On Ice

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After freshman orientation, I was taught to be cautious of many thing: People who creep in dark parts of alleys, drunken people coming back to the dorms after hours, and, something relatively exclusive to Bemidji state University: the weak spots on Lake Bemidji in wintertime.

“Is it solid?” I sheepishly called out, stepping out with my left foot to test the density, like Bambi did when he was a fawn. My friend was a good five feet from shore.

“Dude!” she snapped. My foot quickly sought solid ground. “I made it out this far. Just come on.”

I sipped my chilled mocha drink as if it could bring me super powers to make me brave and keep me warm. The only thing I wore that day to protect me from the winter elements was a stocking cap. Since I only had finals that day, I thought I would be indoors, and therefore a jacket would just seem silly. Little did I know that I would be stepping out onto a frozen, overgrown pond wearing only a black and white striped hat, a t-shirt three sizes too small, and a pair of khakis I didn’t really like, but all my other clothes were packed up for the pending winter break. It’s one thing to be uncomfortable, but it was worse to be uncomfortable and freezing your butt off.

I didn’t want to be out there, but the call of peer pressure was far too strong. I took my time, only stepping a mere foot out from shore onto this Lake Bemidji. People had the courage to park their cars out here, but I feared crashing through the ice.
My friend had long since abandoned me, waddling her way along to avoid slipping on the ice, making long, continuous lines into the snow. I thought to myself, *Why are you so afraid of something that can’t even move?*

At that moment I slipped and fell onto my butt, realizing that the lake had a slippery defense against me. The cackles from my friend echoed across the lake. She asked the traditional, “Dude, are you ok?” I gave her a nod and she scuttled off out onto the lake again. As for me, I just sat still, my now damp butt growing colder and colder. My butt grew tender; I think I felt the bruise growing. I took yet another chilled mocha sip, thankful that my expensive drink didn’t spill.

I grew cold, my only motivation to get off the ground. With great care, I found balance on my own two feet again. Upon standing, I filled my lungs with the sweet tingle of cold air, letting it out in a visible mist.

Far off from shore were a few ice houses were collected together like a tiny village. Beyond that, I could see the Bemidji water tower and a few buildings that outlined the town I was growing familiar with that semester. And of all things to be fascinated with, I couldn’t get over how straight the trees were compared to back home. Those that crowded our woods tangled, bent and swayed into each other, creating a net of wooden nature that light tried to penetrate daily. Here trees shot straight to the sky, reaching up for the sun they craved so desperately.

With my friend at my side, we walked along the shoreline, taking part in a conversation so deep, I forgot how cold and wet I was from my earlier tumble. Occasionally, I tried to massage the sore feeling out of my butt, but it didn’t break my reminiscing focus. She and I mentioned some of the funniest stories and memories
collected in the last few months and thought about how far we had come. She had come from a broken home, and I came from a small community with little funds but big dreams.

I told her more about the summer before I moved into Maple Hall. There was tension in the house after I received my acceptance letter. No one knew where the money would come from to support my education, and no one wanted to hire me only to have me quit three months later. I was reminded daily of the financial burdens, told over dinner how I needed to earn six hundred dollars a week to pay for college, and heard that number increase each week I was unemployed. So much for positive reinforcement.

I hated that I worried my parents. I hated that my dad didn’t really understand my need to further my education. I hated the idea that it could all fall apart and my dreams would never be realized. I hated how I felt. It left my stomach knotted and acidic, and my brain constricted. There were nights where I cried quietly into my comforter. All this stress, agony, and perseverance, just because I wanted to go to college.

But that summer I knew wanted college to be an adventure, not a battle. With that in mind, I gave myself little reminders that the best would come of it. In spite of apprehension from both my parents and myself, I found perseverance. The comfort that came over me each night was that I knew deep down in my gut that I was doing the right thing.

So after all that, why was the lake so scary?

“To think we were dipping our toes in this lake just a few months ago,” I said to my friend. “Now we’re on top of it. I can’t believe it.”
She smiled at me, but I don’t think she really understood. We were different in that I learned how to seek a small victory every day. My victory that day was being able to stand out on the lake and look at Bemidji State University campus before us. I saw opportunities. I saw my future. I saw what became of my courage.

I held my drink up high while screaming in my head, *Victory!*