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Death and the Penguin

Translated from the Russian by George Bird

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In the icy cold of Saturday morning, Viktor, Sergey and Penguin Misha emerged from a red *Zaporozhets* parked on the Dnieper Embankment near the Monastery Gardens. Sergey collected a bulging rucksack from the boot, shouldered it, and they descended the stone steps to the frozen river.

The Dnieper was under a thick layer of ice, on which, at polite distances from one another, the winter anglers sat like fat, motionless crows, each by his own hole.

Steering clear of them, Viktor, Sergey and Misha headed deep into the Dnieper ice fields.

They paused at every free hole, but they were all either frozen over or too small.

"Let's try the bay," said Sergey. "Where winter swimmers go."

They made towards a narrow spit, the tail of an island, which they crossed.

"There, look!" said Sergey pointing. "See that patch of blue?"

The hole, when they reached it, was vast, with many naked heel-prints at its edge. Without waiting for the go-ahead, Misha lunged forward and dived smoothly in without so much as a splash.

Viktor and Sergey stared at the heaving mash of ice and water, hardly daring to breathe.

"Can they see under water?" Sergey asked.

"I daresay," said Viktor. "If there is anything to see."

Taking off his rucksack, Sergey pulled out an old quilt, which he spread on the ice a metre or two from the hole.

"Come and sit down," he called. "Each to his own holiday amusement."

Viktor came and sat, Sergey having meanwhile produced a thermos and two plastic cups.

"We'll start with the coffee."

It was sweet, and made a pleasant drink against the cold.

"And I never thought to bring anything," Viktor confessed sadly, warming his hands around his cup.

"Never mind, there'll be another time. Spot of cognac?"

Sergey poured some into each cup, then slipped the flat bottle into a jacket pocket.

"To all that's good!" he proposed.

They drank, warmth pervading their bodies and minds.

"He won't drown, will he?" Sergey asked, looking towards the ice-hole.

"He shouldn't," shrugged Viktor. "But I'm in the dark really about penguins. I've looked for books on them but haven't found any."

"If I come across anything, you shall have it," Sergey promised.

Viktor looked around anxiously. The nearest angler and hole were a good 30 meters away. The angler was sitting on his tackle box and every now and then could be seen raising a litre-sized water bottle to his lips.

"Think I'll take a stroll," said Viktor, still watching the angler.

"I shouldn't. Let's sit for a bit and have some more cognac. He'll be back. He won't drown, that's for sure!"

A sudden gurgling came from the ice-hole. Viktor looked at once, but it was only the mash of ice and water slopping to and fro.

Sergey raised his cup of cognac. "Come, let's drink to him. People are legion, penguins are not – and ought to be cherished!"

As they drank, a cry rent the frosty silence. Swinging round, they saw an angler some 50 meters away leap back from his hole, pointing at it with both hands. Two other anglers were heading his way, abandoning their rods in their holes.

"What's up with him?" Sergey asked, speaking to himself.

Oblivious to events 50 metres away, Viktor was sipping his cognac and considering how each new day brought to one's life something new, totally unplanned for. A time would come when it would be trouble of some sort, perhaps even death.

"Look!" shouted Sergey, clapping him on the shoulder.

Returning to the here and now, Viktor looked first at Sergey, then, following his gaze, saw Misha approaching from the direction of the island.

"Where's he popped up from?" asked Sergey in amazement.

Misha came to a halt at the edge of their quilt.

"Perhaps he'd like a cognac," quipped Sergey.

"Come on Misha," called Viktor, patting the quilt.

Misha stepped awkwardly onto it and looked from one to the other of them.

Reaching once more into his rucksack, Sergey produced a towel and wrapped it around him.

"So he doesn't catch cold," he explained.