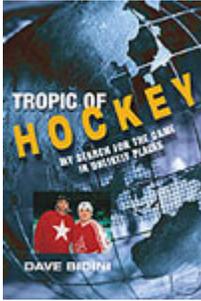


Excerpted from *Tropic of Hockey*, unedited.



THE EYES OF SAM WONG

It was now my turn to skate.

The tournament moved into its second half, where men's teams made up of ex-pats and international women's clubs took to the ice. My team was called The Hong Kong Canadians. Seeing that most pro franchises these days are named after weather systems or animals (or in the case of the Columbus Blue Jackets: bugs), our nickname had the ring of a club who might have competed in an amateur tournament one hundred years ago. It was also the first time that I would represent my country abroad.

The Canadians' first official game was at The Glacier. I made my way to Kowloon Tong with my hockey bag slung on my back like a large gelatinous fin. It shimmied behind me when I walked, cutting a swath through pedestrians making their way through the city. From above, I must have looked like a bear wandering through a field of tall grass; as soon as I created my wake, it was immediately swallowed up by bodies. People pushed and elbowed and ducked under the bag and nobody said a thing. When I got on the subway, it lay in front of me like a big sleeping dog and considering the time it would spend stuffed in the trunk of my car, my hockey bag never had it better.

I arrived early for the game. From the beginning of my adult hockey life, I've liked to sit alone and settle my head before playing. I've never meditated, but I find that entering a rink is to pass into a place of calm and tranquility. When empty, there's a peace and solitude to hockey rinks that seals one off from the outside world. It is to step into a kind of hollow, and in the case of Skyrink, this quietude was exaggerated even more by the noise and bustle and colour of the Kowloon market. I dropped my hockey bag to the floor like a sack of mung beans and laid my skates in front of me like a Zen master readying his incense and zabuton. I placed a fresh t-shirt along with my running shoes under the bench, and cantilevered my stick on a rack over my head, all of this an attempt to fuse with the aura of the rink: the cold of the ice pressing on my face like a flat mountain rock, the decay of the crowds, the still-life of the beer cans and hockey tape and gum wrappers strewn about the room, the quiet of the benches, the ice machine thrumming.

I settled on a bench in the dressing room and proceeded to change. I must admit that the wearing of hockey equipment was never as thrilling to me as it is now. As a kid, it was hard learning how to fasten all of that equipment on one's body, but when I wear it these days, I feel giddy and free. I draw enormous pleasure, for instance, in being able to strap a garter belt around my glutinous mid-rift. It just tickles me that something so feminine would be so vital to the hockey player's ensemble. Some say that hockey is, by nature, a macho sport, but to my mind, the wearing of such dangly underthings goes a long way towards debunking that theory. Similarly,

the idea of fitting a plastic protective cup around one's nether regions strikes me as not being very macho at all; were hockey truly a manly game, we would have done away with the cup years ago. But I'm glad that we didn't, because there's something oddly thrilling about competing against persons who actually want to inflict damage on one's nether parts. I can also attest first-hand to the boldness of a sport which allows one's groin to expand in public without shame or fear of reprisal. And I know for a fact that there's not one male hockey player out there who hasn't rapped their knuckles over their perforated shell and secretly proclaimed, "Call me Plasto-Dick! King of Mankind!" while pretending to secure the disc in its sleeve.

Once the cup and garter are in place, the shin-pads are fitted, then promptly covered up by striped stockings clipped high on your leg. At this stage of undress, one looks as much like Marlene Deitrich as Dimitri Kristich. It's amusing to think that at one time in hockey's history, some fop decided to ink circles around the legs of the uniform, giving even the most battle-ravaged hockey player the fanciful look of a butterfly collector. We've all known psychotic hockey players who are surprisingly mild-mannered off the ice (enforcer Stu Grimson comes to mind -- a fighter who thumps goons at night and writes children's fables by day) and perhaps those whimsical stockings have something to do with this. There was once a backlash against hockey socks in the 1980's, which resulted in the creation of Cooperalls -- long pants with shin-guards sewn into them. They replaced the hockey sock for a winter or two, but a serious design flaw -- they were bell-bottoms -- limited their appeal, and since the 70s revival hadn't yet hit, they eventually went the way of the rover and coaches shouting "By Crimmeny!"

Dressing to play hockey is like going out for Hallowe'en. On most hockey nights, I leave my house wearing a typically seasonal ensemble -- gloves, hat, winter boots -- only to reappear an hour later made up like an extra in some bizarre Nordic ice pageant. To play hockey is to metamorphosize without being judged sociopathic. I'm sure those highly paid barristers who like to be dominated in their off hours would have an easier time in the press were they caught wearing blades along with the usual paraphernalia (and that's the last time I'll mention bondage in this book).

Skates are the most traditional part of a hockey player's ensemble, and probably the most important. In his book "Soccer in Sun and Shadow," Edward Galeano suggests that the soccer ball is feminine in the way players treat it, and while I wouldn't say the same about the asexual puck, I believe that we care for our skates the way we might pamper a loved one. Players are forever coddling their blades: rubbing them down with a stone, protecting them with cotton sleeves, wiping off snow, drying them with a towel, rewarding the tongue with new laces, replacing or tightening rivets, and, most tellingly, entrusting them to strange hands so that they may be sharp and true before important games. No other piece of equipment is as loved and laboured over. Even the way we hold them-- our fingers curved around the blade and housing-- reflects a certain tenderness. Elbow pads and socks are merely flung into hockey bags, but the skate is tucked into the end of one's satchel. Some bags even come with a separate compartment. Skates are also the one piece of equipment that players brag to each other about. It's dressing room news whenever someone gets a new pair because an investment in blades suggests that the player is serious about their game. I've been to the Hall of Fame and seen hundreds of sticks. But skates are the only other piece of equipment kept under glass.

The sweater principle is a pretty important one, too. I'm the kind of fellow who decides how to dress in public according to what's not lying in the laundry basket, but picking out a jersey for a game is a much more deliberate matter. I'm like Michael Jackson in this regard: "Hmmm. Am I feeling royal blue or garnet today? Perhaps a subtle mauve? What about a black or continental yellow?" The colour of one's pants or socks is inconsequential, but jerseys make the player. Those who wear light colours play differently from those who wear black. Draping black instead of white over one's body is a conscious decision, because you almost always tend to look bigger in dark colours. It sends a certain message about your style of play. No one ever thinks, "Tonight, I'm gonna crack skulls!" only to get dressed in pale blue and lavender.

The sweater also allows the rec. player to publicly support his or her favourite team. Skates, gloves and pants often look the same, but the jersey is a mode of self-expression. This may explain why musicians such as Alice Cooper, Mike Levine, Snoop Doggy and Coolio started wearing them. It's become almost a cliché for touring musicians to don the colours of the local sports club in an attempt to curry favour with the audience. I know a fellow by the name of Lou Klein, who, while working at a rock festival a few years ago, got word that Robert Smith, lead singer of The Cure, wanted a Toronto Maple Leaf jersey for his show. The idea of Smith in a hockey sweater is an absurd thought. This is a man who has inspired legions of teenagers to dye their hair black, tease it into a sort of mussed bird's nest, ring black circles around their eyes over a patina of white pancake make up, dress in long overcoats, and apply great gobs of lipstick over their mouths. There was a better chance that Bob Marley was into hockey than Robert Smith.

The concert was a few hours outside of Toronto. Lou drove through the mid-day summer heat to the nearest town -- Barrie, Ontario -- but couldn't find a Leaf jersey. He doubled back to Peterborough, where he had the same result. He called his superiors, but they told him, "Robert must have his jersey!"

Lou turned and headed to Toronto. He finally found one. He fought his way back along the highway, which was jammed with people driving to the concert. He sat in the stifling heat of his car getting angrier with Robert Smith by the second. He finally made his way back to the site, where he stormed through the artist's compound, burst into The Cure's dressing room and flung the jersey across the trailer at Smith, who was reclining on a couch.

"Here's your jersey," said Lou. "I hope you like it, even though I know you'll never fuckin' wear it again."

Lou slammed the door and was fired on the spot. But he made his point. Robert Smith wore the jersey for the rest of his North American tour.

The last vital piece of equipment is the helmet. Don Cherry has theorized that helmets and face-guards are largely responsible for the nastiness of the NHL game -- vicious high-sticks and slashes and chin-high chops. I agree with The Plaid One in this regard. One of the plagues of modern hockey has been the number of players getting konked out of the game due to concussions and other cranial ailments. You'd have thought that as soon as the league made it mandatory for head-gear to be worn, the number of injuries would decrease, but it hasn't been the case. From a rec. leaguer's point of view, there have been times when I've found my stick waving in the air only to think: "No worries. Just a little bonk off the old plastic." I've never seen more players in cages or visors throw their bodies in front of shots or passes. Protective head-gear has resulted in a kind of footballesque style of hockey which has created a whole new way of getting hurt. I don't wear a visor or cage, but the times that I've experimented with one, I felt like I was wearing an aquarium on my head. There's a sense of infallibility behind all of that plexiglass. Things look and sound different and it makes for a more interior, self-absorbed approach to the game.

There's a stigma attached to players who wear visors and cages. They're inevitably chippier than maskless players, though in no way am I implying that players who don't wear them aren't chippy. It's just that those whose mugs are enmeshed with reinforced steel are a little more inclined to whap you in the face than players who bare their mouth and proboscis. Cage-wearers can hit and not fear reprisal. Taking a punch off the cage is like getting a beach-ball bounced off your face. I have no problem with skaters who wear face-masks and play an honourable game, but negligent visor-wearers, as with Goatee Guys, should be drummed from the game. Then there's the Visor Wearing Goatee Guy. Don't get me started.

The helmet is sometimes a canvas, an art-thing. Players sticker them with team crests, numbers, band decals, bumper stickers, Dole fruit emblems, equipment crests, and the like. Some paint them, others scrape away the colours. Some wear bubble-helmets to look like Jammy Jagr or Mike Foligno; Jofas to look like Gretz or Jari Kurri; SK10s to ape Butch Goring; or the classic CCM to look like Doug Gilmour or Kirk Muller or Brian Trottier. Shopping for a helmet is like

looking for a bed -- it's something that you know you'll be spending a lot of time in for years to come.

Once this hulking costume is assembled, you walk out of the changing area about fifty pounds heavier, five inches wider, and at least a foot and a half taller. To take that first step onto the ice is to feel like an actor entering the stage from the wings (and I don't mean Patrick Swayze in "Youngblood"). It is here that you become your hockey self. Your language changes. Your words become gnarled and peppered with invective. You shout more excitedly than you ever would in your office, home or yoga class. You make every excuse to use the word "Fuck" because the mere sound of it gets you into the game. It doesn't take much to trigger the F word. Really, a hockey player will use any excuse to swear. I remember one game. I was jockeying my parts, which weren't sitting right in my cup.

"FUCK!" I screamed, as if I'd been bitten by a monkey.

"You okay, man?" asked one of my team-mates.

"Just my fuckin' balls."

"Squared?"

"No. They're not sitting right."

"Fuck I hate that."

"Ya, fuck."

"Still fucked up?"

"Ah, that's fuckin' better," I said, my hands plunged into my pants.

"Fuckin' eh."

Brad Niblock was the captain of the Hong Kong Canadians. He wore thick-lensed glasses and looked like a book-keeper on the ice. Like the rest of the fellows, he was employed by a multi-national corporation based out of Hong Kong. The players shared the same cultural experience of being Westerners adrift in Asian big business, and since most of them had competed either together or on separate teams in the Budweiser South China Ice Hockey League, there was a social cohesiveness in place before we passed our first puck.

Brad and Mark Sigson, our goaltender, were the first to show up at the rink. Mark arrived with his dad, Keith, who'd come over from Winnipeg to visit and help coach the team. Keith was a dead ringer for hockey writer Scott Young. The first thing I said to him was: "Hey, you look exactly like Scott Young!"

"Who?" he asked, turning his ear.

"Scott Young! Neil's dad."

"Neil who?"

"Neil Young."

"Who?"

I took this as an early sign that our team was in trouble. The rest of the players soon followed, among them Yanic Canteini, a French-Canadian gadabout who worked for Mercedes Benz. Yanic would lend my international hockey experience a pan-Canadian feel-- not only was it the first time I'd take to the ice in Asia against players from different parts of the globe, it was also the first time I'd play on the same team as a French-Canadian.

Once we suited up, we marched out of the dressing room. I took to the ice and saw that there were a few hundred people scattered among the stands. Here was another first: strangers watching me play hockey. The surface of the Glacier was hard and fast even though it lay in the sub tropics. My skates nipped the ice, spraying shavings of snow when I stopped, and it felt good to shake the last bit of jet lag from my legs. We lobbed shots at Mark and got a feel for the rink, and when the referee blew his whistle and dropped the puck to start the game, I was thrilled to be finally playing hockey, determined to make an impression on my team-mates.

But the game proved to be more skating than I'd bargained for. After a few shifts, my legs and lungs felt the burden of having spent the better part of the week navigating a strange, smoggy city on foot. While huffing on the bench, I asked myself why I hadn't chosen to document the evolution of lawn bowling around the world. But even if I'd been at full capacity, our opponents -- Team World -- skated better and were more skilled than any of the Canadians. Team World combined Dutch, German, and Japanese players along with French and British -- an unlikely coupling which I assumed would play out in our favour -- and we lost by six goals. They were captained by a handsome young Dutchman named Nils Bakker, who wore neither a cage nor a visor. I realized that he'd made this choice not because he was a fan of old-time hockey, but because he considered himself something of a playboy on skates. He looked like Spider Savage. He had long blonde hair and skated dashing, the prototypical European player. He scored twice and strode off the rink into the arms of his rapier-thin girlfriend dressed in a chic black sweater and boots. She was beautiful. The Dutchman had groupies, too. Young girls lined the edges of the rink and called out to him. Our cheering section, by contrast, consisted of Janet in jeans and backpack, and a RheoNerd named Jason and his girlfriend, whom we'd met in a market Causeway Bay. Not a glint of vogue on the three of them, god bless their little hearts.

Team World's best player was a British defenceman, who victimized Mark for three goals. Perhaps it's me, but there's something that I find troubling about hearing a British accent on the rink. It suits a soccer or cricket pitch fine, but on the rink, it bends my ear in an unpleasant way. It might have something to do with the fact that the vintage hockey accent -- all those gnarled errrs and tthhss -- has made me suspicious of someone who can't shout, "HEY REF, YER A FRIGGIN HOSEBAG!" and sound like they mean it. When this fellow spoke, he sounded like a parody of a hockey player, the way Graham Chapman might have played him. Frankly, the British accent made hockey players sound just a little too smart. Were he a Cockney or a Scot, I might not have minded, but the fellow sounded like Jeremy friggin Irons. So as his team laid their beating on us, I skated over to him and jibed:

"Hey bud, ya friggin hosebag."

"Fak off," he replied. Then he flew past me and scored another goal.

After the buzzer sounded, Keith looked hurt. During the game, he'd changed lines, run a fifth defenceman through the roster and opened and closed the bench door. He'd kept things positive, too. Whenever a line came off who hadn't been scored on, Keith shouted: "We're playing our game!" Whenever one of our defencemen iced the puck, Keith yelled out to him: "We're playing our game!" And when we gathered together in the dressing room afterwards and peeled off our wet gear, Keith sat down and decided: "Well boys, we just didn't play our game." Yanic stood up and said: "We do better next time, right?" I didn't know whether he was issuing a consoling thought or a threat, but when he said it, two other players -- Dirk and Pat -- looked pissed-off and I took this as a good sign. Richard, for his part, said dryly: "Maybe it had something to do with our pre-game chant." He was right. "LET'S HAVE FUN!" just didn't have the tenor to inspire us to play beyond our means.

Our next game was the following morning at SkyRink, but I never made it (we lost 2-1 to an ex-pat team from Singapore, who scored in the last minute). After the Team World game, Janet and I wandered through Wan Chai, where we came upon a stand selling fruit shakes. Mine was made from watermelon pulp. It tasted great, but within minutes, my heart and stomach felt as if they were being squeezed from the inside. On the bus ride home to Repluse Bay, I became wracked with indigestion. I felt as if cement had been poured down my stomach. I gulped Pepto-Bismol and tried to fart or burp or do whatever it took to relieve the pressure, but all I could produce after long bouts of trying to push what felt like a football through my bowels were pathetic tweeps, the kind of sounds that would get you thrown out of the flatulence club. So when

9 am rolled around and the alarm sounded for me to drag myself down to SkyRink to play Singapore, I could not. I spent the afternoon forcing bubbling liquids down my hatch until the tweeps sounded a little more like gasps of air being expelled from a balloon. I was determined to not spend my day with my face wrenched sweating on the toilet. And really, it wouldn't have made for a very good book.

I managed to get myself up and out of the house, even though I nearly yanked on the ride to SkyRink. The bus roared down Repulse Bay road shaking like a white-water raft. I barely made it to the Metro without voiding my small intestines, but lucky for me, not even the sway of the double decker could shake the molten rock that had hardened inside my body.

The first thing I did when I took to the ice at Skyrink was look for the roller coaster. My eyes followed the track all the way around to the bay, where, to my relief, two men wearing work-belts and yellow overalls were pinging its front wheel repeatedly with a small hammer. The pinging was loud and bright, and after awhile, the workmen gave up. I lifted my stick into the air and touched the track like someone reaching their hand inside a dark lair. The dragon slept. I played without fear of death from above.

SkyRink looked even smaller once I was on it. It only took two steps or three strides from behind your net to get you to centre ice. You could stand at one end of the rink, shoot the puck down the ice, and it would ricochet back into your skates. It was like a being trapped in a game of Rebound. Once the ice filled up with players, you couldn't take three strides without being knocked into another skater. After a few shifts, I thought I could read the game's flow, but it was still impossible to tell what the puck was going to do. Patches of concrete showed through where the boards met the ice and a padded billboard that read BUDWEISER SOUTH CHINA ICE HOCKEY LEAGUE was strung up below the railing. Upon hitting the billboard, the puck bounced like a murder ball in whatever direction it pleased, and when it made contact with the boards -- which weren't really boards at all, but squares of plexiglass -- it made the unpleasant sound of a work-boot kicking a door, before spinning madly up the ice.

I know this makes no sense, but despite being sick, I actually played well in our 12-1 drubbing of the South East Asian Express (then again, I suppose if I hadn't played well in beating the other team by 11 goals, perhaps I shouldn't have been playing at all). Before the match, Mark suggested that we chant "BEER!" to bring our team luck. So we gathered in a little scrum around our goalie, put our hands in a bundle, and shouted as if we were, in fact, the very parody of Canadian hosers set loose in Hong Kong. Feeling that he had not raised the stakes high enough, Mark promised a beer for anyone who scored a goal. His idea worked and the fellows ran up the score. After the game, Keith produced a bag of beers and the team destroyed them. "We played our game, fellows! Our game!" he trumpeted in the change area.

I felt bad for the Express in their drubbing. It was awful having to watch some of their younger players skate in defeat towards their families, who leaned against the mesh with their cameras cocked. But in international hockey, losses like these have to be put into perspective. I don't know if it would have made the SE Express feel any better, but during the D-Pool World Championships in Perth, Australia, New Zealand were beaten 58-0 by the home team. And 58-0 seems like a sister-kisser next to the 92-0 score -- the most lopsided hockey total on record -- that the diabolical South Koreans pasted on Thailand at the D-Pool World Junior Championships.

But from our team's perspective, scoring a few goals made the fellows feel a little better going into our game that evening against Bud Gold at The Glacier. Bud Gold (which sounded more like the name of an NFL coach than a hockey team) were made up of CBCers -- Canadian-born Chinese. They had yellow jerseys with the red BUDWEISER logo stamped in the centre. I'd seen them play earlier: they were fast and tough and I knew it would be a good game.

Because there was only an hour between games, there was no point changing into my street clothes. So I left my hockey gear on and strolled through the Kowloon market to catch a taxi to Festival Walk. At this time of night, Cheung Sha Wan Road was swirling with colour. Neon signs hung over the street like electric lattice-work, illuminating the market in a jubilee of light. I took

in the streetscape holding my hockey stick like a staff, a Ulysesian nomad in repose before the kaleidoscope of sound and colour. I half-expected to be set upon by natives who'd never seen a man dressed in pants, shin-pads and a red hockey sweater before, but most of the Chinese were nonplussed. A few vendors laughed at me, but I might as well have been wearing a broad hat for their muted reaction. I even stickhandled a melon rind between stalls: nothing. It wasn't until I visited the mainland that I realized that it takes a lot more than a hoser with a Koho to stand out in China.

When we showed up at the Glacier, Gordie Howe and two hundred kids were swarming around the ice. Gordie towered over them like a white pine. Ben was there with Herb, Joanna and Aislin. It was like a hockey Christmas and Gordie was Santa. The stands were jammed with people watching the silver-haired legend show their sons and daughters how to take a shot. Gordie would pull some kid out of the crowd and stand them three feet away from the boards with the puck. He'd shoot against the wall POAMB! a few times and then the kid would try. Gordie would wait patiently until the puck was lifted off the ice, then he'd place those very hands-- the same ones that he'd used to beat the near-life out of Mike Walton and Lou Fontinato-- over the kid's grip, and show him where to place their weight. Gordie had a gentle way, and someday that boy or girl would grow up and say: "When I lived in China, I was taught how to take a wristshot by Mr. Hockey." It was a fine thing for the Howes to do, and just watching Gordie move around out there eased my nerves before the big game.

Once fully geared, I skate-stepped out of the dressing room to the bench. The Zamboni had made The Glacier gleam like a dinner plate licked clean by a dog. The rink was packed all the way around, eight hundred people filling the three tiers of stands. Arlene and the Filipino women's team were there, Daniel Teo and his Singapore club, the Shovellers, and way above us in the restaurant with a view of the ice, Colleen and Gordie Howe sitting like royalty atop their playhouse.

Keith arrived at The Glacier wearing a checkered blazer, which he'd been saving for an important game. "Your lucky jacket?" I asked, tugging the fabric on his arm.

"We'll see," he said, chewing a nail.

Keith told me that he wanted to move me up to forward. His plan made sense. Against Bud Gold, we needed more speed up front, and though I'm not a fast skater, we had too many defensive types on offense. Keith's idea was to spread it around, and it was alright with me. I believe that every defenceman harbours a secret desire to be a forward, anyway. Backliners are saddled with the thankless task of having to clear the front of the net, chase loose pucks around the boards, get bodied in the corners, take shots off the toe, knee, foot and ankle, suffer checking wingers, and cover up for the forward's defensive lapses. Wingers and centremen, by comparison, get to float around and collect the glory. In many ways, defencemen are like bass players-- they stand at the back of the play, feeding the rhythm and the tempo of the game only for those leading the attack to sing the songs, score the goals, have solo careers, get endorsement deals, do between-period interviews, date expensive women, crash expensive cars, and suffer the occasional beating at the hands of a jealous bass player.

Mark skated out onto the ice to start his warm-ups. He kneeled in his crease and stretched. It hurt to watch him. He leaned back until the top of his helmet was touching his skates. It looked like some religious genuflection in reverse. He held this for a few seconds, then slipped from the butterfly and stretched his body across one leg and then the other, before springing to his feet and spinning his arms around at his side like two bicycle wheels. He called out to us to shoot at him from the blueline, instructing us to move in a few feet each time. We wound up one by one and threw everything we had at our goalie. After a flurry of shots, he waved us away. I went for one last skate around the rink and smiled at Janet in the stands. The wind licked my face and my legs felt loose, my body relaxed. Then Mark spanked his stick on the ice like a beaver thwapping his tail on the water and it was the signal for us to gather around him in the crease.

"BEER!"

I skated to the bench.

“Just play our game!” shouted Keith nervously, his hands cupped around his mouth.

The game started with a flurry. Bud Gold were smaller than us, but they had quicker forwards. Their defence, however, was porous, and I thought it was an area that could be exploited. Off the whistle, Dirk, the pilot, stormed the net and ran over the Bud Gold goalie. It was a nasty thing to do, and I felt bad because I knew him. A few days earlier, I’d seen him sitting in the stands at SkyRink wearing a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey, so I approached him and said, “Do you like the Toronto Maple Leafs?” expecting a response in Cantonese. But Sam Wong was from Mississauga. He’d moved to Hong Kong after graduating from university. During the warm-up, I tapped him on the pads and wished him luck, but like most goalies trying to find their head before the big game, he looked up at me and said nothing.

We changed lines and I skated out with Yanic. I played the left side. We kept the puck in the Bud zone for long stretches, ringing it around to the point then skating in front of the net hoping for a rebound or a deflection. The corners at The Glacier were wide and square, so you had a bit more time to collect the puck and figure out what to do with it. Bud Gold’s strategy was to freeze the disc whenever they got the chance, but this back-fired when Yanic won a draw and sent it to Mark Irwin, our best defencemen, who fired it from the point. The shot missed, but the puck came spinning out to the slot, where I slashed at it the way a golfer might hack at a ball in the rough. The puck squirted to a Bud Gold defencemen, who tried to tamp it with his stick. Yanic skated towards the puck and so did the rest of the Bud Gold team. The next thing I knew, Sam Wong was looking into his net where, to borrow a phrase from poet John B. Lee, the puck was moving around in the mesh like a hard black fish darting of its own accord.

I couldn’t tell who had scored the goal and neither could the score-keeper. But it didn’t matter. We were mobbed by our team-mates. It felt great: our bodies scrumming together like a single moving organism. The score-keeper, for his part, thumbed the CD player as if he had a nervous tick. Though I’d had to suffer through bits of The Offspring for the better part of two weeks, it was great to skate off the ice and see Keith waving his fist in the air while Geddy Lee sang “Spirit of Radio:”

“INVISIBLE AIRWAVES CRACKLE WITH LIFE!”

A Toronto song for a Toronto goal. I was thrilled that Rush had followed me to The Glacier. It made me feel like I was skating on my neighbourhood rink.

Yanic punched me in the shoulder: “Ya, man, ya!”

“Way to work, man,” I said.

“OUR GAME!! OUR GAME!” howled Keith.

“Okay. We go to the net, okay?” said Yanic, panting breathlessly. “We go there again. We mess them up that way and we get in there fast. I go fast and you hang back and I look,” he said, pointing to his eyes. “I look and you go, okay?”

“Okay!”

“OUR GAME!”

We laid back after going up 1-0. It’s a habit of all truant teams to coast on a lead. As a result, we paid the obvious price. Brad took a penalty for dumping one of their players in front of the net and Bud Gold scored while I was killing the penalty. Both Yanic and I had a great shift, moving around the ice like waterbugs, dashing from point to point and swiping at the puck like Tstutis fishing with a net. We even managed to get a shot on goal. But just as the penalty was coming to an end, I lost one of their wingers along the boards. He cut in past me and made a clever move off the wing. Mark dived and poke-checked the puck away, but it ended up on the stick of a Bud Gold forward, who wristed it high into Mark’s chest. The puck ricocheted off him and bounced in the slot, where a player I should have been checking flipped it into the empty net. It lay there like

a frozen turd. The crowd whooped. The stands were jammed with friends and relatives of Bud Gold, who'd spent the day in the mall, then taken in the game at night. The Bud Gold players swarmed the scorer and he shook his fist at the crowd. Joy blossomed throughout the rink. I wasn't unhappy for him.

Before the game, I'd wondered whether a partisan crowd would get the better of us, but I think there's something about large crowds who wish you unwell that gives your angst a focus. It's the same in music as in athletics. Hostile crowds are usually moronic and reflect poorly on the team you're playing. Perhaps I would have been worried had the Bud fans burned effigies of Keith in the stands, but the last thing I felt was intimidated. A crowd who loves you and demands that you perform well: now that's intimidating.

The first half ended tied 1-1 and we got a two minute rest. Keith gave us a pep talk, which more or less involved him pacing up and down the bench punching his fist into his hand and repeating you-know-what. Mark Sigson said: "We're all over these guys, guys. Keep it up and we'll be fine." It was nice hearing that from our goalie. When a goalie is relaxed enough to sound words of encouragement, you know you're alright. Most of the time they just pour water over their heads and suppress the urge to vomit.

In the second period, both teams found their rhythm. The hockey was free and confident. We punched and counter-punched like two fighters in mid-round. If you were watching from above, you might have sensed a lull in the play, but at ice-level, it was the opposite. My brain and feet were racing. Neither team gave the puck away and both tried to create measured chances rather than foolish rushes deep into the zone. The hockey was less creative, but it was harder to play.

Five minutes into the period, Yanic took the puck from one of our defencemen and skated out of the zone. I followed on my off-wing. We moved up the ice on a two-on-two against the Bud Gold defence. Yanic put his head down and skated hard. He looked up briefly, and with a flick of the wrists, sent the puck across to me. Since we were about fifteen feet apart, I had a fraction of time to consider the possibilities while the puck was on its way. I'm sure that the best players have already planned their next four moves during that time, but the best I could do was think: "Oh, fuck." The puck was wobbling on its end like a runaway tire, but I corralled it neatly on my back-hand. If I'd accepted the pass on the forehand, I might have cut to the middle, but instead, I went outside. Being a defenceman, I knew that it was harder to defend outside speed than inside, although I won't deceive you: I came to that realization well after it had happened. But when you're in the body of the moment, your reactions are instinctive, and much of the beauty of a move lies in the fact that it is executed impulsively. It's not like some coach had diagrammed the play on the chalk-board; heck, Keith didn't even own a piece of chalk. Instead, the play came from a place within myself, where physical harmony had met my imagination. As I skated around the defenceman, he huffed like a man trying to blow out a candle, did a half-turn and swiped at my feet as if doing a dance with a whip. He missed. I broke free and moved in on Sam Wong.

Eric Nesterenko once told Studs Terkel: "I haven't kept many pictures of myself, but I found one where I'm in full flight. I'm leaning into a turn. You pick up the centrifugal forces and you lay in it. For a few seconds, like a gyroscope, they support you. I'm in full flight and my head is turned. I'm concentrating on something and I'm grinning. That's the way I like to picture myself... I'm on another level of existence, just being in pure motion."

As I bore in on the goalie, I felt caught in the ripple of something strong and alive. Like Nesterenko's gyre, I felt loosened by the fluidity of my own existence, of life itself. Here was one of the great revelatory moments that sports promises. It is the jewel which every athlete looks for but rarely finds; rather, it finds you.

I'll always remember this play as if seeing it from a distance. It's no wonder; my mind seemed to elevate above my body, as it were a ship riding the crest of a wave. To the person in the stands, the high pitch of the game -- the din of voices rising to meet the climax of the moment -- may have dominated the scene, but on the ice, I felt like an action film hero who hears only the sound of blood pounding in his ears. Solitude. A chi of energy and light. I was cast alone before the

goaltender, a four-inch hole peeking out from his battered armour as if it were an eye winking at me. I had skated into a place so calm and waveless that I lost myself, propelled by physical music. I felt so loose like a fist of light, an entity. I looked into Sam Wong's eyes.

I shot.

A goal in Hong Kong.

The team collapsed upon me. They shouted into my face and slugged my chest and helmet and shook my body. It felt great. When I got to the bench, Keith came over and whacked me in the shoulder, his blazer swinging open.

"No one told me we had a ringer!" he said, his face as bright as a pumpkin.

"Ringer! Ringer!" shouted Yanic. The others joined in.

I shouted back at them.

"WE'RE PLAYING OUR GAME!"