

Excerpted from *The Five Hole Stories*.



I AM BOBBY WOLF

*YOU ARE SPINNING
ROTATING
AN ORB*

“*MON DIEU!*” they shout behind the windows of their brasseries. “AY, MR. WOLF! AY, MR. BOBBEEE!” Fans clutter the sidewalks waving napkins, placemats, postcards, coasters, and magazines. One pudgy kid with a fat head rushes out of his papa’s butcher shop, handing the Wolf a ballpoint pen and a white rag. “Papa says he hate you,” he spits. “But mama, she’s in love!” The Wolf signs it for the old woman, who’ll spread it across her night-table under her prayer candle, jewel box and tobacco tin filled with cotton swabs, moving her hand across the rough cloth come playoff time while the old man lays prone in his Habs red and blue, snoring and reeking of rotgut in the rumpled bed behind her. “My favourite is Pierre Pilote!” says the boy, flashing narrow eyes and chipped teeth, drool leaking from the corners of his mouth. Within seconds, the Wolf is horseshoed by people pressing closer, their faces rising to him, mouths agape. He looks away into the emptiness of the sky, where a kiss of pigeons flies out of an eavestrough, their milky brown bodies lost against a long cloud that drifts across the sky. Soon, the cops show up, flipping open their little yellow pads: “Geez, the boys down at the station don’t know what they’re missing!” TO MONTREAL’S FINEST: KEEP ON SHOOTING STRAIGHT. Taxis lean on horns and buses stutter and double-take before the paparazzi arrive, snapping flashbulbs, shouldering him, trying to get under his coat. The Wolf holds up the flat of his hand-- “That’s all for today, gents!”-- and steps into a waving taxi door, which closes onto an angry, tightening face that reaches out as they pull away, then pumps the big Go Fuck Yourself with his finger in the rear view.

*IN SPACE IS PEACE
IN LIFE IS SPACE
BREATHE*

“Your number one fan, eh?” asks the driver, a small man in a wool cap.

“One of them, I guess.”

“Me, I’m a Beliveau man,” he says.

“Helluva player,” replies the Wolf, watching the crowd shrink.

“My boy admires your shot,” he says, shaking his head. “That crazy shot.”

“Thanks.”

"I didn't say that I admired your shot," he says. "I think it's impure."

"Impure, eh?"

The driver laughs. "Back in the old days, it didn't take a blade that went this way and that way and this way to score goals," he says, making curving motions with his hand. "You played with a straight stick, something you pulled off a floorboard. A bed slat. Didn't need to do tricks. Players used to make that fucking puck sing with what they had."

"You don't like Boom Boom, either? He uses one."

"PAH! Boom Boom. He had one good year. My *grand-mere* could have scored fifty with the chances he got."

"I thought that every Hab was sacred around these parts."

"You think us French are blind to the nuances of the game, Bobby Wolf?"

"No, I didn't mean..."

"We drummed Donnie Marshall out of town, didn't we? Chewed up Mr. Worsely and spat him out like raw meat PLAH! We gave him three nervous breakdowns, you know," he says, waving his fingers in the rear view.

"Listen, I..."

"I've heard it all before. The English think the French are little blind dogs. Meep meep meep meep meep," he says, performing a talking pantomime with his hand. "I don't mean to cast aspersions, Mr. Bobby Wolf, but really. My passions lie not with a player simply because he wears the *bleu, blanc et rouge*. It helps, yes, but please, allow me this, okay?"

"Of course. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, friend. Be worried. At this moment, the Habs' play is cresting. I don't have to remind you that you haven't scored in five games."

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"Not reminding me."

"You see, us French. We are clever, eh?" he says, stabbing his temple.

"Yes, very clever," sighs The Wolf, looking out the window at the tree-lined street. Pappin's self-help tapes roll over in his mind: *The tranquility of the universe. The attitude of an empty sky. The simplicity of a woman's back.*

"What you need is a good salve," he says.

"I'm taking supplements."

"Pills," he scoffs. "Everything with a pill, eh? This salve is different. It's from the north. One dab on your scrotum and you'll be invigorated, Bobby Wolf. I am a simple taxi man, but this much I know: once you apply the salve, it is absorbed into the walls of the skin and then-- sweeeeeesh!-- believe me, straight into the bloodstream!"

"If anything's gonna touch my ball sack, it better be attached to a woman."

"So proud, Bobby. But beware. Are you so proud that you think you can overcome the powers of this slump? Don't be foolish. This salve is magic."

"Thanks anyway."

"I know a man who takes it who is seventy-seven. Still, he fornicates!"

"That's swell."

"Carries twenty bushels of grain a day. Keeps a stable full of cows, goats."

"What's in it?"

"What?"

"The salve."

"Man gel. Sap, cedar oil, beaver milk."

"Christ."

The driver swerves off St. Catherines and heads down a narrow alley.

"Quickly, we'll go."

"Where? No. I've an appointment."

“It can wait. I am doing you a great favour, Mr. Bobby Wolf, star of the Hawks. You see? This Frenchman has a greater concern for the game!”

*SEE THE SOUND
HEAR THE PICTURE
FEEL THE AIR*

The house smells of old cushions. Emile puts the Wolf in a plastic-covered chair in the sitting room, and says, “Wait, Bobby Wolf,” and hands him a pawed-over sports section from *La Presse*:

WOLF, QUE MALADIE?

The light is dim. The air dense, hot, thick. There’s the sound of an old woman’s voice through a door, then Emile rushing down a hallway. “Come with me,” he says, returning to the sitting room. “My mother wants to see you.”

The old woman is lying in bed. Above her is a huge wooden cross draped with beads and palms. Her eyes are barely open, but when the Wolf walks in, filling the door frame, she lifts her head and motions for him to approach.

He moves beside her and she grabs a handful of London Fog.

“Is it so bad that you must come to an old *vache* like me for help, Bobby Wolf?” she croaks. Her face has a gray pallor, skin folding into itself.

“Mama,” whispers the driver. “The salve.”

“Your powers. Where are they now, Bobby Wolf?”

“It’s only been two weeks,” he tells her.

“Two weeks can be a lifetime, a career,” she reminds him.

“Two weeks.”

“Watch neither the calendar nor the clock, Bobby Wolf. Watch the stars. Time is passing through them. Time is being drawn across the skies. Do you remember Augustus Dupuis? He wore number twelve, I think.”

“Mama, the salve.”

“He was a star once. In my time, the twenties. Skated like the wind and possessed a shot like a gun. Then one day, *sacre bleu*, it was over. One game. Two. Five. Ten. Fifteen. Soon, he held his stick with the tenderness of a man choking a snake. He was our favourite player. My parents sent me down to the rink to bring him birch-bark tea, spiced meats, herbal creams, culpepper snuff. Of course, he refused to take any of it. A man once told me that Dupuis tried to drink his way out. Whored around the city, broken, desperate. Then: nothing. No goals in twenty games. We brought him the salve and he threw it into the street. I watched him. He had no respect for magic, the universe. And now, here you are standing in front of me. A star. You’ve never even heard of this man.”

“I have now,” he tells her.

“This is a start,” she says, raising a single sepulchral finger.

The old woman reaches for her night-table. She opens a drawer and hands him a vial filled with a gold liquid, then places her hand on the Wolf’s.

“Rub this into your chestnuts,” she says, coughing.

“What’s in it?”

“Maybe your life,” she says.

“That’s an awfully small bottle for such an enormous thing,” he tells her.

“You can laugh now, that is good. But laughter comes from the same place as sadness. A joke can be either tragic or funny, depending on the ending.”

The old woman raises herself up on her elbows and pulls the London Fog closer to her face. Her breath is sour, her eyes half- alive.

“Your chestnuts,” she croaks.
“My chestnuts,” says The Wolf.
She closes her eyes.

PASS INTO THE VOID
PASS THROUGH THE VOID
FLOATING

Club Paris is the same every hour of the day or night: swirling lights, long couches, clacking beaded curtains, mirrored walls, the scent of desert root, coconut oil, Lamb’s Breath. And, of course, women in every state of undress. Dancers from Grenada, Puerto Rico, Sept Iles; men from Belgium, Toronto, The Hague. Bouncers wider than two-car garages with watering can faces, all of whom immediately recognize The Wolf. “Afternoon, Mr. Wolf,” “Greetings and salutations, Mr. Wolf.” He slivers the doorman a smile and palms him a twenty. He shows him to a private room, lit softly. In it, there’s a divan, a glass table, a bucket with champagne on ice, and a bowl of fresh fruit. Music starts up outside: “Let me stand next to your FIRE!” As he leans forward and peers into the main room, a naked black chick in devil’s horns is writhing on stage, dappling her body with globs of dayglo dripped from a paint brush. The Wolf wonders if this is what Pappin meant when he said, “Temptation is the last step before the first stage of self-discovery.” But before he can know, there’s a taste in the air: a warm Abran breeze carried on a hawk’s breast. Her hair is sandy, her skin golden. Sylvie looks at him and says, “My boy is having trouble filling the net, yes?”

“I’ve been listening to these tapes,” he tells her.

“And what do these tapes say?” she asks.

“They tell me to keep myself open to the forces of the universe.”

“Come with me,” she says, taking his hand. “I know how to find these forces.”

She takes him to a room that is painted hot orange. They lay on a round bed, with orange posts and an orange headboard. There’s a record player in the corner shaped like a space pod. With long black fingernails, she flips up the top, moving the tone arm to a Marvin Gaye album that begins with a wha-wha guitar and ends, a half hour later, with the heartbeat of a single bass drum.

“It’s been five games,” he says, lying naked across the bed.

“And your team is losing?” she asks, playing with the hair on his arm.

“No, no. Mikita’s scoring.”

“Well, then, perhaps if the universe is not open to you, it is open to him.”

“Stan doesn’t have those concerns. He’s Czech. He worries about what the next day’s going to bring. Coming from abject poverty will do that to you.”

“You’re family was not poor?”

“We grew up on a farm. I guess we were poor. I never felt poor.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Not poor.”

“Well, then.”

“I don’t know. I’ve got nothing to complain about, believe me.”

“Then that is good.”

“Sylvie, I’ve been given this salve.”

“Salve?”

“A lotion. An old Quebecois woman told me it would restore my powers, even though I told her that my powers weren’t fleeting. Not yet anyway.”

“How old was this woman?”

“Old as dirt.”

“It is best not to ignore the practices of these old French women. They have survived for many years living by the same means.”

“Her son brought me to her in his taxi. Funny little guy.”
“What did she say to do with this salve?”
“She told me to coat my chestnuts.”
“Your chestnuts?”
“You know,” he says, pointing between his legs. “Chestnuts.”
“Oh,” says Sylvie, covering her mouth. “Well, then. Where is it?” she asks, reaching for his coat.
“There’s no need to...”
“This streak is in your chestnuts?” she asks, getting up.
“My ‘nuts, my head, my hands. Pappin says it’s a problem with my chi, my spiritual equilibrium,” says The Wolf, watching Sylvie rise off the bed to stand naked in front of him, spreading the golden salve into the palm of her hand.
“I like a man who is concerned about his universe,” she says, stretching out beside The Wolf, her face lying flat against his stomach.
“No goals in five,” incants The Wolf.
“Is that your mantra, Bobby Wolf?”
“My what?”
“The points will come. You are Bobby Wolf.”
“Maybe the answer to my problem is right here in front of me,” he tells her, watching her position her shoulders between his legs. “Maybe it’s right here and I don’t even know it.”
“I am a French woman. One day I will be an old French woman,” she says, working her arm with the strength and elegance of a swan’s neck. “Yes. I am a French woman,” she repeats, “and you are Bobby Wolf.”
The salve is warm on his skin.
“You are Bobby Wolf.”
Bobby Wolf closes his eyes and dreams of pigeons returning to the trough.
“How does that feel?” she wants to know.
Suddenly, he is light, free.

*RIDE WITH THE AIR
YOU CAN
YOU WILL*

“You are Bobby Wolf,” whispers Sylvie.
“I am Bobby Wolf.”