

Light smacked the ice in Sam Hall Arena and bounced off, blooming bright in the air above. The empty stands looked tired in their worn tiers, the sag of a wilted wedding cake. And the same smell, always, in every rink. Mineral, metallic, but something else too. Something unnameable, old, the smell of a museum. It's in this smell, maybe, where a person can start to get lost.

A player strode across my path from the hallway joining Sam Hall to the Phys. Ed. building. She carried a black hockey bag branded with the Scarlets' red W over one shoulder and a red backpack over the other, handling each as though it were the weight of a purse. I fell in behind. Sandals yawned from her heels, calloused the colour of potatoes – the three-headed-monster heels of hockey players, skate-boot friction over the years wrenching eruptions in the bone. A ragged swath of red at the tip of each toenail. Her hair's dark waves moved stiffly as she walked.

We passed a desk, the gel-headed guy behind the counter dwarfed by the giant wall of shelves behind him, overflowing with every type of ball imaginable, their colourful skins scattered among helmets, skates, racquets, sticks. He looked up from a textbook spread on the counter and smiled.

'What's up, Hal?' he said, saluting with a highlighter. 'Back to work, eh?'

She nodded at him like she was the CEO returning from lunch and he was the secretary. 'You bet.'

Tall, with the bulk of her thighs given away by the jeans – loose waist bunched in by an old leather belt but tight across her quads and butt – and the wide-legged strut dictated by those skating muscles, the hockey legs. I felt the narrowness of my own legs and pictured Hal shovelling me like a pile of snow from the crease as I went in for a rebound.

We entered the long hallway of yellow dressing-room doors and my stomach spasmed – I couldn't picture what I was about to walk into. Hal opened a door near the end and an off smell leaked from the room. The sharpness of onions and something else – chili powder? She groaned under her breath. The door opened onto a short, dim hallway inhabited by a stick rack. It was still early, but a

few sticks were propped crooked in there already, sloppy numbers written in black marker on their handles. Hal glanced back at me briefly as she threw her sticks into the rack and then warbled 'Burrito!' like a war cry. She stalked into the room, dropping her hockey bag to the floor with a dull *whump*, and her back burst suddenly into light.

I tucked my sticks into the far corner of the rack and followed her. Stood in the entrance to the room behind the small hill of Hal's bag. She was framed now by the bathroom doorway cut out of the far wall, hand outstretched toward a player decked out in Scarlet hockey gear: baseball cap, T-shirt, sweatpants. The top of her head reached Hal's chin, and Sig – my grandmother – would have called her, with approval, sturdy. They were between the sinks and a tattered brown velour couch, stuffing bursting from an arm, a green toilet stall looming in the background. The short player jockeyed from foot to foot, mirroring Hal's moves, as though she were trying to hide with her back the giant faux-wood microwave that was buzzing with geriatric exertion. On the wall above the bathroom door, a mural: the huge red W, penned in on three sides with *Character, Dedication, Excellence*. These words startled me. They reminded me of the campus holding Sam Hall in its palm, the university unfolding layers all around it, and how this made me lost.

'Just give it to me,' Hal said.

'You're confused.'

'Toad. Do you see this?' Hal pointed to her face. 'This is a nose. Rule number thirty-eight. Now take it out and put it in my fucking hand. I can't believe we're already doing this.'

'Your nostrils are uncommonly large, friend.' Toad turned and fished a burrito swaddled in paper towels from the microwave. She took an exaggerated bite, her back to Hal.

'Delicious!' she mumbled, chewing.

'It's that extra-spicy, extra-heinous kind too, isn't it? You bastard.'

I felt the mounting vertigo of a tourist. They might have been speaking Spanish. Only a few spots were taken around the room, a handful of players taping sticks, pawing through their bags, so I looked for the biggest gap. The benches lining each wall were

broken up into stalls, black wooden partitions separating them and a shelf traversing the top of each. Small, empty porches. Silver-tusked hooks everywhere and clear Tupperware bins under the benches. All the stall walls were bare except for one with a poster of David Hasselhoff in a green Speedo and a Santa hat.

'Hugo, how's it smell in here?' Hal poked her head around the corner of the doorway and Hugo looked up from her stall wearily, shoulders dropping a bit, like a seasoned little sister who didn't want to be enlisted. She was pale and small, but with a veined bulge in her forearms as she leaned over her bag, elbows on her thighs.

'Like ass,' she said dully.

'And rule thirty-eight. Say it.'

Hugo pulled a pair of long underwear from the bag and mumbled, 'Thou shalt not eat burrito.'

'Thank you.'

I dropped my bag in front of a stall in a deserted corner, across from David Hasselhoff and a few down from the next closest player, and then someone grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled, steering me away. I turned; her face was inches from mine, nose wrinkled, tongue crooked, unsnagging a lip from braces. Her mouth shifted into an apologetic smile.

'Diss one,' she said, gesturing to a stall four down, now smoothing my shirt where she'd grabbed it. 'That's the one you want.' French accent throwing a kink into some of her words. She nodded encouragement and I moved away from her hand on my back.

'Oh? Okay.' I picked up my bag. 'Thanks.'

She nodded again and hung her backpack in the stall next to the one she'd assigned me. We both looked to the bathroom. Toad now held the burrito above her head.

'If you cut it, does it not bleed?' she said, gesturing at it.

'Don't do this. You can still do the right thing.' Hal shook her head, hands on her hips.

My neighbour clucked her tongue, rolled her eyes at the display. She turned to me. 'I'm Pelly,' she said.

'Hi. I'm Iz.' We smiled at each other and then she smiled a bit too long and I unzipped my bag.

‘You’re discriminating against my favourite food just because it has body-odour issues – which is a fucking tragedy, Hally. Listen, I’m an elite athlete. I’m a leader of this team. I’m giving my body the sustenance it needs to give a hundred and ten today and you’re trying to sabotage this? Let’s look at the underlying issues here, let’s talk about this, let’s have a chat. Are you worried that someone’s going to be a little, um, more of a champ than someone else today? ‘Cause you know – ’

At this, Hal turned on her heel and strode over to her hockey bag. She yanked it up and then threw it down in front of the stall I’d first chosen. Toad devoured the burrito, a victorious grin. ‘Kisses!’ she called, mouth full.

Pelly shook her head, turned to me. ‘It’s always like this,’ she said, apologetic.

Three stalls down, Hal pulled off her T-shirt and bent over her bag in a black lace bra, a ridge of muscle moving over the small etches of rib in her side. The intricate stitches and eyelets of the bra. With brisk, businesslike motions, she sat up, unhooked it and I looked away and knew they must be older, these players.

Pelly went to the toilet stall and Toad shoved her a bit as she passed, Pelly squeaking protest. Toad had taken off the hat; her eyebrows surprised me. Thin, high arcs. They seemed to set the rest of her face off balance, working against the sweats, mocking them, and I wondered if she plucked the eyebrows to make them go like that, to go so high and ironic, or if they were some freak genetic occurrence she tried to hide with a baseball cap.

I pulled off my shirt and jeans and got into my old under-equipment clothes – the lull that always comes at the beginning of the equipment dance, my limbs falling into the familiar rhythms, the pattern looped and repeated a million times. Shirt. Left leg of the tights. Right leg. Right shin pad: hold and tape. The creaking trumpet of tape as I yanked it off the roll, drawing quick circles around my calves.

A cluster of voices echoed hollow down the hallway and then four more players burst in and greetings ricocheted rapidly around the room. Then two more and another and another in quick succession,

like someone had rung a bell and they'd all come running, and the windowless room swelled suddenly with sound, their voices getting all tangled up in each other, a laugh track layered in. Angles of conversation grew more complex as the empty stalls filled, voices now in competition, cross-room shouts, players craning their necks to talk over neighbours' heads. Someone turned on the cd player in the corner where I sat and the Tragically Hip screamed, pinning everyone's voices back. But they just adjusted, cranked up their own volume, veins bulging in the side of Toad's neck as she talked to Heezer, who sat in the Hasselhoff stall wearing a bowling jersey with 'Juan' stitched on the pocket. Heezer smiling and nodding, leaning forward to lip-read. Turning down the music wasn't an option. They carried on around it, some mild affliction they just had to live with.

Hockey pants, cinched in. Left skate, the lace burn on my summer-thin skin. Right skate.

The stalls began to run out. A stack of orange plastic chairs that looked like imports from a Grade Six classroom scattered into available spaces around the room. I guessed at the other rookies – the ones who went straight to the plastic chairs, kept their heads down, weren't pelted with insults or nicknames when they walked in. Darting quick glances at them, I tried to decide whether or not they looked like they'd be good. A broad-faced player ambled in then with a stubby but tall hockey bag bulging like an overstuffed cushion. Goalie. She let the bag drop in the entrance to the room and spread her arms wide.

'What's up, savages?' she bellowed. Two players on the plastic chairs looked over with the eyes of startled horses and then I knew for a fact they were rookies and I felt comfort for a moment in their disoriented stare.

Shoulder pads, left elbow pad, right elbow pad. I pulled my practice jersey over my head. I usually left my helmet off until I was walking out of the room, but I put it on now and leaned back into the shadowed nether regions of the stall, letting the little walls on either side close me in.

Hal slipped on a pair of hockey gloves, scuffed, with beaten-looking edges. I wondered how long she'd been playing. She

dropped her chin to her chest and began to slowly hit the gloves together; the sound was like a thick book being slammed shut over and over again. She kept doing it and others joined in and the sound got into my chest and found the adrenalin that began its snake-charmed dance through my limbs, murmuring to my legs, my hands, my heart. Humming them awake.

Sig ashed a cigarette out the open window, smoke and leaf-bloated air layering September into the cab of the sagging grey pick-up. The ashtray overflowed with mottled butts, Styrofoam cups from the Laketime coffee shop and Coke cans littering the passenger side floor. She flicked a butt out the window. Iz always got after her for doing that – the reason behind the ashtray affront. She'd spot Sig winding up with a butt and say, 'Sig.' That's all she'd say, just her name, and Sig would wink and stuff the butt into the ashtray.

She'd left Iz standing in her miniature room in the residence. The room held a cot the university supplied, Iz's childhood dresser, a couple of old suitcases bursting with winter clothes, and her hockey equipment, the black bag pocked with dust from its trip on the truck bed. She'd have to lug the equipment across campus to the arena later that afternoon by herself. Sig wanted to stay and help her unpack, find her a good meal, drive her and the hockey bag over to the arena later. But a quiet insistence in Iz's posture, the way she stood in the centre of the small room, told Sig that if this move was going to work at all, it would have to start right then, right there. No use dragging it out.

She closed the door against the tears threatening to spill from Iz's eyes, the embarrassed tilt of her head. Her steps down the worn hallway carpet, her opening of the door, her turning of the key in the truck's ignition, each felt like a failing.

Stacy Moon, the Winnipeg University Head Coach, had found Sig in the stands at the Rec Centre during one of Iz's games last year – Iz still playing in the Midget boys' league, although she was older than most of them by then, her old teammates all moved on to the Junior league, if they were good, or the Friday-night beer

league. Sig saw the Scarlet Hockey crest on the woman's jacket, and then Moon explained how they'd come to see Iz and how excited they were with what they'd seen so far. She said this with the necessary confidence of a small woman wearing big shoes, cut with a strangely girlish enthusiasm. Sig had heard about this already – 1997 and they'd finally started a women's hockey program in Canadian universities, the next logical step for the sport that seemed to be gathering force with a why-didn't-we-think-of-this-before energy. The hockey parents had already begun to ask Sig about it, about getting Iz in there.

Moon explained the team was still in the building phase and didn't have a lot of money, but the program was growing, and then she lost Sig a bit in the spiel about costs and retroactive scholarships, and Sig looked out and found Iz on the ice, striding through centre, looking for a pass from the boards and getting it. The way Moon told this part of the story sounded more like they were getting off welfare to take a job at McDonald's, but Sig didn't care about this. Then they stood and watched the girl stick-handle around a cement-footed defenceman, big oafish boy, in for a shot. The puck left her stick and stopped the breath in the crowd's throat, one huge gulp, and Sig saw science textbooks. She saw a bed-in-a-bag and bulk sweat socks and five-pack Jockey bikini briefs from Zellers. She saw the numbers in the bank account they'd opened for Kristjan's university fund and that they'd continued for Iz instead. Kristjan – Iz's father – gone two months before the girl was born, but some parts of him, like this, overlapped into her. The density of the fund's sediment and the way it bloomed thick stalks of intention. She saw notebooks and ballpoint pens and highlighters. She saw a woman, an older woman with Iz's face, wearing a white coat, a child's knee in her hands, bending and straightening the leg like a wing. A physiotherapist, Iz had said once, shyly. What she wanted to be. This woman holding the leg made sense to Sig and she'd often gone there in her mind, placed her own aching joints in those hands, let them bend her back into health. The goalie covered the puck. Breath out with the whistle and Sig knew she'd pass Iz to Moon. To those faceless girls. As though the whistle sliced open the inevitability.

‘We’ll see,’ she’d said to Moon.

Truth be told, she’d waited after dropping Iz off at the residence. She’d sat out the afternoon in the parking lot of Sam Hall Arena, the truck hidden among the students’ shit-heaps, the accidents-waiting-to-happen all decked out in skateboarding stickers and rust. The players began to arrive, small in the distance with the growth-like bump of hockey bag across their backs, and Sig squinted until she had a headache, watching the gaggles of girls disappear into the blank face of Sam Hall.

She held her breath as she watched Iz walk slowly up the arena sidewalk, leaning slightly against the weight of her shouldered hockey bag. She’d changed into a different pair of jeans, different T-shirt. ‘What’re you going to wear?’ Sig had asked her on the way out. ‘Dunno,’ Iz grunted as though she didn’t care.

*Chin up*, Sig thought angrily as she squinted at Iz’s hunched back. *Get your goddamn head up*. She couldn’t walk into a murder of girls with her eyes glued to the bloody floor. She’d be eaten alive.

Her ponytail was crooked.

She walked through the door.

We fell into a swarm around the gate to the ice, watching the Zamboni amble a lazy line down the far boards, erasing the remains of the practice before ours.

The players’ chatter sawed through the Zamboni’s stretched movements. I stood in their middle and felt the waiting in my legs. The transformation always begins here, in the drum roll off the ice, waiting for a Zamboni, or for the rest of the team or the coaches, summer leaking from your body, muscles rearranging themselves under the weight of equipment into memories of this theatre of winter contained by the boards. How to act.

After the final lick of the Zamboni’s slow tongue, its last lazy circle, the ice lay smooth, a thin-skinned sheen. Dizzying mirror. The Zamboni inched toward its door and our swarm shifted, tightened, everyone moving toward the gate, lifting their sticks off the floor. Muscles flooding with memory.



Tykes league – me and all the boys. Chad Trenholm, a notorious parent-clinger, crying his eyes out beside the other team's net, stick on the ice, wailing, 'I want my mommy.' Even the motherless among us could feel his loss there on the ice, small but urgent. It spread among us, contagious as head lice.

Our coach, Uncle Larry as we all called him, stood on the bench behind us, unmoved, the sloppy game going on around Chad's inert body.

His leather mitts formed a fat bracket around his mouth. 'Keep it off the ice, Chad!' he called, a voice scrubbed porous by cigarettes and rink air. 'Off the ice!'

Our ice grew walls this way, conjured gradually through Uncle Larry's mantra. *Keep it off the ice, boys. Off the ice, Isabel. Am I speaking Chinese here, or what? I said, Keep it off the ice.*

Even if we did miss our moms, dads, grandparents – if their faces flickered lonely in the stands, an impossible distance away, if our toes were so cold we were convinced they'd fallen off and were rattling around in our skates, none of it was to touch our ice. This was our first training as men.

I wasn't a girl then. Not a tomboy either – that word, like some ragged misfit cat, tripping on the tails of others. I was a girl, of course, but not a *girl*. We were the same size, had the same voices, the same disguised faces behind our too-big helmet cages. And we all pretended we were someone else when we were out there. Someone bigger, faster. Someone with hands, as Uncle Larry said, as though the ones we owned were imposters, all the real hands leading disembodied lives out there, magic bleeding from their elusive fingers like the coins Sig used to conjure out of nowhere, silver blooming from the crack between her ring finger and pinky before her arthritis got too bad.

We played together, so we were the same. That was a long time ago.

But it can't all be kept off the ice. Even after the Zamboni has licked away the violence of our skate blades, there is always more. There's more and more.

I glided up the ice, right wing, playground squawk of voices behind me, eyes on Pelly's strides like a speedskater through the middle, but she'd lose the puck, I saw this in her flimsy grip. Voices around me calling for the puck, calling Pelly's name, along the boards, behind me, voices circling like seagulls, and I should call, I should call, but why didn't Pelly see me open? Head down, Pelly wouldn't look up, and she'd lose the puck, she was about to lose the puck. Open. And Pelly, head up, finally, cage tilting toward me and the puck coming fast, *tock* of the puck on my tape. Breathless, ready. And legs springing long, eyes breathing the bobbing helmets, and the jerseys all different colours – shit, different colours – and holding on to the puck, keeping it – who was on my team, I didn't know – their voices shouting my own name hot in my ears, coming from behind and beside, the heated jazz of the Z, sawing me open. Chest growing in breath, red bloom of lungs, ribs' tectonic shift. Open.

Breath moving in smooth currents, in and out of my lungs, puck clinging tight to the stick, and bodies everywhere, colours everywhere. But now I saw only the spaces between, precise. Incisions in the frozen air. The smooth slice of blades, alignment of joints and muscle, angles measured and tight. Mathematical wonder.

And then Hal was bearing down on me, and I could feel the swing, tumbling back into myself, but not quite, logic still strung down the electrical wires of my legs, Hal bearing down, script unravelling in my limbs, legs coiling and then boneless, not thinking, feeling Hal's hard bones against my shoulder, all of Hal's bones at once against the boards, and then I was looking down, spine still buzzing.

Hal sprawled, her gloves and stick littering the ice in a circumference appropriate to impact, like a plane wreck.

'Yard sale!' someone shouted across the ice.

Hal lay on her stomach, hands clutching at her helmet, ragged gasps. She rolled on to her back.

'I'm – I'm sorry – I forgot – I played hockey with guys, and – ' I couldn't breathe, Hal's face red and crumpled. Moon sprinted over.

'Jesus Christ! What's wrong with – ?' She saw my face. 'Oh – well, there's no hitting – Hal, are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' Hal said and hoisted herself up off the ice with a sharp breath.

'I'm really sorry. I – '

Hal turned her back and skated away. I looked to Moon, throat tight.

'Hey, no,' Moon said, as though reprimanding a puppy. 'No. You injure one of our players and that's – Hal's our captain – if she got bumped off pre-season, I don't – ' Tears elbowed the backs of my eyes. Moon touched my arm with her glove and tilted her head slightly. 'Hey, I know – listen. It's like this. Just don't do it again.'

I glided back to the line at the boards.

'You okay, buddy?' Toad asked Hal. I slouched behind them, making myself small. I could see the muscle in Hal's jaw clenching through the side of her cage.

'I was just laid out by a fucking Barbie doll. Other than that, I'm great,' she said.

I cleared my throat and looked over into Pelly's stall where she hid, face red and wet, her braces exposed in a pained grimace, silver gleaming from the vague shadow cast by the shelves above. Her shoulder pads spun slowly on their hook, like a mobile, shrouding half her face.

'Are you okay?' I asked. Pelly shook her head, hopeless. Toad came over and sat on the other side of her, nudging her to make room.

'I won't steal your tape any more, champ. You don't have to cry about it.' She smiled into the stall.

'I sucked.' An echo.

'If you sucked, Pelter, then we all did. It was a fucking gong show. Mooner got a heinous haircut, and she's taking it out on us.'

'I'm going to get cut.'

'Nope.'

'I am, Toad. You don't know.'

'I do know. And, anyways, it's just the first day. You can get better, but Mooner's mullet won't improve for a long time, unless she shaves her head. And that's a good thing, you know?'

Silence.

'It is a mullet,' Pelly said.

Toad hit her on the knee. 'It really is. Boz says no, but it is. Heinous Hall of Fame material. Just don't worry about stuff right now, Pelter, okay? Seriously.'

Toad went back to her stall. Pelly's head emerged after a bit and she leaned over again, attacking her laces.

'I'm okay,' she said to me, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

I nodded. 'That's good.' We undressed in silence. I looked over at Hal, speaking gravely to Boz, eyebrows raised. Boz nodded her head over and over, the tiny tips of braids dancing on her shoulders. Her glasses filled with the yellow light of the room, burning bright ovals against her dark skin.

'Are you okay?' Pelly asked.

'What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine.'

'You worried about Hal?'

'No, no.' I wiped my skate blades with an old T-shirt, kept my head down. 'A little bit, I guess.'

'Just stay away from her for a while. She'll forget about it. Pretty sweet hit though, eh?'

'I just – I didn't mean to, that's all.'

'It was like, *Pow!* And we were all like, *Holy shit, did that happen?* And we were laughing a bit?'

I walked along the curve of boards toward the rink door that would spit me onto the road leading back to Rez. The ice lay empty and gleaming. Fluorescent lights hung a steady hum in the rafters, their blurred reflections crowding the surface of the ice. I passed an open door cut into the stands like a mountain cave, seats rearing up high above it. A man's voice called out the door. 'Is that Isabel?'

I thought it was Stan, the assistant coach. I turned around and a stranger stepped from the doorway, craning his neck nervously.

'Look at you, then,' he said quietly, as though we'd been reunited after years apart. 'There's the face.'

He looked kind of lost standing there in the small doorway, no one else around. He wore navy blue sweatpants that rode up a bit around the ankles, a white polo shirt tucked in. The shirt was old and thinned so you could see the orangey hue of skin and roughly sketched chest hairs beneath. A black leather fanny pack hung crooked around his thin hips.

I smiled awkwardly, my feet still pointing toward the door to the parking lot.

‘Oh – pardon me. Sorry.’ A high-pitched little laugh. ‘My – I’m Ed.’ He took a couple of hesitant steps over and then shook my hand. Strong shake, then, as though he’d just remembered something, he dropped my hand and combed his fingers through his hair with the quick motions of habit, adjusted the strands into a consistency meant to keep up the illusion his scalp wasn’t peeking through. But he had this look while he made the adjustment – he crouched his head down like he was about to be hit and rolled his eyes upward, hand performing the furtive adjustment, so it looked like he was pleading for me not to notice and, although I was confused, I instantly wanted to tell him he was handsome. I wanted to pat him on the back like a dog.

‘You don’t know me, I guess,’ he said. ‘You don’t. I knew your, uh, dad. I played with Kristjan back in the day.’ An apologetic tone.

Of course.

‘You’re from Kenora?’ I said.

‘No, we played Junior that one year here in Winnipeg. Billeted together. Geez, you look like him, eh?’ Amazed eyes.

‘That’s what I’m told.’

‘Okay, well.’ His eyes slid to the ground, then over to his door.

‘You work for the team?’ I asked.

He smiled quickly, then ran a hand over his mouth. Long fingers with knotted knuckles. ‘You could say that, I guess.’ He pointed past my head. ‘I drive the beast.’

The black nose of the Zamboni poked out from its stall beyond the boards, the headlights glowing dully in the shadows.

‘Oh, okay,’ I said and made a movement toward the door. ‘I see.’

‘You going out? Just hang on one second, I’ll come with you. Need a smoke.’

Ed patted the fanny pack. He went through the door, then came out pulling on a beaten-up windbreaker, fluorescent green stripes on the sleeves. He shut the door behind him and the room disappeared into the stands.

He held the door open for me. The late summer air felt curdled after the rink’s ice-thinned atmosphere; walking into the dark parking lot felt like an escape.

I’d stay away from the paths on the way back, take the lit road that wound around the perimeter of campus and smacked straight into the residence. Sig and I had mapped this route earlier in the day. A million years ago. Ed picked up a dusty pylon and used it to prop open the door, then pulled his cigarettes from the fanny pack. The lighter’s tiny flare and then the orange tip of the cigarette brightened against the shadows of his face. I hovered for a moment.

He squinted against the smoke blowing into his eyes and tilted his head at me. ‘You walking?’ he said.

‘Yeah, it’s not far. The residence. McMurtry.’

He clicked his tongue and looked down the road. ‘Murch, eh?’ The curving line of amber street lights. A rusty station wagon sped past, a thud of bass coming out the window with a tortured twist of song. It went around the bend and the low hum of distant traffic took over again.

‘Decent amount of people, I guess,’ Ed said. ‘You best keep under those lights, though. And stay off the street else one of those morons will mow you down.’

‘Yeah, I will,’ I said. ‘Okay, well, see you.’ I raised my hand and started to walk.

‘Buddy a mine told me about you,’ Ed called at my back. ‘His nephew plays in Dryden and he seen you play against him at some tournament. Said he couldn’t believe it – Norse has a girl and she has his hands. So Stan and me are having beers last winter, I tell him about it. We drove down – Moon too – that weekend to watch you play. I told them, “She has his hands, you know, you’ll want to see this.”’

I knew the game he was talking about. Moon had approached me afterward and we'd talked about the team. Then Sig and I took the ice road, plowed across the lake, home from the rink like we always did because it was quicker, but it felt like Sig was speeding, and I was scared the tires would spin out and the ice would twirl the car around and around like a toy.

'I never really knew how they found out about me,' I said.

Ed gave an embarrassed laugh. He waved his cigarette through the air like a ref saying *No Goal* and stepped away from the long triangle of light cast over the pylon onto the cement.

'Just wanted to say hi is all,' he said. 'You best get going before you get cold.'

I took a couple of steps backwards. A crescent moon rubbed against the dark bulk of Sam Hall. 'Bye, Ed.'

"Night, Isabel."

Sig relinquished Kristjan in chunks. Every night, a dose of him, as though it might cure what ailed me. She'd start with something tangible, something I could see there in the pictures – his teeth, say. Scraping at his grin in one of the old albums. She'd start with a tooth, the hard fact of enamel, and it would be hard to tell when she crept away from these small truths of his body into something bigger. That unknowable lake of myth that grew and grew.

'Ah, but his teeth were such beauts,' she'd start. 'Teeth like your grandpa's, big and strong. Kid drank milk like it was going out of style – jugs and jugs. We had our milk delivered then – none of this Safeway garbage. Charlie – that's it. He was the milkman, and lugged all those jugs to the back porch for years thinking we must have twenty kids or thereabouts, me and your grandpa. But he only ever seen Kristjan slamming in and out of the house. So one day, finally, when he's collecting money from me, he says, "Where you hiding all those other youngsters?" I laugh and say, "It's just the one for us. The boy." And you should've seen his eyes, they went real wide, and he says, "I don't believe it." And I just nod – what do you say to that? And he says, "Well, ma'am," – called me *ma'am*, if

you can believe it, only time I was a ma'am in my life – “Well, ma'am,” he says, “we’ll have to look into getting that boy a cow all his own.””

I shifted in my bed, and Sig shimmied in so she could swing her other leg up onto the mattress. She sat on top of the comforter, pinning me into a tight cocoon. The dim bedside light rippled shadows over the bed like water, so it seemed as though we were tucked into the cabin of a boat.

‘Well, I forgot ol’ Charlie and what he’d said, busy with Kristjan and his baseball – spring at the time. But not a couple of weeks later, if I don’t arrive home from bowling to find a big fat cow on our front lawn, chewing on the grass like the old doll owned the place!’

‘Liar!’ My eyes sparked open.

‘How can you call your poor old grandma names like that, child? A cow in *that front yard*.’ Sig feigned indignation, a hand thrown across her chest, and pointed in the direction of the lake.

‘Could it swim?’

‘Oh, she swam like a fish, Isabel. Can’t you just see it? She was too slow to take out for walks, real lazylike. So Kristjan would swim her way over to Eagle’s Nest Island and back. You’d just see their two heads bobbing along, way in the distance, Kristjan circling back once in a while to help her along. Hot summer, and Kristjan was a prune the whole time.

‘And that milkman, Charlie, never came again. We didn’t need him with Bobby Orr – that’s what we called her – right there in our front yard. Kristjan had as much milk as he could drink, eh? Kid needed his own cow.’

I inherited a lot of his stuff. People die and their hockey equipment lives on. Sig joked that she’d cross-dressed me as a kid, decking me out in his old clothes all worn at the knees and elbows, but why the hell not, the clothes were there in the attic, ripe for the picking. But that wasn’t it – I knew Sig found some sort of satisfaction in the reincarnation of the clothes, seeing them walk again, seeing them run and climb trees.



So I got the clothes and the equipment and the following parts as well: his eyes, his laugh, his cowlick and his hockey hands, among others. Apparently this is the most unbelievable part, these hands of mine: I handle the puck the same way, have the same moves, have his *hands*. As though I'd grown from these hands somehow. Hands growing arms like branches, skin, crawling into bloom, growing a heart, eyes, a mouth. But first, the hands. The rest: an afterthought, a revision.

As I walked down the hall cutting the third floor of Rez in two, my neighbour slipped through his door and then slammed it behind him, as though he were being chased. I'd met the neighbour, Gavin, as I lugged my hockey bag out of my room before practice. The extreme straightness of his part looked like a wound, a pinkish line carved in his head, and I had to dodge his bad breath as he stepped in centimetres from me and said, 'Greetings,' eyebrows pulled down gravely. His dad had walked up behind him then, wrangling a huge stereo speaker that looked seventies, and gestured a sort of apology at me with his reddened face, moving his grey handlebar moustache in weary acknowledgement of this son of his, as he angled his elbows through the door.

All day, throughout the building, parents had been depositing kids. Handing us off. The hallways crackled with the static of separation, the hot worry of mothers. When the brown hallway door closed behind Sig, cleanly, quietly, I disappeared.

The smell of Windex and musty carpet spilled out as I opened the door. I yanked up the window and propped it open with the amputated arm of a hockey stick. Then I stood in the middle of the room and rotated a full circle, assessing my options. I sat on the plastic chair in front of the narrow desk that had only two legs, the front ones, and was bolted to the wall at the back, as though they'd sawed it in two and Gavin or someone else had the other half. I unpacked the box of school supplies Sig had put together and then arranged the binders and notebooks in the scarred wooden shelf above the desk and resisted the sadness offered to me in the pages of the little

blue Daytimer – Sig pulling it proudly from the Zellers bag: ‘Thought you’d need one of these.’

I lay on the bed and closed my eyes and tried to paint the space behind my eyelids the exact blue shade of the living-room walls at home.

Music boomed suddenly into my room from next door. Prince began to croon. I groaned. That huge speaker. I thought of the blue emptiness of the living room. Sig sitting in its bruise. She hated quiet. She would choose Prince over quiet. I picked up the phone.

‘Hello,’ she snapped, because a phone call was an insult to whatever she was doing.

‘It’s garbage day tomorrow,’ I said. She chuckled, slow, and then harder, gaining momentum until she severed it with a cough.

‘So?’ she said.

‘Did you put it out?’

She snorted. ‘Yes, Mother. Mother dearest. Four bags, all your junk, thanks a lot. Anything else?’

‘Nope,’ I said.

‘Well, the sky hasn’t goddamn fallen since the departure of Your Excellency, but you’ll be the first to know when it does. I even remembered to feed the dog. We may just survive this, kiddo.’ Sig snorted again. ‘How was it?’

I paused, weighed the possible answers. I could tell her about Ed.

‘I hit a girl,’ I said.

About how, when he watched me play, Ed saw Kristjan’s hands and in a poof of diesel and snow the Zamboni man became my fairy godmother.

‘She big?’

And I ended up there, lying in the narrowest bed I’d ever seen, in the smallest room, listening to the complaints of my muscles and Prince.

‘Pretty big.’

‘You hurt?’

And Sig had ended up alone.

‘Nah.’

‘She hurt?’

‘Well, didn’t seem like it. She was spread all over the ice, though.’

‘Ah,’ Sig said.

‘Yeah.’

‘She got up, though?’

‘Eventually.’

‘Ah. Well, no harm done, kiddo. Shake it off. All your equipment in there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’d you eat for supper?’

‘Bought a tuna sandwich from the food court.’

‘The food court – look at you, eh?’

‘It was pretty crappy.’

‘Ah. Not bad for practice anyways. What are you doing now?’

I looked around the room. ‘Lying on my bed. My neighbour’s a nerd and he’s listening to Prince.’

‘Oh, hey now, you watch it, kid. You jocks. Nerds grow up to rule the world, you know, so you be nice to him. He could be prime minister one day and you’ll be in the beer leagues, Miss Big Time. Just watch it.’

I laughed. ‘I’ll be driving the Zamboni,’ I said, and Sig snorted.

‘You know you are not in the beer gardens if you can hear me right now.’ The bullhorn voice echoed into the room from the hallway, sending a ripple of surprised laughter around the lecture hall. ‘You are not in the beer gardens. You are in class. I know this because I am walking down the hall, past your classroom – ’ A woman in a long skirt and Doc Marten boots walked up the stairs and closed the door with a grudging smile. This door opened into the upper atmosphere of the lecture hall, the rest of the room dropping down from where she stood like a swim-down cave, old brown seats forming walls. It had rained the night before and the smell of wet grass and mud had been carried in on the soles of sneakers and sandals. I’d chosen a seat next to the stairs, midway down, and now I sat and waited, clutching my backpack on my lap. The woman descended the stairs. Was this the professor, Dr. Hurlitzer? Based on

the name, I'd pictured old and tall and square and moustached. She picked up a stack of papers from the desk in the pit of the room and looked up with a small twitch of her ponytail. She couldn't have been more than thirty. I looked around the half-full room, wondering if I had the wrong one.

That summer, I'd swum blindly through numbers in the course catalogue – section numbers, lab numbers, course numbers. Awkwardly trying on the descriptions. I'd talked to a career counselor at the university. Physiotherapist, I threw out to her. This was the one Sig liked. Teacher, I also said. Biologist. Hockey coach. Each answer felt like confessing an exotic, hidden desire, but none of it seemed to surprise her. General first year, she told me, with conviction, and these words had calmed me instantly. And so: Psychology, English, Biology, History. A huge island to roam around until. That was as far as I'd gotten: *until*.

'Okay, everyone,' the woman said. 'I have the syllabuses here. Dr. Hurlitzer is in Germany still, so just grab one and then you can go. She'll be back next week. I'm the TA – my name is Morag. Any questions, I can answer them for you. Otherwise, see you next week.'

That was it. The beginning and end of my first class and the room stirred suddenly with swooping students, flying down to the TA and her papers, then fleeing the room, syllabus in hand, back out into the sun. These moments in the classroom a minor setback to the anarchy of a beer-drenched first day.

Student traffic swelled into a thick orbit around University Centre, a gravitational pull toward the beer gardens set up behind the building. Moon was out of town, so no tryouts that afternoon. Without the ice time to move toward, the afternoon loomed. Going back to Rez wasn't an option. In the past couple of days leading to the start of classes, the halls had become crammed. The soundtrack of endlessly colliding schedules: relentless door slamming, muffled beating of shoes on the carpet, voices glancing off each other. A hotel of teenagers freed, completely, from the leashes of their parents' eyes for the first time. Musk of hormones and hangovers. Students staggering down the halls in pyjamas and bedhead well into the afternoon.