The way I began was always the same. I would lean forward with my hands on my knees and stare at the ice, picking a spot on its surface. Then I would picture myself skating to that spot. I'd see myself making a wide circle that I'd bring in tighter and tighter before turning abruptly and skating out of the circle the other way. Then I would actually go and do it. My blades never made a sound. I couldn't let anyone discover what I was doing, so I learned how to skate soundlessly without the *chunk-chunk* of steel on ice the other boys made when they played the game. I learned to envision myself making moves before I tried them. If I could see myself doing it, then I could do it. It worked for any move. There was no explanation for how I could do what I did. I knew it as a mystery and I honoured it that way.

My grandmother had always referred to the universe as the Great Mystery.

"What does it mean?" I asked her once.

"It means all things."

"I don't understand."

She took my hand and sat me down on a rock at the water's edge. "We need mystery," she said. "Creator in her wisdom knew this. Mystery fills us with awe and wonder. They are the foundations of humility, and humility, grandson, is the foundation of all learning. So we do not seek to unravel this. We honour it by letting it be that way forever."

When I released myself to the mystery of the ice I became a different creature. I could slow down time, choose the tempo I needed whenever I launched myself into learning a new skill. I could hurtle down the ice at full speed and then bend time in upon itself to slow the

turn, every muscle, every tendon, every sinew in my body remembering the movement, learning it, making it a part of me.

I learned to stop quickly on one skate. I learned to skate backwards, switching back and forth instantly, shifting my weight from foot to foot, making dazzling changes in direction. I set up horse turds in random patterns and learned to cut in around them from all sides. Every time, I would envision the move and then make it happen. I reached out with all the love in my heart and let it carry me deeper into the mystery.

Then I picked up the stick, using all of the skills I'd developed the winter before to stickhandle the horse turds around the ice. The turds were precious and I worked at not breaking them. I turned circles, first one way and then the other until I could make them faster and smaller. I practiced driving off one skate into high speed using as few strides as possible, balancing the turd on the blade of my stick. I shifted, I feinted, I faked. I raced across the ice with the silent swish of blades and cleared it of evidence as the turds broke with a short, sharp snap of my wrists.

I kept my discoveries to myself and I always made sure that I left the surface of the rink pristine. For the rest of the day, I'd walk through the dim hallways of the school warmed by my secret. I no longer felt the hopeless, chill air around me because I had Father Leboutilier, the ice, the mornings and the promise of a game that I would soon be old enough to play.

Father Leboutilier worked the boys hard. He pushed them to do the drills and then to transfer that discipline into the scrimmage. He outlined what he wanted to see in the scrim of snow on the ice. Circles. Arrows. The math and the science of it all. Once they understood, they skated languidly back to their positions, their faces pulled into concentration. When the puck was dropped they moved deliberately, the scratchings and doodles on the ice suddenly coming to life. It was thrilling to see. They skated hard. They were big, lanky Indian boys and their angular faces were grave. As they pumped their legs and swung their arms in pursuit of the puck, zipping by me in a blur, they were warrior-like. When the whistle blew they turned as one. Some of them dropped onto the ice, legs splayed, chests heaving. Others leaned panting on the boards in front of me. Their faces burned with zeal and joy and their breathing was like the expelled air of mustangs. The clomp of their blades made me think of hoofs on frozen ground. This was the game. This gathering of brothers, of kin, joined by the exuberance of effort and challenge and strain, breathing the air that rose from the glacial face of a rink under a bleak sun.

The team was preparing for their first organized game against a town league team from White River. They practiced aggressively. Father Leboutilier whistled them down only when there was a flagrant misplay or a breach of the rules. The pace was breakneck. They poked and pulled and elbowed mightily to free the puck and send the game careering down the ice again. Then one afternoon someone screamed and a player fell to the ice clutching his leg. Father Leboutilier skated over quickly, knelt down and cradled the boy's head in his gloved hands. After a few minutes a couple of the boys helped the injured player to his feet. He leaned on them as they skated him slowly to the boards.

"I'm okay," he said.

"You can't stand on that ankle," Father Leboutilier said.

"I'm okay," the boy repeated.

"I'm sorry. I can't let you play when you're hurt."

"We ain't got no one else. How you gonna make a team?" the boy asked.

The words were out of me before I'd thought them through. "I'll go in for Wapoose," I said.

The Father looked at me in surprise. "You skate, Saul?"

"Yes."

"How did you learn?"

"By myself. In the mornings. After I cleared the ice."

The others were watching me, their eyes glittering obsidian from beneath the rims of their helmets. I was just the ice cleaner, the Zhaunagush in their midst. They'd been content enough to just leave me alone but I was still the outsider. The Father rubbed at his chin with his glove

and stared out across the field. "Well, I suppose you can fill in for the scrimmage."

I ran to the snowbank to retrieve my stick. When Father Leboutilier handed me Wapoose's skates, I went to the barn to get the wadding of paper I kept there and stuffed it in their toes then slipped my feet in and laced them up tight. The Father was grinning as I leaped over the boards. I skated once around the ice. Slowly. Getting my legs under me. Father Leboutilier nodded, and when I got back to where the team was, he put a hand on my shoulder and directed me to Wapoose's place on the right wing.

I could barely breathe. My whole body was quivering. Once the puck was dropped I lagged behind the play to study it. When the players moved up ice I skated on my wing. The other boys ignored me.

I stayed at the edge of the scrimmage, the play rolling its pattern out in front of me. Then, suddenly, I saw it clearly. I saw the direction of the game before it happened and I moved to that spot. Now I bent to my skating, spreading my feet a little wider and keeping the full length of my stick blade on the ice.

There was a collision at the blue line and the puck squirted free. It spun like a small planet in a universe of white. Everyone reacted at the same time. I could hear the clomp of their blades. But I pushed hard, evenly, and I was at full speed in three strides. I scooped the puck onto my stick and cradled it as I pumped with my other arm. The goalie yelped and backed slowly toward the mouth of the net. I whisked across the blue line and there was only me, the puck and the net. I was flying, skating as fast as I could

go, and then time slowed to a crawl. I could hear my breath, the yells of the other boys behind me, feel the pump of blood in my chest, see the eyes of the goalie squinting in concentration.

When I was twelve feet out I leaned back on the heels of my skates and pushed the puck out in the space between my knees. I shuffled it back and forth like Beliveau. I wriggled my shoulders and then I pulled a broad feint to my left and the goalie took it, sliding over on one padded knee with the paddle of his stick on the ice. Once he'd committed I tucked the puck back neatly between my legs, like I'd done so many mornings with the horse turds, reached back with my stick and caught the puck in the middle of my blade. I flicked my wrist and the puck slipped neatly into the right angle where the crossbar met the post.

I spun on my skates and slid backwards into the boards behind the net. I was too shocked to raise my arms.

The other players turned in a long slow curve to stare at me in amazement. Father Leboutilier stood at centre ice, a giant grin on his face.

"You taught yourself the game, Saul?"

"Yes. From books and the games on television."

"That was a pretty snazzy move. You taught yourself that?"

"Yes. I practiced stickhandling with turds."

He laughed. He rubbed my head with one glove and then motioned the other boys over. "Can you play centre, Saul?" Father Leboutilier asked.

"Like Beliveau?"

He grinned. "Yes. Like Beliveau."

"I can try."

"Good. Ottertail, you take the right wing."

"I play centre," Ottertail said with a hard look at me.

"Let Saul try it. Just for the scrimmage."

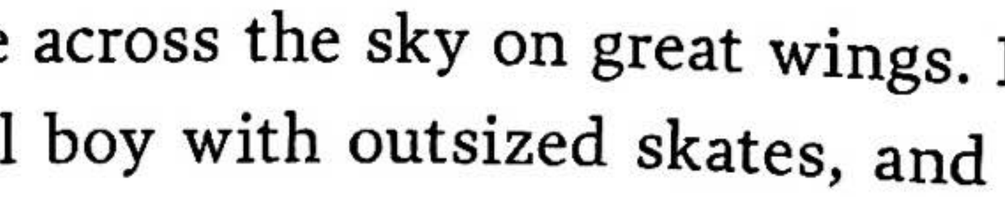
Father Leboutilier blew his whistle and I lined up to take the first faceoff of my life. I lost the draw, but once the scrimmage began, that curious sense of being able to anticipate the play took over. The puck seemed to follow me. Father Leboutilier just let us skate and after a while our plays became sharp and crisp and we were all together in the thrill of the game. When Father Leboutilier finally whistled us to a stop, the older boys skated to the boards and leaned there. I dawdled behind them, unsure of what to do. But as I drew near they made a spot for me among them. We stood there like stallions home from the range.

19

Father Quinney and Sister Ignacia protested at first about my age and small size and the effect that breaching rules would have on the rest of the children. But once Father Quinney saw me play, things changed.

"He has a God-given gift for it, Sister," he said when Sister Ignacia pressed the issue.

I kept my morning job, but now I wore the skates when I shovelled. Once the ice was cleared I would pull one of the nets from its place on the snowbank and dangle my boots from the corners and practice hitting them with wrist shots. I created skating drills for myself. I did figure eights in both directions. I did them skating backwards. I set up lines of pucks and practiced cutting between them at as fast a speed as I could manage, switching between skating forward and backwards as I did it. I'd watched figure skaters on Father Leboutilier's television, and I started to mimic their movements in my play. I made spinning turns, abrupt changes of direction on one foot. There wasn't a nuance that I didn't try to incorporate into what felt like flying, being borne across the sky on great wings. I loved that. I was a small boy with outsized skates, and in the world that hockey had created I found a new home.



I'd never heard from my parents. Maybe they couldn't find me. Maybe their shame over abandoning us in the bush was too great. Or maybe the drink had taken them over as easily as hockey had claimed me. Some nights I felt crippled by the ache of loss. But I knew that loneliness would be dispelled by the sheen of the rink in the sunlight, the feel of cold air on my face, the sound of a wooden stick shuffling frozen rubber.

20

We played the town team three weeks after Father Leboutilier first let me skate with the bigger boys. My teammates laughed when they saw me in my uniform. Another town team had donated their old sweaters, and I looked as though I were drowning in mine. It hung as though there were no bones to me. My outsized skates and full-sized stick made me looked even odder. Father Leboutilier had tried to convince me to cut my stick down some, but the longer shaft felt more familiar to me.

The game was held in the White River arena. We'd only ever played outdoors and the heat in the dressing rooms made the air feel heavy in our lungs. We were used to suiting up in the full chill. We were used to allowing the cold to prepare us, and those first circles on the ice, the rush of blood to our muscles, the gradual warming from the effort, were how we readied ourselves. In the arena, yellow lights were above us instead of the sun, and rafters instead of clouds. There was glass above the boards and behind the nets instead of chicken wire.

When I skated out at the tail end of our team I could see people in the stands pointing at me and laughing.

"The Indian school brought their mascot!"

"Is he a squirt? Nah. He's a dribble!"

Father Leboutilier huddled us all together on the bench and I listened intently to screen out the taunts.

"These boys are a skilled team," the Father said. "They've been playing organized games since they were six. This is your first organized game. So play it for fun. Play it to learn. Play it as a team and you can't lose."

There were twelve of us. Two sets of five and a pair of goalies. We were nervous. I could see that in my teammates' faces. As soon as the puck was dropped it was obvious how outmatched we were. The town team moved the puck quickly. Their passes were crisp and on target. They scored within the first minute. But before long, sitting there on the bench, I felt that curious sense of vision descend on me. I could see. I could see what they were going to do before they did it. By the time Father Leboutilier called for my line, I was ready.

The crowd howled when they saw me skate to the centre line to take the faceoff. Their centreman scowled and slapped my stick with his own.

"Shrimp," he said. "Stay out of my way."

He won the draw and the puck skittered back to their defensemen. I skated easily with the play as it made its way down ice. We gained control of the puck and started our own rush, but that broke down at their blue line. I watched the other team closely, and when the puck went into the right-hand corner of our end after a blocked shot, I knew I had them. I pushed off hard, breaking into the clear on a hard angle in front of our defenseman. I yelled. He saw me and flipped the puck toward me. I snared it easily with one hand and turned up ice at the same time.

Three of their players were ahead of me. When the left-winger tried to check me, I went left. I poked the puck back to the right, between his legs, and stepped around him. Their defense was backing up and a dozen feet separated us. I outskated the first boy. He came with me as I flashed across the ice, but I cut hard at the boards on both blades at a sharp angle, the puck on my backhand, and left him there. The second boy skated backwards as I straightened and aimed right for him. I stared at his chest and let the puck dangle at the end of my blade. I could feel his eyes go there, and when he lunged I spun, tucked the puck between my legs, picked it up as I came out of the spin and was clear. I could hear the crowd yelling at their team to stop me. I covered the sixty feet to the net in no time. Their goalie had backed up into the crease. I leaned to the right. He followed me. In my mind I saw my school boot dangling by its laces from the top right corner of the net. I leaned hard on my right skate and snapped off a wrist shot at the same time. The goalie flung up his glove hand but it was too late. The puck skimmed into the top corner of the net.

The arena went crazy. The klaxon buzzer sounded, the red light flashed, their players slammed their sticks on the ice, the crowd roared. I was lost in a wild celebration of arms and sticks and helmets. Father Leboutilier was standing at the open gate to our bench as I skated over, his face was red with excitement. He stopped me and put his hands on my shoulder pads.

"That was beautiful," he said. "You were beautiful."

I sat on the bench and basked in that. When I leaped back onto the ice, it was with determination to earn the Father's praise again. There was no laughter from the

crowd when I took the puck this time. Instead, they yelled at their team to stop me, to hit me, to crush me. But when the players tried I simply skated faster. No one could touch me. I scored twice more and made the passes that earned us another two goals and we won that game by a single goal. I was applauded as I left the ice, and in the dressing room my teammates gaped. I just offered a small grin, then bent to my skates and began to unlace them.

Father Leboutilier came and sat down beside me and leaned back against the wall with his legs thrown straight out in front of him. He put a hand on my back and patted me.

"Saul," he said quietly, "the game loves you."

I sat with the Father's hand on my back, listening to the excited chatter of the team as they recreated the game. The game loves you, he'd said, and right there, right then, I loved it back.

St. Jerome's was hell on earth. We were marched everywhere. In the mornings, after the priests had walked through the dorms ringing cowbells to scare us awake, we were marched to the latrines. We stood in lines waiting our turn at the toilets—a dozen of them for a hundred and twenty boys. Some of us soiled our pants during the wait, because we were strapped if we left our beds at night. We had half an hour to wash, make our beds and prepare ourselves for the march to chapel. There we sat dully in our seats while Father Quinney said a mass in Latin. At the end he pronounced the greatness of the Catholic god.

"We brought you here to save you from your heathen ways, to bring you to the light of the salvation of the one true God. What you learn here will raise you up, make you worthy, cleanse your body and purify your spirit."

When he was satisfied that the message had been pounded into us, we were marched to the dining room for breakfast. The boys and the girls sat on opposite sides of the room. We stood behind our chairs until everyone had their bowl of lumpy, tasteless porridge, slice of dry toast and watery glass of powdered milk. Then one of the priests would say grace, and we would sit and eat in silence. Not

one of us could resist risking a beating by sneaking a peek at the nuns and priests at their table, eating their eggs, bacon or sausage. The smell of it would waft over us while we choked down our gruel then sat with our hands at our sides until they were finished eating and we were marched to our work details.

They called it a school, but it was never that. Most of our days were spent in labour. Even the youngest of us had to work. The girls were kept busy in the kitchen, where they baked bread to be sold in town, or in the sewing rooms, where they made our clothing out of the heavy, scratchy material the school got from the army. The boys mucked out the stalls of the cows and horses, hoed the fields, harvested the vegetables or worked in the carpentry shop, where they built the furniture the priests sold to the people of White River. We spent an hour in the classroom each day to learn the rudimentary arithmetic and English that would enable us to secure manual labour when we "graduated" from the school. There were no grades or examinations. The only test was our ability to endure. Since I could already read and speak English when Father Leboutilier came along, I was given access to books from the town library. But the others had to read from primers and never gained facility with the language. Kids were routinely strapped for giving the wrong answer. In front of the entire class, kids were turned to face the wall, made to pull their pants down to their ankles, bent over with their hands on their knees and whipped raw. Boys and girls alike, except that the girls were allowed to keep their underthings on.

"I seen more little brown nuts than a squirrel," Lenny Mink said to me once. "And more dark cracks than the

river at spring breakup." He was funny, that Lenny Mink. He died when they were trying to clear a stump from the end of a field and a tractor chain snapped. Lenny's head was split wide open in front of all those boys. There wasn't a funeral. There never was for kids who died. His body just disappeared and none of the priests or nuns said anything about him again.

We were like stock. That's how we were treated. Fed, watered, made to bear our daily burden and secured at night. Anybody who shirked or complained was beaten in front of everyone. That was perhaps the biggest crime: making us complicit through our mute and helpless witness. Sometimes older boys or girls would jump in and try to stop a beating, but they would be pummelled and bloodied and led away, never to be seen again.

We lived under constant threat. If it wasn't the direct physical threat of beatings, the Iron Sister or vanishing, it was the dire threat of purgatory, hell and the everlasting agony their religion promised for the unclean, the heathen, the unsaved. Those of us who remembered the stories told around our people's fires trembled in fear at the images of hell, damnation, fire and brimstone.

I was never sent to the Iron Sister, but I saw it once. Father Leboutilier and I were stashing the hockey gear in the school's basement. I had an armload of equipment as I walked behind him down the stairs. We turned a corner, and there it was. It was shaped like a shoebox, long and flat with a small grille in the door. I could see that it wasn't high enough to allow even the smallest child to stand, or even kneel. I walked toward it, and the iron was cold to my touch.

"Come away from there, Saul," the Father said from behind me.

"Why do they have this?" I asked

"They lack charity."

When your innocence is stripped from you, when your people are denigrated, when the family you came from is denounced and your tribal ways and rituals are pronounced backward, primitive, savage, you come to see yourself as less than human. That is hell on earth, that sense of unworthiness. That's what they inflicted on us.

The beatings hurt. The threats belittled us. The incessant labour wearied us, made us old before our time. The death, disease and disappearances filled us with fear. But perhaps what terrified us most were the nighttime invasions.

They would start with the swish of slippered feet along the floorboards or the hems of cassocks and gowns as the predators hurried through the dorms. We'd push our faces into our pillows or bury our heads beneath our blankets to drown out the surf of woe that came each night. First, there would be the creak of bed springs as the adults sat. Soft whispers, cajoling, and then the rustling sounds that tattooed themselves onto our brains, the cries of distress, the sound of skin sliding against skin and the low adult growls were born of a hunger none of us could ever understand. Sometimes three or four boys would be visited like that. Sometimes only one. Other times boys would be led from the dorms. Where they went and what happened to them was never spoken of. In the daylight we would look at each other blankly, so that we would not cause any further shame. It was the same for the girls.

"God's love," Angelique Lynx Leg whispered one day.

We were shelling peas on opposite sides of a five-gallon pail. She said it so quietly I looked up to see if she was addressing me. She wasn't. In her hands, a slick green shell she rubbed with the nub of a thumb. "God's love," she said again, and then looked at me with eyes as deep and empty as the eyes of a doll. "What Sister brings at night. What Father brings. To bless me. To nourish me."

I watched as a single tear flowed out of the corner of her eye, burst fully formed against her brown skin. She reached up with one finger. Then she held that finger up in front of her face and looked at it, tasted it with her tongue and then bent to the task of shelling peas again. She was nine years old and all I felt was hollow.

When I hit the ice I left all of that behind me. I stepped onto the ice and Saul Indian Horse, the abandoned Ojibway kid, clutched in the frozen arms of his dead grandmother, ceased to exist.

Father Leboutilier loved the game more than anybody. When he coached us or watched the televised games, he lost the solemn priestly facade and became a boy again, licking his lips in anticipation. His relish was infectious.

So it didn't surprise me when he began to show up at my early morning solo practices. He'd wait until I had scraped the ice clear and done my warm-ups, then lace up his own skates and join me. During those sessions I learned how to transfer what I could see in my head into my feet and my hands. Father Leboutilier taught me how to take a pass on my backhand without looking then switch it to my forehand to take a shot. He taught me how to snap off wrist shots like rockets with fast passes he fed me from behind the net. I learned how to fire accurately off either foot while still in motion and he showed me how my skates could help me handle the puck on the attack. As I demonstrated each new technique, each step up in understanding, the delight on his face was my reward.

"Hockey is like the universe, Saul," he said one day. "When you stand in the dark and look up at it, you see the placid fire of stars. But if we were right in the heart of it, we'd see chaos. Comets churning by. Meteorites. Star explosions. Things being born, things dying. Chaos, Saul. But that chaos is organized. It's harnessed. It's controlled. What you can't see under all the action, the speed, the mayhem, is the great spirit of this game. That's what makes you so extraordinary. You have that spirit within you."

I took his words to heart and I practiced diligently.

Our school team played the town team a few more times that winter, and we won handily. Word had gotten around how well we played, and even Father Quinney attended a few games. My vision grew even sharper the more I played. There would always come a moment when the game would swing to me and I would find the puck on my stick. I came to expect that, relied on it.

Winter ended and the rink melted back into the furrows of the field. But I kept getting up early. I began to run. I'd run down the curving gravel road to the bottom of the ridge and then up its harsh slope. When I got to the top I would turn and face the school while I caught my breath, and then I would turn and head through the bush to the lowland, where there was a beaver lodge. I'd watch the vee of swimming beavers, listen to ducks and mergansers, and think about what Father Leboutilier had said about my underlying spirit.

When I told him what I was doing, he joined me. We ran every morning. He told me how important it was for a player to have strong thighs. He'd been to the Montreal

Forum and met the astonishingly fast junior star Yvan Cournoyer in the Junior Canadiens' dressing room.

"His thighs were like loaves of bread. Huge. He even had to have his pants tailored for him. He is the fastest player I have ever seen, Saul."

We started to do wind sprints up the face of the ridge. Once I could do a dozen in a row, he took me along the ridge to where boulders were thrown in a mad jumble at its base. I ran that talus every day. Leaping and bounding between the rocks was exhilarating, and we made a game of it. I tapped into the spirit of hockey in those tough training runs.

One day when I was working in the barn, I discovered a sheet of linoleum stuffed in the back of the loft. As I wiped the chaff away, it felt like ice on my palm. I carried it out to the area where the hockey nets were stored and placed it about twenty feet in front of one of them. Then I took a stick and a puck and began snapping wrist shots at the net. Father Leboutilier ran interference for me with Sister Ignacia and got me free time to practice in the hour before the evening meal. It was a joy to find the game in the heat of summer, and when I saw a workman cutting off sections of three-inch pipe with a welding torch one afternoon, I asked if he could cut me a couple. Those rings weighed far more than a regular puck and I stickhandled with them and worked on my wrist shot until my wrists and forearms were rock hard. When I showed Father Leboutilier, he laughed.

"Marvellous," he said and roughed my hair.

The Father got some boys in the wood shop to cut six holes in a sheet of plywood, one at each corner, right and

left, top and bottom, one square in the middle at the bottom, and one in the centre top. I practiced shooting the heavy rounds of pipe at each of those holes. I worked hard at that. I practiced until I could feather the steel through each of those gaps. Then Father Leboutilier started calling out the holes to me.

"Top right!"

I'd sail a ring of pipe through that hole. He'd roll it back, then call out another hole. My shots grew pinpoint accurate and fast off the stick. When we switched back to regular pucks, the rubber was a blur.

The other boys got wind of what I was doing and showed up to watch. Eventually they joined in and we held tournaments. Each hole had a point value and we each took twenty shots. The one with the highest points won. I went through the end of that summer and the fall undefeated. And in the gathering gloom of those evenings we all grew closer. I ceased to be the Zhaunagush. I became Saul Indian Horse, Ojibway kid and hockey player. I became a brother. I basked in the glow of this regard. In our laughter, teasing and rough camaraderie, I found another expression of the spirit of the game. We'd head back to the main building for the evening meal, jockeying, nudging, poking each other. Wrapped in the aura of freedom that the game offered us, we'd grin at each other over the hash and skimpy stews. Brothers. Joined by the promise of steel blades forming swirls in snow and ice.