality Mitch was not on his way to meet St Peter but was being gruffly wrenched out of the lake by a very strong arm. It was Gary. He was leaning out from the rocky bank, one hand gripping Mitch's collar. Gary's other arm was hooked around a birch. Within seconds he had Mitch on the shore.

Mitch, his brain still fogged from shock, looked up at Gary and said, "What are you doing here? I thought I was all alone?"

Gary said, "I knew you still had half a bottle of Golden Weddings - thought I'd help you drink it so I was waiting for you. But I walked here acrossed the thick ice which is why I'm dry and you're not."

Mitch would've liked to laugh but his lips were numb. He did manage to reply, "Gary, if there's anything I could ever do for you, just say the word."

"Well", said Gary, "You worked for IBM and you know how to write computer code, so maybe you could help my son, Tyler. He's written an app, a game more like, it's about outdoor survival and it's pretty fun to play. He just needs some help polishing the code and he'll be ready to pitch it to some companies. Can you help?"

"Of course." squeaked Mitch. "But first, do you know where I can get a good set of snow tires?"

The end

