

Second Hand Skates



by Kathy Warnes

Aunt Lucy and Mama sat at the lighthouse kitchen table drinking tea. Emma sat across from them tracing circles on the red and white checkered oil cloth with her fingers.

“May I skate across the bay to visit Hattie?” Emma asked Mama..

“I don’t think the ice is thick enough yet,” Mama said. “We had a few warm, thawing days last week. And your skates are second hand. Remember, Papa made them for John when he was little. Wait until Saturday, Emma. John will come back on Saturday and you two can skate over to Hattie’s and back on Sunday. John will watch out for you. You have to learn to be prudent about things like ice, Emma.”

Emma’s dog Sandy, a wire haired terrier that Harriet said looked like a rag mop, barked at Mama. “Sandy, behave yourself or you won’t sleep with Emma tonight,” Mama said.

Sandy stopped barking and Emma said, “All right, Mama.”

Papa had always told Emma to be prudent and he had been prudent and friendly with Skillet Island Bay until. one day he had gone to rescue a ship’s captain whose ship, the Amelia, sank in a storm. The waves that thundered around Skillet Island Light had washed both of them away.

Then Emma thought of something. “If the ice isn’t thick, how can John come home?”

Emma’s brother John stayed on the mainland during the week to go to school. He skated home to the Skillet Island Light on the weekends on a pair of new ice sakes that Papa made when the ice froze thick enough. Emma could hardly wait until next year when she would go to school on the mainland. Mama and Aunt Lucy had taught her in the mornings after they let the light go out for the day, but Emma wanted to go to school with Hattie.

“He’ll come in the skiff. It’s light enough to drag across the ice and water tight enough to keep him dry and safe if there isn’t any ice or it’s too thin to hold him. You already know that, Emma. Why are you asking?”

Emma looked out the kitchen window and she saw ice, a mile of clear, blue thick ice that covered Skillet Island Bay from the edge of the lighthouse to the dock on the shore of Skillet Island Harbor. She saw herself skimming over the ice, her brand new skates sparkling silver in the sunlight and her red scarf flying in the wind. Harriet skated not far behind and the wind carried the music of their laughter back to the light house.

“I was dreaming about ice skating with Harriet,” Emma said.

“Wait until John comes back,” Mama said. She handed Emma a book. “You need to study your spelling words if you want to keep up with the others in school next year.”

Emma spent the rest of the day studying spelling words and doing sums. That night she stared out of her bedroom window at the path that the tower light made across the bay to the shore and she imagined herself skating smoothly down the path and Papa came from the shore to meet her. “I miss you, Papa,” she whispered. “I wish you’d come home.”

The next day Mama had a fever and Aunt Lucy tended Mama and the light by herself. The day after that, Aunt Lucy had caught the fever too, and both Mama and Aunt Lucy tossed and moaned on their beds. Emma fixed cold clothes for their foreheads and in the afternoon, she climbed up into the light tower and lit the Skillet Island Light so that ships and sailors wouldn’t be swept away like Papa and the ship’s captain had been.

Saturday came and Mama and Aunt Ruth were worse. Mama kept calling Papa and Aunt Lucy didn’t say anything. She just lay under her wool blankets gasping for breath.

“Abner, where are you?” Mama cried, her fingers flinging away the quilts that Emma tucked around her like their dog Sandy flung sand away from the bones he buried on the beach.

“Mama, today’s Saturday and John’s coming home,” Emma told her. “John’s coming, Mama!”

Emma thought Mama heard her because she didn’t fling away the quilts so wildly.

Late in the afternoon while she was lighting the lights in the tower, with Sandy following close at her heels for company and protection, Emma heard footsteps climbing the stairs. “John, is that really you?” Emma shouted.

John’s cheeks were red from the cold and he put an icy hand on Emma’s arm. “It’s colder than the North Wind’s heart out there,” he said.

Emma felt a stab of fear. “You didn’t go through the ice anywhere did you?”

“No. Why are you lighting the light? Where’s Mama and Aunt Lucy?”

“They’re sick, John. I think they need Dr. Allenwood.”

John turned and ran back down the stairs, with Emma close behind him. Sandy barked at their heels and followed them to Mama’s room. Mama was sleeping, but her breathing sounded like the steam engine that they had ridden on when they went to Chicago last summer. She didn’t

open her eyes, even when John called her and Sandy barked right under her ear. Aunt Lucy stirred when they stood by her bedside, but she didn't open her eyes either.

"I'm going to get Dr. Allenwood," Emma said.

"I'd better go," John said.

"Someone has to stay here and keep the light burning," Emma told him. "I skate faster than you do even if my skates aren't new, and Harriet and I discovered a secret about the Bay."

"What secret?"

"We found out why this island is called Skillet Island."

"My teacher said it's always been called that after some early pioneers who rowed over and made a campfire. They cooked bacon in a skillet over the campfire so they called it Skillet Island."

"I found the skillet handle, John."

"Where is it?"

"Papa showed me a map. So me and Harriet rowed around the Bay last summer and found the skillet handle. It's only a bridge length from land."

"What's a bridge length?"

"It's about ten skiffs wide between the island and the mainland there. It's too far for me to swim, but it's not too wide to row or paddle or skate. People like Papa could build a bridge from the mainland to the island."

John put his hands on his hips and stood with his legs apart, just like Mama did when she was bawling Emma out. "Why would Papa show you a map and not me?" John demanded.

Emma stuck out her tongue at him. "One day when we were studying maps he showed me the map of the island and the skillet handle. You were at school on the mainland. Then after that he went out to rescue Captain Keith and..." She pulled the map out of the pocket of her dress. He said I was a good map reader."

John let his arms drop limply to his side. "I'll keep the light going. Hurry and get Doctor Allenwood Emma. Mama looks awful sick and Aunt Lucy doesn't look too good either."

Emma hurried into Mama's room and kissed her hot forehead. "I'm going to get Dr. Allenwood, Mama. Hang on. I'll hurry!"

Emma hurried into Aunt Lucy's room and kissed Aunt Lucy's hot forehead. "I'm going to get the doctor, Aunt Lucy. "

Then Emma ran downstairs and put on her warm coat, hat, mittens and scarf. She ran to the shed and fastened on her ice skates. Pulling Papa's light skiff behind her, she found the skillet handle of Skillet Island and stared at the square of ice that separated the island from the mainland.

By now the full moon stood above the light house like it was trying to squelch the light. Emma watched the light twinkle and grow stronger. John knew how to keep the light burning. Now she had to reach land safely and find Dr. Allenwood.

Emma slid the skiff out onto the ice and holding it tightly by the bow and pushing the skiff, she skated behind it. Emma followed the path of the skiff and the moonlight on the water. When she was about halfway across, she felt the ice creaking underneath her.

“Papa, I’m frightened,” Emma said.

Suddenly, Papa skated in front of her, his long green scarf streaming out behind him and his blue stocking cap bobbing up and down and guiding her along the moonlit path. She heard his laughter floating behind him and it tickled her ears and her heart. She skated faster, trying to catch up with him. Before she knew it, her skates and the skiff bumped against solidly frozen grass and reeds and she guided the skiff up a bank onto land.

“Thank you, Papa,” Emma whispered. “I’ll always miss you, but right now I have to get Dr. Allenwood and give him your map so he’ll come back to the light house with me.”

She waved as she stood on the bank, staring at the blue stocking cap and long green scarf until they melted into the moonlit path.