

The American Sun & Wind Moving Picture Company

In the forest, high above the lake, I imagined that I was, far below, trapped beneath the black ice. I gathered sticks for kindling, pressed them close to my chest, then brought the bundle, like a gift, to the edge of the woods. I saw that Mr. Lesko and his horse were already out on the ice, clouds of steam pouring from the horse's nostrils.

Beside the small fire, my uncle Max was unwrapping the camera from its blanket—lifting it tenderly, as if it were an infant—then setting it upon the tripod: a sign that we would soon begin. I closed my eyes and prayed that I wasn't too late—that I had not stayed in the forest too long, and that there was still time for me to help make up our new story.

I could make a story out of anything—a nail, a glass, a shoe, a tree, a mirror, a button, a window, a wall—and for every story I made up and gave away, I also made one up I told no one about—one I stored inside me, in the rooms where I kept my most precious memories and pictures.

Below me, Mr. Lesko was hitching his horse to the ice plow and, when he urged his horse forward, I climbed into his head and saw that he was hoping the horse would resist him so that he might use his whip. The sleighs—pungs, we called them—were on land, next to the ice house, and while I was gone, Mr. Lesko and his son had cut a runway into the lake's shallow end, for floating the cakes of ice to shore.

I closed my eyes, made a picture of the lake, and labeled the picture

as if I were back at our studio, printing out an opening title for one of the moving pictures my family made:

FORT LEE, NEW JERSEY
NOVEMBER 12, 1915

I opened my eyes and saw that my uncle Max was fishing inside his suitcase for his lenses and film. My mother was lifting dresses and hats from the clothing bag my father held open for her. My uncle Karl was talking with Mr. Lesko, showing him where he wanted the ice cut.

I made my way down the hill and started across the lake to where the fire was burning below the camera. I had helped build it there—lit the first match to the greasy newspapers so that, the heat rising steadily, the oil in the camera would remain soft and the gears would not freeze.

I looked into the black ice—the first ice of winter—veined like marble, clear like glass. In the space between land and snow, I knew, small animals and insects lived all winter long. I wondered if there were a space like that between water and ice, where I might lie down.

In ancient times, Max taught me, men would build memory palaces inside their minds, and in each of the palace's rooms they would keep furniture, and on the furniture they would place objects. They invented systems and conjured up images by which they could name the rooms, and recall which rooms contained which objects and how the rooms led to and from one another. Sometimes they did this to remember the objects themselves, and sometimes the objects were there to remind them of other objects, or of lists or texts they wanted to set to heart—of the words to the Psalms, or the names of the saints, or where all the stars in the universe were located.

In our own times, Max said, people still organized their memories in similar ways, but now instead of being kings, priests, or philosophers living in temples and palaces, they were magicians, memory artists, and *idiot savants* working in vaudeville, at county fairs, or in circuses.

My father's three suitcases, like steps leading to an invisible stage, sat side by side on the ice, next to the sleds on which we transported our equipment, and inside the suitcases were his accordion, his violin, and his clarinet. When Karl wanted actors and actresses to show more

feeling, he had my father play for them. My father played his violin during love scenes. He played his accordion during barroom scenes and cowboy movies. He played his clarinet, his flute, or small pump-organ for night scenes, or when people were dying.

I deposited my bundle of sticks next to the fire. Max tapped the side of the camera. Is this one reel? he asked.

No, I said. It's not real until you open the shutter, turn the handle, and let the light inside.

Stop with the nonsense, Karl said. Two reels, he said. This one's a two-reeler we gotta finish by the end of the week.

Max winked at me. But if it's too real, I asked, how will we be able to bear it?

And we don't need your crappy routines either, you two, Karl snapped. If I want your opinion, I'll give it to you.

Leave the boy alone, my father said. He's a good boy, even if he looks like a girl.

Mr. Lesko's son was on the ice now too, but I could not tell which was the father and which the son. They both wore beaver coats, the fur turned to the inside, and black leather hats with earlaps. One of them walked on the far side of the horse, pushing an ice-marker back and forth along the surface of the lake, making a checkerboard of squares.

Max's warm breath was on my face. Joey? he asked.

I closed my eyes. I see a woman drowning, I said.

Karl came closer. And—? he asked. Okay. So she's drowning. So what else—?

I see her drowning, I said, and she's caught inside a hole in the ice, trying to climb out, to save herself.

And then—? Karl asked.

There's a man, and he has a whip in his hand. I looked up at the hill where I had been a short while before, and I pointed. And there's a frightened child up there, alone in the forest.

Why? Max asked.

Because the woman had to marry the man after she gave birth to the child. But the man beat the child, and one day, when it was old enough, it ran away.

I like it, Karl said. This we can sell—whips, and a mother and child we can weep for, and then a chase.

Whipping and weeping, my father said brightly. We all looked at him. He shrugged. Whoopee, he added, softly.

My mother put her arm around his neck. Shh, she said. She looked toward me. What else, sweetheart?

Well, there's another man, I think, and he looks exactly like the man with the whip, except that his eyes are different. This man is the man she truly loves, and he's running through the forest as fast as he can.

The horse! Karl said. Come on with the horse before I freeze my nuts off.

But why a horse? Max asked.

Why a horse?! Karl exclaimed. Because we've got a horse—that's why!

Sure, my father said. Do the best with what you've got and leave the rest to God. That's what I always say.

My philosopher, my mother said, then kissed my father, laughed, reached inside her coat, pulled out a pistol, and fired it at the sky.

Come on and get me, you dirty varmints! she cried out.

I hugged her hard. *I've got you!* I shouted.

My little baby Joey, she whispered. My angel boy. Don't ever let them hurt you. Promise me, all right?

I promise, I said.

My mother was the most beautiful woman in the world when she got like this—going from hot to cold, from anger to love to sadness and back again. She held me at a distance. Such a sweet nose, she said. She tugged once on each of my ears, then lifted my cap and roughed my hair. What a waste, what a waste. Maybe your father's right—that you should have been a girl.

My father took me from her, lifted me high in the air. Get a load of those tiny ears, he said. And those gorgeous curls.

Shh, Max said. He's a boy, not a girl. Leave him be.

Hurry! Karl said. We gotta hurry. Look! Karl pointed to the far end of the lake, where, behind the northern range of low, rolling hills, a wide, black wall of clouds rose up like a mountain. The clouds moved toward us as if the ocean were behind them, pushing them through the sky.

The Leskos pulled chisels from their overcoats, knelt down and started hammering and chopping along the lines they had made with

their ice-marker. Karl slapped at his shoulders and walked in circles around the fire, first one way, and then the other.

This is why I'm moving to California, he said. All right? In California we can make movies every day of the year without freezing our tushes off. In California, Edison and his thugs won't burn down our studio and break our cameras. Everyone else is out there already. Griffith's making features he's gonna charge two bucks a seat for—two bucks, for crying out loud!—and I'm still pissing my life away with these two-reelers.

Max cupped his palm over my eyes. Joey? he asked.

I see a horse falling through the ice, I said. The woman and the child are holding on to the horse and the two men who look the same are trying to pull them from the ice. And there's blood. I see lots of blood, and it's turning the water black.

Terrific, Karl said. Love, danger, violence, rescue—we stick to the basics. That's terrific, Joey. Really terrific. So okay. So one of you geniuses tell me—where do we start?

Inside the icehouse, my mother said.

Why the icehouse? Karl asked.

So we can get warm, my mother said. Then she started running across the ice in long strides, gliding and making believe her boots were ice skates. She jumped over the open runway, stopped, put more bullets into the chamber of her pistol, spun the chamber, clicked it closed. She was having one of her wild days, when you never knew what she would do next. She turned toward us and shouted, as if she were leading a cavalry charge: Ready or not, here we come—The American Sun & Wind Moving Picture Company!

Then she fired her gun into the air, three times, and the explosions blasted through my skull like the sound the lake would make if it were splitting open. I heard a man scream. The Leskos were trying to control their horse, which was hammering the air with its hooves. The screaming came from the hilltop where I had been standing a few minutes before. A man stood there now, his hands clasped above his heart.

Holy mackerel! my mother said. I finally did it.

Max! Karl yelled. Start shooting—we'll figure out the story later. Hurry, Max. Camera! Camera!

Max did what Karl told him to, while the man on the hill, hands

pressed to his heart, twirled in a circle, tumbled down the slope, rolling this way and that so that I was afraid his skull would smash against boulders and tree trunks.

It's Izzie! my father shouted, clapping his hands. I watched Izzie carom off a rock, sail onto the ice and spin around, face down. He lay there for a few seconds, as if dead, and I ran toward him.

When I was no more than ten feet away, he stood up, grinned, doffed his cap, and bowed.

Hurray for Izzie! I yelled.

Izzie was my mother's cousin, our stunt man when he was sober, and often when he was not. He could walk on the ledges of high buildings, stand on the wings of flying airplanes, jump out of burning windows, and ride wild horses. He could duel with swords, drive cars like a maniac, and fight with his fists like Battling Levinsky.

How's my favorite little guy? he asked, and before I could answer, he hoisted me into the air and was racing across the ice with me. I stretched my legs and arms way out, as if I were an airplane. We zoomed in for a landing, and he set me down beside the fire and started in kissing my mother.

My father grabbed Izzie and began waltzing him around in circles while he sang the words to "The Beautiful Blue Danube."

Karl was screaming through his megaphone that time was money, that we were robbing him blind, that by the time we finished shooting in the icehouse and got back out here, we'd have lost our light.

Easy does it, cousin, Izzie said, his arm around Karl's shoulder. Like I always say, the main thing in life is to have a good time and not to get hurt. Everything else is extra.

Not to get hurt? Karl shot back. Ha! I think maybe what we got here is a major case of the pot calling the kettle black.

I never risk injury, Izzie said, and he repeated words he always gave to people when they told him he took chances: Everything I do in this life is figured out exactly.

The Leskos put away their chisels. One of them took a pair of ice tongs from the leather harness on the side of the horse, opened the tongs wide, hooked them into the cake of ice. But even before they lifted out the first cake, I realized that only some of the blood in the lake was coming from where the horse was scraping its neck and legs raw against the sharp edges of ice.

Izzie rubbed his hands together. So what are we waiting for? Let's put this show on the road.

But what if it rains or it snows? my father asked. We have to think about that also. What if there's a storm? What do we do then?

We shoot our moving picture, Karl said, whether it rains, whether it snows, whether it storms, or whether it stinks.

My father lifted his accordion, shrugged the straps into place over his shoulders, began playing "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean." My mother reached into the small telescope bag in which she kept her make-up, took out her mirror and her lipstick, passed the gold tube back and forth through the flames to thaw it, then lifted the lid and twisted the tube of red wax upwards. She stacked my father's suitcases to eye level, set her mirror on top, and began doing her lips.

I saw fountains of blood explode from the bottom of the lake. The wind was roaring through the water like thunder, tearing holes in whatever was in its way—rocks, animals, trees, children—and I closed my eyes again, the way I did when I wanted a scene to change, and I saw that below the ice, water, and mud, an entire lost world existed—cities, buildings, castles, people—and that it was from this world that the blood was rising.

Here, sweetheart, my mother said. It's time. She handed me the mirror and the lipstick, so that, for our story, I could begin to make myself into her daughter.

I looked at my image in the mirror—stared through the dark holes in the middle of my eyes and imagined that on the wall at the back of my skull, my face, like the pictures inside Max's camera, was upside down.

So tell me, Joey, Izzie asked. Would you like to be our director? He handed me Karl's megaphone. Taped to the wide end of the funnel was a circle of cardboard, and in the middle of the cardboard my uncle had cut out a rectangle, so his megaphone could double as a viewfinder. I looked through his viewfinder at my mother, squinting until the only thing I could see was her lips. They were wine-red and moist, and someday soon they would fill entire screens—forty feet wide and thirty feet high in the theaters in New York City.

The boy wants to be a director, Izzie said.

Fine with me, Karl said. I had enough already for a lifetime. Take over. He's got my blessing.

Good. So here comes everything you need to know, Izzie said. Are you ready?

Ready, I said.

Okay. Then repeat after me—Camera.

Camera!

Action.

Action!

Cut.

Cut!

Now you know everything Karl knows, he said, and he kissed me hard on the mouth. Now you're a director.

The Leskos were floating cakes of ice along the runway, toward shore. I held a strip of black velvet up, next to the camera. When my mother turned and looked at it, her pupils dilated, and her pale blue eyes went dark.

Cut! Karl said, and Max stopped shooting. My mother looked away. I put the strip of velvet in my pocket, and while Max counted, I back-cranked the camera for him, eight turns. Then he tilted the camera down, its lens pointed at the open water, and he cranked the handle forward, so that before one scene ended the next would begin. That way my mother's eyes would seem to dissolve in the dark water of the lake. You would see her face, aflame with fear, and then you would see her eyes grow dark with despair, after which the scene would melt, and you would move right through her eyes until you were staring into water as deep and black as the night.

One of the Leskos hooked a cake of ice with a pike pole, dragged the cake onto a plank. When the Leskos had six cakes of ice lined up, they jammed them together, shoved a slab of wood into them at one end—there were two metal spikes in the wood—attached the slab of wood to the horse by rope, and made the horse pull the blocks of ice along the plank, to shore.

By this time the Leskos had carved out a section of the lake that was as large and square as the infield diamond of a baseball field. Max raised his camera slowly, set it in position, and photographed the northern crescent of the lake where Mr. Lesko was walking behind his horse, plowing the ice. Mr. Lesko played my mother's cruel husband.

Mr. Lesko's son played The Gentle Stranger. He wore a ragged brown wool coat Izzie had given him, and he worked without a hat, so that the winter light, playing through his curls from behind, made him appear very gentle.

I was wearing a wig made of real hair—long auburn tresses—and under my black coat, on top my regular clothes, I now had on a white blouse and a blue pinafore.

Action! Karl shouted through his megaphone.

Mr. Lesko stopped plowing, took out his whip, raised it above his shoulder.

Camera! Karl shouted.

Max began cranking, and Mr. Lesko started whipping his horse.

No! I screamed. And I shot out from where I stood, streaked across the ice, grabbed at his arm. He threw me off easily.

Cut! Karl shouted.

Wonderful, Joey! he called. That was wonderful! I didn't expect you to do that.

I had not expected to do it either, but I didn't say so.

Izzie took the whip from Mr. Lesko's hand, raised it high in the air, as if he were going to strike him, but instead he pivoted and lashed out at the horse. The whip cracked, making a sound like a bullet firing, but the lash never touched the horse's flank.

This is your last warning, Izzie said. If you whip the horse again, I'll whip you. Is that clear? And you *never* touch the boy.

Mr. Lesko said nothing.

Izzie scares me with his anger, my mother said. He never used to be so angry.

He needs a drink, my father said. He always gets this way when he needs a drink. I watched Izzie squat down and dip his hand in the water, to test its coldness. I watched Mr. Lesko coil his whip. I watched my father take out a small pair of scissors with which he snipped the fingers from a pair of wool gloves so that, the pink tips of his fingers exposed, he could continue to play his instruments in the cold.

Behind the clouds, the light in the sky was starting to fade, and I imagined sitting with my mother on a ledge of ice, above the open channel, after everyone else was gone. I imagined us slipping quietly over the edge, descending noiselessly through water, and passing

through the lake's sandy bottom. I had given them one story and now I was making up another, one I could keep inside me forever—about how my mother and I made our way into the lost world below the lake, where we found out the source of all the howling and blood.

Max photographed Mr. Lesko's eyes, and then he photographed the horse's eyes. Next he photographed Mr. Lesko's son, who was using tongs to lift blocks of ice from the plank onto the sleigh. When Mr. Lesko's son looked at his father, his eyes became soft, like the eyes of a wounded animal.

Brilliant! Karl said, peering through his viewfinder. You're a genius, Joey, to have thought of making the husband and the lover the same man.

Their faces are the same, but their eyes are opposite, Max said.

Yes, Karl said. You can make miracles with eyes, Max—I gotta hand you that. In life, you see, eyes are just little things in a face, with skin that goes up and down over them, but in moving pictures, the eyes—oh the eyes are everything.

Max unscrewed the camera and wrapped it in a blanket. I helped load the sleds with our equipment, and then we walked back across the ice, up onto land, through the snow, to the icehouse.

Our story that day was simple, and we made it up as we went along the way we always did.

My mother was living a harsh and lonely life, married to Mr. Lesko and caring for me, her beloved daughter. In early scenes, which we would shoot back at our studio the next day and then patch in later, you would see the two of us slaving away for Mr. Lesko in his kitchen, and submitting to his tyranny, until the day upon which *The Gentle Stranger* wandered into our world.

The Gentle Stranger owned a book of poems, and in the evenings, when our chores were done, he read to us from Tennyson, Swinburne, and Shelley. Karl liked to put sections of poems into the titles because if the pictures didn't tell people what to feel, he said, the words would.

Max disagreed. He believed our stories should be told in pictures only, so that anyone in the world, in any time and place, could understand them. Because all the stories I made up came to me in a series of

pictures that marched across the screen inside my head—pictures that seemed less real the instant I even tried to find words to describe them—I agreed with Max.

We think in pictures, Max always said. Not words.

Even though I agreed with him, whenever I found pictures and people in my head I wanted to save, I gave them names, the way I named The Gentle Stranger, and I invented titles to put on the doors and windows of their rooms, so that someday, if I wanted to, I would be able to find them again.

*The Gentle Stranger Finds a New Home
With the Mother and Her Love-Child*

In exchange for food and lodging, The Gentle Stranger worked for Mr. Lesko, cutting wood and harvesting ice. Mr. Lesko let him use the icehouse for a home, and he slept there at night, wrapped in old blankets, between walls of ice and sawdust.

Then one night, after Mr. Lesko got drunk and fell asleep, we stole away to the icehouse, and my mother told The Gentle Stranger our story: how she had been sent to work for Mr. Lesko as a housekeeper, and how Mr. Lesko had forced himself upon her, after which, in her shame, she had had no choice but to become his wife.

Perhaps it was God's will, my mother said, drawing me close to her. For had I not submitted to Mr. Lesko, my most precious jewel would not be here.

That was when The Gentle Stranger declared his love for my mother. He went down on his knees and clasped my mother's hands. I have never loved another as I love you, he said. You have rescued me from the dead. Without you I cannot live.

My mother's true heart showed in her eyes, but she pulled her hands free and turned away.

I am a married woman, she said.

I looked at The Gentle Stranger and I looked at my mother. I took his hand and I took hers—the hand on which she wore her wedding band—and I joined their hands together.

Then we argued.

Karl said that next my mother and The Gentle Stranger should plan

to murder Mr. Lesko—to arrange for an accident, where he drowned in the lake.

My father said that the three of us should just run away together and start a new life. Let love reign triumphant! he said.

Oh Simon, my mother said, and she rested her head on my father's shoulder. You're the dearest man in the world, aren't you?

I like happy endings that make me cry, my father said.

Izzie said the problem was that we didn't know who The Gentle Stranger was and why he was there and why he was saved from the dead. If they killed Mr. Lesko, they'd get caught and go to jail and I'd be an orphan. Why, he asked, should people pay good money to see lives that were more miserable than their own?

Izzie's right, my father said.

I said that maybe The Gentle Stranger had originally come to the lake intending to commit suicide. When he looked into the water, however, he had seen, not his own reflection, but that of my mother, and seeing her eyes, he had decided to live.

Max beamed, said we could start with the scene in the icehouse—of them holding hands—and then go to a dream-like flashback, by using a piece of fine gauze over the lens, of The Gentle Stranger staring at my mother's image in the water—her fingers clasped together in prayer, her hands themselves seeming to dissolve, only to reappear and rise up, as if disembodied, from the depths of the lake.

In addition to which, Izzie said, who would ever believe a square hole in an ice-covered lake was natural? Everyone would think we were tricking them with miniatures and false shots we'd cooked up in the studio.

Karl said the story was getting too complicated and too expensive. He asked my opinion, and I suggested we combine the two stories: The Gentle Stranger and my mother could still plot to murder Mr. Lesko—but because they were incapable of such an act, they could also change their minds at the last minute.

And then, Karl said, just when they change their minds—I got it, I got it!—there can be a terrible accident that kills Mr. Lesko anyway.

Except that, because they planned the murder, I said, nobody will believe it was an accident, and they'll be made to suffer forever for what they did not do.

Because we were going to shoot indoors, Max changed to the longest of his three lenses and set the aperture wide open. To make use of the available light, we kept the door of the icehouse open and set up a clothesline between two trees, a stiff white bedsheet hanging from it to reflect light into the house. Later, Karl said, we would tint this part of the film blue, to transform it into night.

Max could mix wonderful colors—gold for dawn, yellow for candlelight, red for war scenes, peach-glow for sunsets—and sometimes, late at night in the old trolley barn we had converted into our studio and home, he would let me bathe the strips of film in dyes and choose the colors we would use, not just to indicate the time of day, as now, or, by adding color to the usual black-and-white stock, to emphasize what was happening—the way we did for battles and weddings—but to create the atmosphere that helped you understand the *feelings* in the scenes: pale blues for sadness, glowing ambers for peacefulness, crimsons for passion, ruby reds for lust, forest greens for happiness.

But the colors for feelings—unlike the colors for night, war, dawn, fire, sunsets, and candlelight—were never fixed. Sometimes forest green could show how happy our people were, while at other times it could reveal their fear. Sometimes bathing a scene in indigo could let you sense the joy the characters were experiencing, and sometimes it helped you to feel that the actors and actresses were merely, like the color itself, blue.

As soon as Karl had arranged the scene the way he wanted, in the icehouse, my mother wrapped me in a cloak, and gave me a basket of food, a letter placed at the bottom of the basket, to take to The Gentle Stranger, who was hiding in the forest, waiting for us.

But if you meet in the forest, how would the accident take place on the lake? Karl asked. I told you before—we got a lake, we use a lake.

Okay, Izzie said. This is how it works. We cut through the rope so when he's chasing them through the forest with his horse and sleigh, the rope snaps, the sleigh throws him off flying, and he goes tumbling down the hill into the water.

But we have to figure out how it becomes an accident instead of murder, Karl said.

Maybe it's the opposite of the Red Sea, my father said. Maybe the lake closes shut with ice, and then it opens again and he falls in, splash!

Good, Simon, Izzie said. Terrific. So we chop out a chunk of ice and tow it in, and then we tow it back out. You can show me floating in the lake, face down, in Mr. Lesko's coat and his hat, like I'm drowned, and then the child pokes me with the pike pole, and turns me over and I'll give you a look from underwater that will make people freeze in their seats.

Izzie began smearing his arms and legs with grease, for when he would be drowning in the lake, and while he did I remembered the first picture I had seen inside my head, with which I had begun our story, of a woman drowning, only I didn't understand how that was to come true any more, since we had changed things and decided that Mr. Lesko would be the one to drown.

As soon as Mr. Lesko found my mother's letter and read it, he took out his whip. My mother crawled backwards across the snow, to the icehouse, her forearm across her eyes. Mr. Lesko's arm came flashing down and I leapt in front of my mother, covering her body with my own. The whip's lash cut into my cheek, and the burning sensation—warm and liquid—felt wonderful.

I had not known that this would happen.

Before my mother could tend to me, Izzie had lifted Mr. Lesko from the ground and was pounding him against the side of the icehouse. Mr. Lesko's son lifted a pike pole and tried to stab Izzie, but Izzie saw him coming and stepped aside.

The pike pole rammed into Mr. Lesko's side.

Keep shooting, Karl said. Keep shooting. We'll cut it all up later.

They're cut up now, my father said. He put down his accordion and packed handfuls of snow onto the side of my face. Izzie reached inside his coat, pulled out a leather-covered flask, and took a long drink. He shouldn't drink while he works, my father said.

Don't drink while you work, my mother said.

If I need a wife, I'll buy one, Izzie snapped.

Falling into the lake will sober him up, my father said. Everything Izzie does is figured out exactly.

We moved to the top of the hill and Max set up his camera there, first to show us racing through the forest to warn The Gentle Stranger that Mr. Lesko was coming to do him harm—and then to show Mr. Lesko charging through the forest with his horse and sleigh.

We photographed my mother sawing through the horse's reins with a kitchen knife. We photographed us changing our mind, and trying to tie the reins back together, but before we could, Mr. Lesko, believing we were trying to escape, beat us away with his whip.

So we fled into the forest, past Max's camera, and it felt wonderful to run across the frozen ground, holding tight to my mother's hand, my curled tresses flying out behind me, the frigid air kissing my cheek and sealing the blood there. Izzie put on Mr. Lesko's coat and hat and shoved Mr. Lesko from the sleigh. Mr. Lesko tried to stop him—to tell him he had not finished tying the reins back together—but Izzie knocked him to the ground.

Izzie rode away, then turned back. Max photographed me and my mother slipping down the hill, hand in hand, to the lake. The Gentle Stranger stood in the middle of the lake, waiting for us, but where our camera had been, jagged slabs of ice now floated like small islands. Our plan was to jump from island to island, toward the south end of the lake, where there was a waterfall.

Max could photograph us from the other side of the waterfall and, even though we would be nowhere near the falls, he could foreshorten the distance and make it appear we were in danger of plunging over, to our death.

Max photographed Izzie, disguised as Mr. Lesko, speeding across the snow in his horse and sleigh. Then he moved his camera back onto the ice and photographed me and my mother running along the shore until we found a place from which to step out onto the ice. The fire on the lake was gone and Max said we had to hurry, for the cold air could cause flashes of static electricity inside the camera.

My mother and I set out across the lake, and we called to The Gentle Stranger.

Izzie started down the hill. I saw that the real Mr. Lesko was smiling, and I called out to Izzie to be careful. The reins! I called. The reins!

It doesn't matter, my father said. You heard Karl. Whether it rains or it snows or it stinks, we shoot.

But it was too late. The reins snapped. The horse buckled, as if its forelegs had been chopped off. It tumbled downhill, crashed into a tree, and kept rolling. The sleigh skidded on a single runner in an opposite direction. Izzie leapt out, but he had not planned to do so at

that spot, and though he avoided crashing into a tree, he landed hard, shoulder first, against a boulder, and spun upside down, in a somersault, clutching at his shoulder.

Wonderful! Karl called out through his megaphone.

My father pulled at the rope that was hooked into the slab of ice we were riding on, so that at the exact moment when the horse reached the shore, the ice moved, and the horse fell directly into water, its head cracking against the ice's edge.

I heard a sound come from its neck, like that of a tree snapping in high wind.

In the open water, the blood pooled.

Izzie rolled into the water behind the horse.

Mr. Lesko stopped smiling. He held to his side, where Izzie had rammed the pike pole, as if it were only now that he felt the pain. His horse thrashed at the water, trying to climb out, and the more wildly it thrashed, the more the blood in the water foamed.

My mother watched Izzie lift his hand, grasp at air, then sink beneath the water's bubbling skin. Her eyes rolled up in their sockets. She fainted, and lay across our island of ice, one leg caught under her, her hair trailing in the water.

The Gentle Stranger came toward us, leaping from island to island, as if to rescue me and my mother, but when he got to us, he plunged straight into the water and grabbed for the horse's reins.

From the shore, Mr. Lesko walked into the lake.

Where's Izzie? my father asked. He cupped his hands around his mouth, and called out: Izzie—! Oh Izzie! Where are you?

The horse floated up and rolled onto its side.

Then Izzie rose to the surface. Shit, he said. It's colder than a pair of witch's tits down there.

Suddenly, the horse rose up from the water, above Izzie, as if it were about to fly.

The horse! I cried. The horse!

Izzie turned, but too late, and the horse dropped down upon him with its full weight. Izzie disappeared beneath the horse and the water. The horse had one hoof on our island of ice, but the hoof slipped and the horse fell backwards, its neck catching on a point of the ice, the ice tearing out a long gash and stripping the skin away. As if sprung from a trap, a splintered bone shot through the exposed flesh.

Mr. Lesko waded through the water as if he were walking through brambles.

We have to save them, Max said.

Keep shooting, Karl said. Don't stop.

But they could die, Max said. This is really happening.

Luck! Karl said. Sometimes, after you give up all hope, and when you least expect it, you get lucky. Go figure.

Izzie appeared behind us, climbed onto our island. I think the horse is dead, he said.

See? Karl said. When it comes to stunts, Izzie never takes chances. Keep shooting, Max. Only leave Mr. Lesko out of the frame. We can't have two husbands show up in the same scene.

My mother opened her eyes. You're alive, she said to me. You're alive!

My mother stood. And you too, she said to Izzie, but when she moved to embrace him, Mr. Lesko, struggling in water where he could no longer stand, snatched at her ankle.

My mother tumbled over the island's edge, into the water.

Wonderful! Karl said.

That wasn't supposed to happen, my father said.

Yes it was, Karl said. Don't you remember what Joey said about seeing a woman drowning, about the woman and the child holding to the horse, about the horse in the water?

Ah! my father said. You're right again.

So I dove into the water to rescue my mother. I saw her dark hair floating through the blood, and I reached out, closed my hands around the hair, but at that instant the horse rolled up between us, as if it were a huge barrel, and I found myself holding to the horse's blood-drenched mane.

Mr. Lesko's son was on the shore now, tying a rope to the reins, and pulling. I turned and saw pink water drip from the corner of my mother's mouth. Her eyelids moved up, globes of milk-white gelatin like those we set before the projector's lens rolling where her blue eyes had been.

I felt as if my chest were being crushed between walls of thick limestone. Mr. Lesko and his son pulled steadily on the rope, to haul their horse from the water.

My mother's mouth was open, and her lips were white. In the cam-

era, I thought, black was white and white was black. In my mother's telescope bag there would still be a perfect, red impression of her mouth, on tissue, where she had blotted it.

The storm is here, my father said, pointing to the sky.

We have to help them, Max said. They'll get frostbite. They'll lose their toes, their fingers.

Keep shooting, Karl said. It's even better than what the boy saw. It's real!

Then nobody will believe it, my father said.

Max left the camera, grabbed blankets from the ground—the blankets in which he kept his spools of film and extra lenses—and he rushed toward us.

Make a fire, he said to my father. Make a fire. Quickly.

Karl took Max's place and cranked the camera's handle.

If we don't use it now, we'll use it later, he said. Nothing is wasted. Nothing is lost.

I climbed out of the water. My teeth were clicking like dice. Max wrapped me in a blanket, and began rubbing my cheeks with his hands.

You have the heart of a murderer, Max said to Karl.

Don't make me laugh, Karl said. Did I cut the reins? Did I shove them in the water? Did I kill the horse?

Izzie emerged from the water, my mother in his arms. He set her down on the snow, covered her with blankets, put a flask of whiskey to her lips.

Listen, my brave brother, Karl said to Max. Did you leap into the water to save them?

The horse lay on its side, blood spilling from its mouth as if a long strip of red film were unfurling from its innards.

Mr. Lesko pried open the horse's teeth and blood shot out onto his face as if pumped from a fire hose.

The horse twitched, pawed the air with its hooves.

Suddenly my mother stood up, as if she were neither wet, nor cold, nor frightened. She reached under her coat and took out her pistol.

She went to the horse, put the muzzle of the pistol to its forehead, and fired twice.

Mr. Lesko and his son went down on their knees. They each made

the sign of the cross. Above us, the dark clouds were lower than the hills, separating and spreading now as if, like thin, soiled cloth, the sky itself were rotting.

Mr. Lesko bent his head, pressed it against the horse's neck, and wept.

Cut! Karl said. Cut! We got it.