

by

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Truth or Dare

Geoff hunched forward, his hockey stick propping him up, and blew wisps of darting air around his eyes and over his nose. The cold tightness in his lips he didn't feel. He was Rocket Richard ready to blaze a trail down the ice and blast a shot in the right hand corner of the net.

"Geoff, you gonna shoot or what?" asked Emily, her wrist bent over the black knob of her goalie stick. Foam dripped out of the thick pads she wore. Cross patched electric tape covered up smaller slits.

Geoff wondered how a girl like her who liked hockey, slugged a tether ball around with the guys, and sat in back of the school with a smoke, had a soft name like Emily. She wasn't like the other girls in Mr. Smith's grade seven class who giggled when they snapped at the backs of those who wore training bras and snickered when they passed around happy face notes during music class. She was different. She didn't look funny in baggy hockey pants.

"Yeah, yeah." He breathed deep, imagining his eyes a blaze, intense, a fire, like the Rocket's. He had never seen Richard play and he suspected his father hadn't either but to hear Dad talk--the Rocket was the deal. "Greatest player in the clutch I ever saw," his dad said, pausing to adjust the t.v's rabbit ears and to sip from his Molson Golden, adding tension to his yarn.

"The best. Back when hockey was tough--3-1 games, not like these blowouts today--Rocket scored 4 goals against the Leafs and was chosen not one, not two, but all three game stars." Geoff felt awed by the power of this feat. Not even the Great Gretzky had been so honored.

"Geoff." She pounded her stick on the ice. The flat part of the blade was covered with a 'Champion' spark plugs sticker.

He pushed back his wool cap and tugged at the edges of his C.C.M. hockey gloves. The leather underside smelled sweaty. He and Emily had been playing showdown on the school's outdoor rink all that Saturday afternoon and it was now dark. He had scored 50 goals. She had made 50 saves.

"You can't get it by Grant Fuhr this time." She slapped her stick on the ice and backed up into the net and leaned forward in a crouch, her glove hand poised. "No way. You're not going to get it by der Fuhr. No goal Fuhr, here."

Geoff wanted to say 'uh-huh' or something tough sounding like that, but he was afraid he'd mess up and then look silly. So instead, he curled his tongue, jammed it out the left side of his mouth and sped down the ice. He knew he wasn't really speeding, he knew the edge of his ankles nicked the ice's rough kinks, but he visualized himself as the great Rocket, his hair billowing, his blades slashing away, kicking up little puffs of white.

She slapped the stick again and came out of the crease, cutting down the angle. He hitched his shoulders, shifted to the left, and brought the puck flat upright on his backhand. Emily

reached and fell; he whirled, her stick rapping at his ankles, and saw a large opening high above the webbing of her outstretched trapper. He leaned on the bottom half of the stick but his skate blade slipped on a nick in the ice and he lifted the puck high over the net and high over the woodstained three by five endboards.

"Shit!" Geoff mumbled, flakes of snow caught inside his gloves and glittering his cheeks.

"What a blast," she said, holding her arms high and rigid, the stick raised in triumph. She mimicked the warbled sound of the cheering crowd by blowing air out her lips. "Yes . . . haaaah. Fuhr has . . . haaaahb . . . done it. What a save, sports fans, what a save!" She pounded the gloves together and danced on the tips of her blades. "Haaaaaahh."

He shook his head.

She punched his shoulder, laughed, and discarded her wire-caged mask. Her freckled face had reddened from the brisk air and strangely her eyes looked freckled, too. Her blond grainy hair tied back in a pony tail, looked to Geoff like a long hunk of rope. "Sorry, about the stick, but I had to stop you." She wiped mucous from the tip of her nose into the upper arm of her Oilers' jersey.

"Grant Fuhr, my butt. More like Billy Smith."

She laughed and covered her mouth.

Geoff figured she was embarrassed because of the front tooth that stuck out. He pulled himself up. "Damn it. The puck went

over the boards, again." It happened a lot and it would take at least five minutes to find it.

Emily skated backwards into the net, undid her pads, tied them together and dropped them in the crease. She plopped down in a small puddle of water and undid her skates. "Your wrist shot has some zip."

"Thanks," Geoff said, really wanting more praise but deciding on aloofness. They had played showdown for months--out on the road in the summer and on the rinks in winter. Since moving to Norwood six months ago Geoff had made no real friends besides Emily. He didn't appear cool enough in his jeans and sweatshirts for the partying drinking football crowd. He was too bright for the shop crowd, but not a whiz at chess for the brown-nosers. Dad had said that all these set backs stemmed from Mom's refusing to join the Ladies Auxiliary Gurling Team. Geoff doubted that but he wished he was more like Emily who didn't seem to care about belonging to any crowd.

She kicked aside her helmet, packed her mouth with three chunks of Bubble Yum and chomped them in half. "Truth."

Geoff looked for a break in the drifting snow. His feet were cold.

"Truth."

"Huh?"

"You heard me, dummy. Truth. I'm challenging you."

"Okay, what?"

"Who you have a crush on?"

"Crush? Whattya mean?" Geoff blushed slightly. "I don't know. No one." How ridiculous. Crush. In the middle of hockey season.

He trudged through the knee high drifts cursing himself for not taking his skates off first. She had been acting strange lately, different, talking about crushes and stuff like that. "Why . . . ! Do you have a crush on someone? Randy?"

"No way." She pulled down the sleeves of her sweater and looked indignant. "That guy's a toad." She blew a great bubble and it smacked against her face. "I thought I saw you msking eyes at Sarah Murrow."

"Me? I was just borrowing a pencil crayon to, uh, label my geog maps with." Sarah was nice, Geoff thought. She liked watching old horror movies and Bugs Bunny cartoons. She also laughed at his jokes. But that didn't feel like a crush, whatever they felt like. Geoff was sure he didn't have one. He trudged on.

"I thought you were awful polite."

He shrugged. Yep, she was acting different. "Did you see where the puck went?" he asked.

"No." She lifted her left shoulder and reached between her Oilers jersey and purple sweat top to loosen the chest protector's buckle and clips.

He nodded and Emily smiled, tugging at the clips in back. She huffed, grimaced her face, squinching her nose and pulled the jersey up to her neck. She twisted and fumbled with both hands for the clips. She undid them, bunching the jersey up around her

head, pulling the straps through the jagged-edged buckle and letting the whole corrugated thing fall to the ice. Her arms flapped and she shouted through the jersey. "Geoff, my arms are stuck."

Her hair was tangled. Geoff laughed and looked away, embarrassed at having glimpsed patches of sweat draped around the small lumpy outlines of her chest.

She tugged, yanking the short strands of hair that had got caught inside the jersey's collar. She pulled it back down over her sweats and hitched her shoulders until the fabric was smooth and comfortable.

"Guess what? I found the puck." He shrugged.

"Teriff."

"You got another hunk of gum?"

She spat over her blocker and threw him the opened pack.

He sat on an end of the boards, unpeeled the wax, and plopped a chunk in his mouth. "Gum's the greatest after playing hockey."

She nodded. "It's okay."

"I like Dubble-Bubble best."

"Yeah. I'd rather have an Export."

Geoff knew she smoked but still he was surprised to hear her mention it because he had never seen her light up. "Smoking gives you cancer."

Emily smiled, her front tooth sticking out. She flipped the bulky pads over her left shoulder. Geoff grabbed the chest

protector, the blocker and her goalie stick, wondering what else about her he didn't know. Randy, the repeater in Smith's class who got a kick out of stuffing the girls' desks with dead garter snakes, spread a rumor around that he had seen Emily under a cottonwood, in back of the school, being felt up by some high schooler. 'Felt up' sounded dirty but Geoff really didn't know what Randy was getting at; he knew it was bad, but the only image he could think of was Emily lying on a bed having her pulse read. He knew it was a stupid image but he couldn't help thinking of it. He didn't believe Randy. Heck, that loser thought Spiderman was a real guy.

"You wanna come to my place and watch Hockey Night in Canada?" Geoff knew that Emily didn't have a t.v.

She flicked back her hair with a soft unconscious roll of her neck. "Yeah . . . sure."

"Let me take those pads."

"I can handle them," she said.

Geoff shrugged and they headed out across the field to his home on Princess Street. The goalie stick dragged heavy, through the snow. Suddenly he felt water tickle his ear and then his back hurt. "Emily." He turned around.

She packed another snowball. Her hockey mask was clamped back on.

"That mask is unfair."

She giggled and lobbed two more snowballs. One missed Geoff's shoulder the other stung his leg. He got down in a battle

crouch and ran towards her like Lloyd Nolan, machine gun tucked against his hip, storming the beach in Guadalcanal Diary. A final snowball whizzed by his head.

"Geoff, no." She turned to run, but her laughter slowed her down.

He caught her shaking shoulders and pushed her into the snow. He fell on top of her, pinned back her arms, and removed her helmet.

"Geoff . . . no," she giggled and flailed with her feet.

He rubbed a mound of snow in her grainy hair. She blinked her eyes and blew steam through her lips and he dumped another mound down her jersey. Her back felt warm. "I gotcha, now."

"Oww . . . that's cold. Let me up."

"You promise no more snowballs?"

"Yes, yes." She giggled.

"Promise?"

"My back's cold," she yelled. "Yes."

He let her up. She arched her back and shivered. He rubbed it for her. "Easy. It feels like chips of glass. That's good."

They walked under the streetlights. Emily wiped her forehead and her eyes flickered as the mischievous look that Geoff recognized took over. She rubbed her lower lip. "Dare."

"What, now?" Last week she dared him to climb the school roof to gather tennis balls and the week before she dared him to wrap himself in a tire and roll himself down Main Street.

"A twosy."

"Teamwork. Great. No more throwing snowballs at Mr. Smith." Smith had caught him nailing his pit-bulldog with 30 foot bombs and Geoff mysteriously flunked his history test.

"That was funny," she said.

"It wasn't funny. Flunking History of Confederation was not funny."

"No," she suppressed a giggle. "It wasn't."

"How did we get started on this game anyway?"

"Last summer you dared me to walk along the railroad tracks across the C.N. bridge."

"Oh, yeah."

"And the week before that you gave me a Death, daring me to streak across Mr. Smith's backyard. Geez, that was base."

"Well, you didn't do it."

"Of course not."

Geoff smiled. He was glad she hadn't. After that challenge there were no more 'deaths,' just 'truths' and 'dares.' "Okay, what's the plan, maestro?"

She told him. Behind the school parking lot ran a dried-out gully surrounded by cottonwoods and willows. From there they could play 'I Spy' and watch the high school students sitting in front of the kindergarten kids' monkey bars and swings 'making out.'

"What would they be doing, there. It's cold out."

"They can't do it at home, dummy."

"Okay, expert. How do you know so much about this place?"

She frowned. "I walk Troy at nights and I seen them," she said.

Geoff nodded. "Yeah, sure."

"You don't believe that, I?"--she huffed and crossed her arms--"You've been listening too long to that retard Randy. Shit, he thinks Spiderman is a real guy."

Geoff laughed. "Okay, so we go there. What are we going to do?"

She bit her lower lip and shoved her hands inside her jersey, and her eyes twinkled. "We . . . throw a snowball or two."

"That's a blast."

"Let's drop my equipment off at your garage."

"No, no." The street lights were on and Geoff's parents would make him stay home. Mrs. Jablonski had company for the evening and had told her daughter not to be back before nine. "Adults need adult time," Emily told Geoff her mother had said. He wondered where her father was. She said he died in the great Canada-China war, but Geoff knew there was no such thing. If they were going to play 'I Spy' they'd just have to avoid their parents and take the damn pads with them. "Make a great fortress, sitting on end, against a counter attack, wouldn't they?"

She giggled.

They'd sat behind the car curbs for twenty-five minutes and the insides of his hockey gloves were damp and cold. The laces

dangling the skates around his chest and back irritated him. He could be at home watching the Leafs blow out the Blues instead of freezing his tail off. "This is stupid," he said.

"Sh--I think I hear something."

"You been saying that for the last twenty minutes."

"I mean it this time."

He rolled his eyes and glanced at the willows behind him and the goalie pads and gloves, sticks, helmet, and chest protector, sitting under silver-backed leaves. He spat and thought about being grounded for staying out late. He could leave now, but that would be un-cool. "First intermission."

"Will you relax about the game, we'll watch it."

He sighed.

"Duck!" Emily's voice was excited and high. She grabbed him by the back of the neck and pushed his face into the snow.

"You're breaking my nose."

"Sh--there's two of them."

He dug himself down behind the curb. "Let go, willys?"

Emily told him she saw two people standing in front of the concrete window ledge by the outer gymnasium wall. She loosened her grip and Geoff took a peek.

The girl wore a suede jacket and blue jeans. Her hair curled at the ends. The guy wore a down filled vest and jean jacket. He had a stud in his left ear. "Sh--" Geoff said, watching the girl's knee bend and her right leg move back as the guy kissed her.

While he did that she rolled her head, and flipped her hair back in a lazy wave. The guy kissed her neck and his hands slid down, hooking on the backs of her jean pockets.

"That's why she has a short jacket on, I guess," Emily said, to say something.

Geoff smothered a nervous laugh on his sleeve. He didn't want to giggle, not out loud; he didn't want to say anything. Suddenly, he knew a girl was next to him and he felt like he shouldn't be doing this.

She kissed the guy hard on the lips and he pulled her towards him, clutching his hands into her back. They stumbled onto the window ledge.

Geoff stared into the ground and his fingers tensed inside the hockey gloves. He wondered what it would be like to kiss Emily and then his cheeks flushed and he thought better of the idea.

Emily's face, too, looked a little red in the splash of street lights, flooding in from behind the school. Geoff figured it was just the cold air. Well, maybe it wasn't just that. He tugged on her jersey. "Let's go."

Emily nodded, her jaw slack.

Now the guy had a hand inside the girl's jacket and she rocked her head side to side. Geoff saw the coat flap and flatten and he wasn't about to ask Emily if that was what "felt-up" was all about.

The coat bulged again and he hoped that Emily wasn't

watching. He especially hoped that Emily wasn't watching him watching. He looked away.

"Do that again . . . she likes it," Emily shouted, her voice cracking with nervous energy.

"Emily!"

The guy in the down-filled vest jumped while the girl did up her suede jacket and tucked her legs into her chest. "Huh?" He stepped forward and loomed tall and large. His voice was terse. His eyes looked mean. "Why, you little pricks." He packed a snowball.

"C'mon," Geoff screamed, pulling Emily backward. They tumbled down the incline, crashing into broken chunks of cattails and chips of rock at the bottom of the gully.

"Shit," Emily said as a snowball whizzed by Geoff's ear. Another one smacked the side of her head. "Oww. . . ."

"Maybe you should put on your helmet."

"Funny. Grab the pads," she ordered as she picked up the sticks and chest protector.

He dropped the pads, picked them up again and two snowballs crashed at his feet. "What did you have to say something for?"

"I don't know."

He tucked the bulky pads under his arms and they took off through the field. The white plastic skateguards pounded against his chest as they ran. He didn't look behind him.

They stumbled out by Old Miller's tobacco field, climbed the barb-wire fence with its seemingly ten-inch rusted nails sticking

out everywhere, and made it to the street. Geoff lapsed against a stop sign and dropped the pads. He fell on top of them, laughing.

Emily exhaled sharply, laughed, and sat next to him.

"Man," he shook his head. "Man . . . that was a blast."

"Yeah."

He folded his hands under his armpits and shook his head. It was silly to ever think of kissing Emily. Getting all that guck and junk on your teeth and lips was for the birds.

She looked at the brick-covered street. "I better get home. It's past nine."

He wiped the corners of his lips. The second period would be half way over by now. "Doncha wanna watch the game?"

She made large half circles on the street with her stick.

"Mom's gonna give me shit for being late," he said. "Probably take away my allowance. But if you're there. . ."

Afraid to show the front tooth that stuck out, she pulled her lips tight and smiled. "Okay." She shoved the helmet down her arm and picked up one of the pads.

Geoff smiled. The street light dappled across her hair and the curve of her neck and she seemed--kinda cute. He felt a strange tingle that he tried to suppress. He picked up the other pad and chest protector. "Truth."

"Huh?"

"Truth."

She looked through his shoulder and he thought better of asking her what she'd felt when she'd seen what she'd seen. "Uh,

do girls . . . really? Well, do they . . . like that?"

She bit her lower lip and drew half-circles again. She shrugged. "I don't know. She did, I guess."

They walked silently along the sides of the shoulder. Emily hurled some odd pieces of limestone and chunks of glass she had found.

"Do you think she did?"

"Geoff, I don't know. I guess so."

"Yeah . . . weird." He sighed and the tingle spread.

Emily nodded and they walked silently, feeling the brisk breeze numb their cheeks.

"You really have a good wrist shot," she said.

"Yeah?"

"It's improving."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah." She grinned.

He nodded. "I'm gonna score sixty goals tomorrow," he said.

STRIKE

Kevan supposed he'd have to talk to Kerry sooner or later, but he didn't like the idea. It was all a big drag.

"Throw heat, Kevan, buddy, throw heat," Shira said, leaning to the second base side of short. She spat into her Cal Ripken glove.

Kevan smiled. Shira has style, not like other girls. The business about the petition and the labeling of him as a moody sexist was just too much. Sexist? What kinda word is that anyway? He pulled down his Blue Jays cap, wiped his mouth on his upper sleeve and shrugged into the set position.

The summer wind felt hotter than usual to him, blowing heaps of sand in the batter's box and traces of it around the pitcher's mound. He licked the toothpaste hardened on the side of his mouth and wondered how many big league managers were ever in his kinda jam. In English class he had read faded S.R.A. cards telling all about Ty Cobb and the Tigers boycotting a game because of his suspension. But that was 1911. And this? Well this was ridiculous. Give me a break. The title game was against Dallington tomorrow and Sheryl, Susan, and star leftfielder Kerry Hillis had walked off the team--gone on strike.

All of them said the guys were ball hogs, taking all the cut off throws and Kerry thought it a real rip that Sheryl and Susan always batted last. Shira had shaken her head when she read the petition signed by most of Kevan's grade six class. "It's silly.

Real narny." If anyone was a ball hog, she was, she insisted.

All the guys were on Kevan's side and they figured Kerry for the ringleader because three times for show 'n tell last year she brought in her mom's back issues of Ms Magazine. Where else would somebody learn about a word like sexist? Mike the centerfielder, a cool dude who had a two week old Van Halen transfer tattoo glued on his left shoulder, a package of Rothmans rolled up in his right sleeve, and loved climbing serial antennas at night to spy in people's living rooms, had his own theory: "They're just bitchin' because they weren't invited to your birthday party."

Last year Kevan invited the whole team and all of his grade five class but this year Mom said, "no way," and limited the guests to two. Kevan invited Shira, and, to get even with Mom, Mike.

She just about died when she saw the cigs tucked under Mike's t-shirt. At first it was funny to see Mom at a loss for words and then blurting to Dad something about reform school, but later in the evening Kevan felt bad, because Mom had been real decent, giving Mike seconds of chocolate cake and ice cream, and saying nothing, not even getting sore when he launched four lawn darts into the rose bush.

Kevan gripped the ball across the seams, once again experimenting with a fork pitch. He had a great fastball and a decent curve, but no kid in the neighbourhood could throw a fork ball. If he could. Wow.

"C'mon, Kevan buddy. C'mon now, throw heat, throw heat,"

Shira said in a quick patter.

He reared back, kicked up his foot, and snapped his wrist. The ball gently arced in the lazy haze of morning. Mitch Wiggins gripped the bat, raised his fat leg and trying his best Reggie Jackson, swung through the ball, twisting his body around and torquing off his cap. Kevan's upper lip quivered as he suppressed a giggle. The ball bounced against the backstop.

"Nice pitch," Shira said.

Kevan jumped off the rubber and pounded his glove against his upper thigh. "Got you on that one, Mitcheroo." He was surprised at how the ball broke, tight and inside on the fists, but his excitement fizzled. Without the three girls life and one-up was a drag. Everyone on the team was tense.

Mitch kicked his front foot in the box, puffs of dirt sprinkling his Converse. "Yeah." He frowned. "The box ain't level. You're batting up-hill. You guys notice that?"

"It's the wind," Shira said.

"The wind." Mitch rolled his eyes.

Kevan chuckled to himself as a couple of grade-one kids who liked watching the team practice fought over the ball. The kid in the Michael Jackson t-shirt pulled the other one's curly hair. "Hey, guys," Kevan said. "That's enough. Hey."

"That was a boss pitch," said the curly haired kid, throwing the ball back to Kevan.

He pressed the ball against his hands. He liked the feel of the seams rubbing across the undersides of his fingers and he

liked the younger kids watching his Kingslake Killers practice. The co-ed grades 5 and 6 team had gone 11-1 against other public schools in the Don Valley area. They relied on Kevan's pitching--his rising fastball chewed up righthanders--Shira's timely hitting--she sprayed the ball to all fields--and Mike and Kerry's power--they had hit sixteen and fifteen homers each. His team wasn't fast but he had power and defense, crushing opponents with the three-run homer--Baltimore Oriole style.

Mitch told the little kids to get behind the screen and swung the bat high above his head, twisting it in the air, looking to Kevan like the young Yaz he had seen on Baseball Legends.

Kevan suppressed his quivering lip, jammed his tongue out the side of his mouth and decided to show off for the kids. Heck, he got his forkball over, why not a knuckler?

He gasped as it didn't jump, drop, or move. It didn't do anything. Mitch laced it into left-field.

"Foul," Kevan cried.

"No, way. That was inside the line, by a foot," said Mitch.

Shira nodded.

Kevan huffed and crossed his arms. "Mike?"

Mike fought the wind, cupping his hands, and lighting a cigarette. He shrugged. "Looked good to me."

Kevan threw his glove on the mound and bit his lower lip. He knew he was sulking but he didn't want to stop. Some friends. They're supposed to back you up. "It wasn't fair. It was foul."

He spat.

"No, it was in there," Shira said, trudging to the mound. She removed her cap, wiped her forehead and let the wind ripple back her long blonde hair. Her face was a soft white that always looked pale. "This is the pits. We have no left-fielder." She kicked gravel at the edge of the rubber. "What are we gonna do? You talked to Kerry yet?"

"No way." He swayed to his left, clutching his pitching elbow. Shouldn't have thrown that knuckler. "She signed a petition against me." He had always thought Kerry didn't like him ever since first grade when she had stolen his Maple Leafs' toque on a cold November day and tossed it high up on the school wall where it clung to the dry bricks. He had tried not to cry and she had laughed.

The team gathered around and Mitch stabbed a few ants with the bat handle. "Is that practice?"

"Why are you always in such a rush to leave," Kevan asked.

"Saturday morning cartoons. This week I think Spiderman meets Pee Wee Herman or something, and--"

"Shut up, Mitch."

"Sure, Mike, sure."

"I guess that's it," Kevan said, pulling up his socks.

"You've got to talk to Kerry, Kev. We can't win without her," Shira said.

"Yes we can," Kevan said not looking up from his socks. Kerry seemed defiant, a hard person to talk to. He sat next to

her in class and they hardly said anything to each other. Whenever Mr. Smith showed an NFB film about the Canadian Shield or other boring stuff, Kerry munched loud and hard on crackers, getting the two of them in trouble. Sure he laughed along the first time, but after doing a thousand lines enough was enough. When she kept munching during other films Smith continued blaming the two of them, like they were in cahoots or something and Kevan wondered why he continued taking the rap. Just say something. He couldn't. He didn't want to be a wuss.

Mike took a long drag off his cigarette. "How we gonna win?" His face squinched in the hot sun. He had short bristly hair and hooded eyes that Kevan thought made him look like Sgt. Rock.

"I think we got to talk to her," Shira said.

"Forget it," Mike spat, the cigarette dangling from his lower lip. "Why don't we put out a petition against her?"

"Yeah," Mitch said.

Mike stretched out his arm, claiming the field. "Do you think Kerry's a bitch? Have the whole school sign it."

Kevan liked the idea despite the sharp tingle in his chest telling him it wasn't right. He stepped off the rubber, the wind pushing him forward. He wiped the corners of his mouth on his shirt sleeve. "Maybe we can change the rules. Only play three girls instead of four."

"Where we gonna get the other girls?" Mike said.

"Hey, Mr. Smith's pit bulldog can sub in left. She can retrieve anything," Mitch said.

"She's not a girl," said Shira, crossing her arms.

"Is too."

"Not the kind that can bat and everything, stupid."

"Well, one time a midget played for the Yankees."

"Forget the dog," Kevan said, irritated by the whole ordeal. Kerry was ruining everything. "I'll talk to my sister, see if I can get some of her friends."

"Kerry's a fucking bitch," Mike said in a long drawn out voice. "I say we set fire to her house."

"She lives in an apartment," Kevan said.

"Well, hell, set fire to that, too." Mike chuckled.

They all looked at each other but no one laughed.

The International Tree Club stood under the large birch tree shading the end of the asphalt driveway in front of Billy Demers' bungalow. Kevan's younger sister, Caitlin, hung by her knees from a lower branch, her dress bunching up around her thighs. Billy bounced a super ball.

"Caitie, be careful," Kevan said, slightly flushing, afraid that Mike and Shira would think him overprotective.

"I'm okay." She swung lazily back and forth and jumped down. She ran to her brother. "Hi, Mike. Shira."

They nodded.

"Look." She held out a stream of paper that to Kevan was just a mishmash of people's scrawls.

He glanced at it quickly. She had already told him all about

the International Tree Club and their plans to get information from people and make a first-rate newsletter. Billy's Mom was a secretary and she'd type up and xerox it. "Swell."

"Isn't it neat? We're going to run off twenty copies by tomorrow."

"People should get to know their neighbours," Billy said, watching the super-ball bound over his head.

Mike smirked.

"Great. Look, Caitlin. You wanna play ball for us, tomorrow?"

"Baseball?"

"Yeah."

"Because Kerry, Susan, and Sheryl quit?"

"Well, yeah." He nodded and looked away. "I'll make it worth your while. I'll give you two hot wheels."

She pursed her lips and looked at the ground. "I don't know."

"They're going to ruin our chance of winning everything," he moaned.

"Yeah, all because she wasn't invited to a birthday party," Mike said. "Loser, man."

Shira shook her head. "How narny."

Caitlin curled back a strand of her hair. "I'm too young. I'm only nine."

"So what?" Kevan said.

"I can't even hit. I struck out at t-ball."

"It's better than forfeiting."

Billy looked up from the ball he bounced. He wore a faded short-sleeved shirt. There was a mustard stain on the tip of his collar. "Sherry told us that she and Kerry quit because you're a poor sport."

"I'm not a poor sport," Kevan yelled.

"Said you hated to lose and you sulked too much."

"You gonna print that?" asked Mike, stepping forward.

Kevan crossed his arms, huffed, and his face twitched. He knew it was reddening. He didn't want Shira to see him get mad. Sure, he got mad in games, but that was different. Last week Mitch was out on a close call at first and Kevan threw his glove in the air and then kicked his cap around until the other team changed the decision. Kingslake rallied and won 4-2.

"Says you're a suck."

Mike grabbed Billy by the shirt. "Nervy little twerp, aren't ya?"

Billy's face tightened into a pout. "I'm just telling you what she said."

"She's putting herself before the team," Mike yelled.

Shira nodded and looked at Kevan who looked away. "Kev's fair. He plays everyone equally. They're just griping because two of them are no good."

"Shit." Mike let Billy go with a soft push. He spat. "Shit. This is ridiculous. Forget Kerry. She's the poor sport, quitting and everything. Forget her. Forget 'em all." He kicked the super

ball across the lawn.

"Hey--" Billy chased it.

Mike's eyes flickered and he grinned. "Caitie, if you play for us, along with them three hot wheels your brother promised, I'll give you a Led Zeppelin tattoo. Put it on myself." He flexed his upper arm and showed her his. It speckled in the light.

"That's gross," she said.

"I'm going home for lunch," Kevan said.

He grabbed a chunk of cake, a glass of milk, and his baseball glove. He ran through the backyard, down the gully, and up the hill, chugging across the playground to the apartments lining Godstone Road, the bill of his cap bending backward in the wind. He ran and ran, hoping nobody saw him.

He caught his breath under a beech tree. The smell of oil and gas rising from the underground parking pinched his nostrils. He wished his friends were with him, backing him up, but he didn't want them to think he was weak.

The door and the inside of the lobby loomed big. He wiped his nose and pushed the intercom button. A voice he couldn't understand answered. "Kerry? Is Kerry home?"

"Kevan?" It was Kerry's voice.

In the background he heard her mother and a man talking. He was surprised because Kerry's mom was divorced.

"Yeah, it's me."

"Let the boy up," Mrs. Hillis said in a polite voice. There

was a hesitation and then the door clicked open.

Kerry lived on the seventh floor in a two-bedroom apartment that smelled of Pine-Sol and fresh paint. "Hi," she said, wearing a cowboy shirt and the faded Levis he always saw her in.

He leaned against a wall and looked at his fingers. "Hi."

"Hello, Kevan," her mother said, looking up from the living room couch. She wore a yellow polyester pant-suit. The lines in her face were loose.

Across from her, sitting on the edge of his seat, was a skinny man in a brown suit. His hair was styled back in two evenly stroked waves. A briefcase lay open at his feet. The way his hands hung in the air, rigid and stiff, with the fingers dug into the palms made Kevan think this guy was in charge because he looked like Principal Hamilton bawling Mike out for flooding the toilet with paper towels.

"So, you're the cute boy Kerry's told me all about," Mrs. Hillis said.

Kevan's cheeks flushed and Kerry looked away.

Mrs. Hillis smiled at the man in the suit. "Got a hundred per cent on a Canadian History test. If only Kerry had those kind of smarts."

The man laughed, politely.

"Wouldn't have to work all day with her back, like her old lady." She laughed at her own joke. Mrs. Hillis was the apartment's superintendent. Kevan wondered how come she was way up on seventh and why Kerry had said nice things about him.

"Why don't you get him a Coke or something. You want a Coke?"

Kevan looked up. "Sure."

Kerry shrugged her big shoulders and Kevan followed her into the kitchen. "Supervisor," she whispered.

"Oh," Kevan said.

She poured two glasses and plopped three ice-cubes in each. "Always on Mom's back," she whispered, "but he's the boss."

"Yeah." Kevan sipped from the glass. He felt tense, impatient. He wanted to get to the point, but he didn't want Mrs. Hillis to hear him. "I want to talk about our baseball team."

She nodded. "I'm not coming back 'til you apologize."

"Apologize for what?" His voice was sharp but he was sure it was quiet.

"Yelling at Sherry for dropping a pop-up."

He shrugged. "Sure. I didn't mean anything by it."

"That's not sll. You expect girls to be like guys."

"Huh?"

Her Mom's voice reached them. "Kerry, honey, why don't you take your friend to your room and let us adults talk about adult things."

Kerry took a sip from her glass and headed down the narrow hallway. Mrs. Hillis remarked to the supervisor how they were good kids. Kevan felt uncomfortable. He looked inside the webbing of his glove.

She slouched on the edge of the bed covered with a patchwork

quilt that was unravelling at the ends. He sat in a chair. Strips of paint curled off the back rest. "Nice room," he said.

Kerry looked at her folded arms.

"You're putting yourself before the team," Kevan said, his cheeks flush.

"I am not."

"You are so. Quitting and everything, like you're more important than the team."

"That's not true, but if you wanna look at it that way."

"Well how am I supposed to look at it? The petition and everything."

"Sherry and Susan do their best and you expect them to play like Mike."

"I do not."

"Do so. You expect them to throw like Mike and everything."

He crossed his arms. "Well, I didn't like the petition."

"You yell at Sherry. You always have her bat last."

"She can't hit."

"That doesn't matter. We're supposed to have fun."

He shook his head. "We have a chance to win it all, Kerry."

"So what?" She looked out the window. "I don't care about that."

"You don't care?"

"No."

He sighed and looked at his fingers. She doesn't care? He was shocked. The championship was theirs to have and she didn't

care. "Whattya mean you don't care?"

She shrugged. "I don't. Winning's fine, but--"

His face felt hot and he bit his upper lip. Fun is great when you're not winning, but when you're winning who cares about fun? "Kerry." He huffed. "Wecan be number one. Champs."

"No." She pinched her lips and suppressed a giggle. "No."

"What's so funny?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." Her voice was once again serious.

"Whattya mean, no?"

She looked at her feet turned over on their sides. "No more yelling at Sherry."

"Okay, okay." He pressed his hands against his sides and looked at the Aurora Frankenstein model with glue stains around the hands and neck leaning against the dresser mirror. Creased baseball cards of Ripken and Eddie Murray were wedged between the glass and pink frame. There wasn't much else in the room. No Barbies, no hot wheels, nothing. No wonder she so often wore the same pair of Levis to school. "You're the best player I've got."

She smiled. "Mike is."

"Well . . . yeah. You're right up there, though." He chewed on the edge of his thumb. In the next room he heard the man clasp shut his briefcase and say something about carrot cake. A door closed. "I promise, I won't yell at Sherry."

"And she won't bat ninth?"

His lower lip quivered. Who's coaching this team, anyway?

"The best batters have to bat at the top of the order--speed, contact hitters first and second; power hitters third, fourth, and fifth."

"You bat third and you've only got 2 homers."

"I have a lot of doubles," he said quickly.

Kerry smiled. "Yeah, that's true, I guess."

"Okay, I'll put her seventh. How's that? Deal?" He held out his hand.

"And we'll have fun?"

"Starting next year, I promise. Next year."

She crossed her arms. "HMMMMMMMM."

"Oh, c'mon."

"If Susan asks Mitch not to throw the ball so hard to second, you won't call her a chicken?"

"Well, that's why Shira should take those plays."

She frowned.

"Okay, okay."

She shook it. "Deal." She jumped up and reached under her bed, pulling out her glove. Dust clung to the lower sleeves of her cowboy shirt. Twine was wrapped around the glove, lodging a baseball inside the webbing. "I figured I almost dropped a couple last week. This here should strengthen the pocket."

Kevan laughed. "You'll get Sheryl and Susan back?"

"Yeah." She tightened the twine. "I love wrapping up baseball gloves," she said.

Outside in the hallway her mother paced, a cigarette clamped

in her lips. "Kerry, you forgot to put the pop away."

"Oh, sorry." She bounded into the kitchen.

"And don't run. The neighbours can hear you downstairs."

Mrs. Hillis's voice was tired and flat. Where had her energy gone? He leaned against the wall, waiting for Kerry to finish wiping the pop stains off the counter. "You wanna go outside and field flies? We'll go to my place and get my bat."

Mrs. Hillis stacked towels in the closet at the end of the hall.

"Yeah. Okay." She opened the fridge. "You want some peanut-butter crackers?"

"Sure." He chuckled.

"I told you not to lean against the wall," Mrs. Hillis said in a stern angry voice.

Kevan stiffened. She hadn't said anything before.

"You know how long it took me to scrub this?" She raised her hands, sighed, and frowned.

Kevan stepped away and looked for Kerry who had just closed the fridge. She stood motionless, her eyes staring through his shoulder.

Mrs. Hillis's back trembled as she gently rubbed the wall in a circular motion with a damp rag. She was careful not to remove any paint. "I'm tired of cleaning after you kids. All the time."

He quickly looked into her puffy face. How long did she sit there with the man with Mr. Hamilton's hands really wanting to let me have it for leaning into the wall? Geez, Mom never treats

my friends like this.

"You done in the kitchen? Get going." She sharply exhaled off her cigarette.

Kevan swallowed hard and Kerry grabbed his hand, clamping her fingers around his, and hurrying him out the door. They forgot about the elevator and ran down the steps to the street.

She blew her hair back from her forehead. "Man," she said.

"Geez," He thought about her hand and how hard and tight it felt in his and the way her fingers trembled.

They walked along the gravel path to the playground and stopped at the swings. He dropped down in one and snatched a tall weed, rubbing the gristled end between his front teeth.

She unpeeled the packaged crackers. "You want one?"

"Yeah, what the heck." He smiled, his body still tingling from touching her hand in the hall. The tingles felt wonderfully strange and warm.

"They aren't very good." She leaned against a swing post and wound and re-wound the twine across her fingers.

"You better be careful. You'll cut off the circulation."

She shrugged.

"Where's that cracker?"

"Oh. Here." She handed them to him and kicked at stones wedged in the ground.

He munched into it. "These are terrible. How do you do it? I mean in Mr. Smith's class day after day."

She said nothing.

"I'm kidding. They're fine."

"Yeah."

He rubbed the tips of his Pumas into the ground, rubbing their ends with dirt. "Hey, you remember that time you threw my hat on the roof?"

She smiled. "Yeah. It was really against the wall."

"That's right. I thought you hated my guts."

"No." She giggled. "I--"

"You thought it would come down, didn't ya?"

"Of course not." She laughed.

"You didn't? Then . . . why?"

"I don't know." She looked at her fingers. "I don't know."

He nodded. "Swell. I got a new bat. An Easton. Aluminum."

"Great. I guess I shouldn't have done it, the hat I mean."

"No, no. Forget it."

"It was funny." She giggled. "Your hat hanging up there and everything."

"Yeah, loads of laughs."

She chuckled and so did he.

"Let's go field some flies," he said.

The Poem, 1969

He heard a click-clicking and then the soft giggle of his nine year old sister. She twisted his big toe. "Owww. Tee, quit it."

"C'mon. Get up." She shook him.

"Leave me alone." He kicked his foot free of the covers, rolled against the wall and wrapped a pillow tight against his ears. "Let me sleep, huh?"

"It's Christmas. Wake up."

"C'mon, Meeto, wake up." Mom shouted from the living room. "C'mon." Her voice trilled.

The tone of it bothered him. There was too much sing-songiness in it. She oughtn't to be that happy. "Awww, leave me alone."

The click-clicking became a snap-snapping and Jimmy sat up. "What are you doing?"

"I got it in my stocking." She popped another slide in her GAF viewmaster. "It's neat."

"Swell." He smiled. Sis had been fidgety since midnight. "You didn't sleep."

"Did so."

"Did not. I heard you clicking that damn thing all night."

"Don't say damn."

He huffed.

"I was hoping to see Santa."

"Uh-huh." He rolled his eyes. He knew all about such things.
"What did I get in my stocking?"

She handed it to him. "Go ahead. Open it. I think it's one of them spinning gyros you've been wanting."

"I bet you pawed all around the wrapping to figure it out."

She flicked back her fine hair and folded her legs on the corner of the bed. "Yeah."

Sisters. He carefully undid the red wrapping covered with Walt Disney characters. C'mon, Mom. I'm getting kind of old for that aren't I? Mickey and Pluto aren't even funny. He still liked Bugs Bunny cartoons. He figured he always would.

"Whattya got?"

He shrugged. "Relax, willya." Every year Mom and Dad had stayed up late Christmas Eve, drinking French wine, listening to Nat King Cole, and wrapping gifts. Around midnight, when the frost had just lighted on the windows, Dad would come sneaking into Jimmy and Teresa's room as he and Sis lay on their stomachs, trying to suppress any giggles. They never could sleep before midnight so they faked it. Dad was easy to kid.

It always surprised Jimmy how soft his father's step was. Often he yelled at Mom and complained about the way she spent money on the kids and "dickered" with traditional Matchedone meals--"Don't give me new. I like it old. Whattya think I'm the Apollo spaceship blasting off to the moon or something? I need change, progress, all the time? Don't want change," but at

Christmas--he was gentle. Jimmy used to peek at Dad stuffing the stockings--gift first, then the oranges, then the candy canes. Always the candy canes last. It was the only time that Dad hated to break anything.

Christmas this year was different, big time. Even with all that click-clicking of his sister's, Jimmy slept. He couldn't believe it, he did, hours. Dad was gone. Mom and he were getting divorced.

"It's a gyro," he said.

"I knew it. Spin it. I want to see it spin." She bounced on the end of the bed.

"Be careful. You'll fall off."

"Spin it."

"Later."

The door cracked open and Mom peeked her curly haired head in. "Hang a shining star upon the highest bough," she chirped, her face light and bouncy.

Teresa laughed. "Sing some more, Mom."

Jimmy smirked. Mom had a good voice, but she was no Sinatra.

"Get outta here." Mom chuckled and tapped Jimmy's knee. "What's that look for?"

He shrugged.

"It's Christmas!"

"Big deal," Jimmy said.

Mom said nothing. She wrapped her arms across her chest and wiggled her hips. "O-o-o-o-o. Coldies."

"Mom, you're always coldies," Teresa said.

"Coldie-coldie-coldies," Mom said.

Jimmy shook his head. "Mom!" How can she be so excited?

"It snowed last night. It's white everywhere."

"Wow," Teresa said.

Mom slapped Jimmy's shoulder. "C'mon, Meet. Let's go open the gifts."

He slowly did up his pajama top. "We're not going to eat first?"

"No." Mom's face tensed. "Why should we?"

"It's just . . . it's kind of a ritual or something. Dad pigs out and we wait to open the gifts."

Teresa laughed and Jimmy recalled Christmas after Christmas, the same old routine. Dad in his bathrobe, at the kitchen table, eating eggs, slowly chewing on smokey links and asking Mom for seconds of coffee. The asking for seconds was just too much. Was this supposed to be funny or just plain torture?

"Well, we'll just change that ritual, this year." Mom smiled.

Downstairs the tree lights sparkled playing off the red, green, and silver bulbs to create flashes of color. Frank Sinatra's "Mistletoe and Holly" played on the stereo and Jimmy huddled against the component's cabinet trying to resist the tingles he felt. Teresa sat on the couch.

There were only a couple of packages under the tree for each of them. That didn't bother Jimmy but now Mom was going to work

and what would the kids at school say? He dreaded them finding out Dad was gone. The only other kid in his grade seven homeroom class that had no father was that loser Laslo Chakiriss--fighting, breaking things(like the school windows--twice), and forever losing his place in Mr. Broiling's English class. "What page we on?" he always seemed to ask, his hair askew, his lower lip drooping. Would everyone expect him to become Laslo's friend? Or maybe even act like Laslo?

They opened the gifts from Santa first. Jimmy thought it was real cool the way Mom wrapped the Santa stuff in shiny silver guck that Teresa and he never saw around the house or in any drug store. Teresa got a Tumblin' Tom-Boy that she made roll over and over again. Jimmy got a checkered bombardier's jacket with a white fur collar.

"Wow," Teresa said. "You look like one of those guys in the First World War or something."

"Yeah. Me and my Sopwith." He grinned, trying to hide his disappointment. It was a nice jacket, warm, but he wanted toys--knights, and cars, and board games.

Mom whistled. "Looks sharp, hon."

"Yeah."

"Open my gift next, Mom." Teresa begged.

Jimmy smiled. This was the first year Tee had bought anything and she was delighted.

Mom carefully undid the long angular package full of bumps and bruises and bits of blue and green ribbon. "You wrapped this

yourself, I see."

Jimmy giggled. His gift for Mom wasn't finished. He was trying to write her a poem. Mom loved poems. Every one he had ever written, since kindergarten, was tucked in back of her Macedonian cookbook. For Christmas he had made this card--a Toronto Argonaut wide receiver running through a snow-filled endzone--with the theme of teamwork, pulling together, or something like that but the poem was just too mushy. He couldn't get away from writing something too emotional or sounding hurt about Dad's leaving. He didn't want to do that to Mom. He wanted to keep everything in tight, close, quiet.

"Wow. Look at this." Mom unrolled the cellophane, revealing thirty-six plastic cups. She wasn't quite sure what to do with them. "Thanks, honey." She hugged Teresa.

"I haven't finished making my gift for you yet, Mom." He looked at his fingers.

"You William Shakespeare or something? You gotta do revisions?"

"Well. . . ." He laughed.

"Go ahead. Open yours from your mother."

The package felt heavy. Jimmy hoped it wasn't more clothes. Mom leaned forward. Teresa played with her two new Barbie Dolls.

"Gosh. . . ." It was a Wilson football. "An official C.F.L." He gripped the laces and patted the nose three times and imagined himself fading back into the pocket, like he was Russ Jackson or something.

"You like it?"

"Yeah."

"When the weather warms up, I'll toss you a few passes."

"You?" That would be just great if Eddie or the guys saw him practicing with Mom. Your dad a wuss or something? Can't throw a football?

"Yeah, me." Mom giggled. "Where do you think your father learned to throw a spiral?"

Jimmy smiled.

"Now c'mon. Let's clean up. We gotta go to Baba and Dedo's."

"Ohhh. We always go to Baba and Dedo's," Jimmy said.

"They're your grandparents. Christmas should be with family."

"Great. Dedo always pinches my cheeks. Thinks he's doing me a big favor by giving me a quarter."

"You like seeing Uncle Aleck, don't you?"

"Yeah, he's cool." Al was the coolest, walking around in his fishing hat, taking candid pictures with his Polaroid and drinking rum and cokes. Last year he taught Jimmy how to shoot craps. He learned all the odds. Sevens--six out of thirty-six rolls; sixes and eights--five out of thirty-six rolls; fives and nines--four out of thirty-six rolls and so on down the line. Al knew all the angles to any game. He was an engineer.

"Can't we play with our toys awhile?" Teresa asked.

Jimmy bit his lip. Dad wouldn't be there, this year. There'd be no jokes about Baba's zilnick. "It's terrible, terrible. Don't

touch the zilnick," Dad always said, his face puffed out, a mound of four slices on his plate. "I only eat this stuff out of respect for Baba." He'd take another large bite. "Terrible stuff. Don't touch it. Mmmmmmm, terrible stuff."

"You can play with your toys for ten minutes and then we leave," Mom said.

"Oh, Mom," Teresa said.

"Ten minutes."

Teresa flicked the switch on Tumblin Tomboy and it flipped over twice at the hips and wedged itself against the coffee table.

Jimmy walked upstairs and closed the door behind him.

Dedo sat on the edge of the plastic covered chesterfield chuckling away at Danny Kaye and Bing Crosby's "sisters" routine from White Christmas. He played with his bristled hair. Baba turned up the television and offered Jimmy some musleenkees.

"Ne baba," she said, pushing the plate against his chest, "yahdee."

Jimmy smiled awkwardly.

Uncle Aleck lined up the putter and dropped a twelve foot putt into a beer stein. "Damn, I'm good." He laughed at himself and pushed back his fishing hat. "Take an olive from your grandmother and say hello to your dedo."

Jimmy nodded. He hated olives. "Hi, Dedo."

"Sho pryesh, Golomuo?" Jimmy could tell by the way Dedo

smiled at Baba that he was impressed. The boy was growing. He looked strong. "Golomuo." Dedo squeezed his cheeks with thick gristled fingers and thumbs until they hurt. "Good boy, good boy," he said, removing a quarter from inside his shirt cuff.

"Thanks, Dedo."

"Ah, ne Dedo."

Al landed another putt. "How come you kids never learned Macedonian?"

Jimmy shrugged.

"They knew it, Lack, when they were younger," Mom said, sitting next to Baba on the smaller couch. She flicked back her curled hair. "But you know kids at school make fun and they lost it."

"Awww . . . it's nothing to be ashamed of."

"They know that, Lack, they know."

"They know but they don't know." He laughed and raised the putter on a half swing. "Goddam great putter I got here. You remember Trianka?"

"Yeah. You've only been planning your wedding for twenty years." She laughed.

"Sweet kid. Gave me a set of clubs. I think it's her way of proposing." He raised his eyebrows like Groucho Marx and transformed the putter into one long cigar. "If she can't hit par on the back nine, forget it." The putter bobbed.

Mom laughed. "You gonna get married?"

He pushed back his fishing hat. "I don't want to rush her."

You know."

"Yeah." Mom laughed behind her hand.

"Gevka, you doing okay? I mean, all kidding aside."

Mom crossed her arms and looked at the carpet. "Yeah, Lack. Fine."

"Hey kids, what's that?" He pointed to a yellow ceramic hippopotamus sitting on the mantle.

"A hippopotamus," Teresa said.

"Very good." Al looked at Mom. "Smart kids," he chuckled, wrapping his hands on their shoulders. "Okay, I've got a tougher one. You guys whizzes at math or what?"

"Yeah, kind of," Jimmy said.

"Kind of." Al winked at Mom. "All right, here it is. How many people would you have to have in a room before you had two with the same birthdates?"

Jimmy bit his lip and pondered. Teresa counted on her fingers. That's easy, he figured. "Three-hundred and sixty-five."

"Three-hundred and sixty five? Malatah, whattya think?"

"Fifty?" Teresa said.

"No. But that reminds me. Mom, get me a beer, willya?"

Baba smiled and headed to the kitchen. Jimmy wished they'd eat soon. His stomach was growling as the smell of stuffed peppers and zilnick floated down into the living room.

"Kids. If you ever wanna get your uncle a gift--fifty. Labatt's fifty. Got it?"

They nodded.

"None of that Carling Black Label shit."

They nodded again.

"Great kids." He laughed. "I love them. No, why three-hundred and sixty-five, Meeto? Use your head. Three-hundred and sixty-five because that's how many days are in a year? I taught you all about odds when we shot craps last year--remember seven--six out of thirty-six rolls?"

"Yeah."

"Well. What are the odds you could have 365 people in the same room, all with different birthdates?"

Jimmy hadn't thought of it that way at all. "Pretty slim."

"Pretty slim." He smiled. "It's incredible. Impossible. I think the number's 28. One of the guys at work figured it out using algebraic equations."

"Wow." His uncle was so smart.

"The jury's still out. You kids like your gifts or what?"

Does Timex make waterproof watches. "Yeah, sure," Jimmy said. He and his sister got KOHO hockey sticks, a puck, and two dollars each.

"Well, I hadn't heard anything. You want me to take 'em back?"

"No, no. I like them." He leaned on the end of the stick.

"Yeah. Thanks." Teresa said.

"Just don't try any slapshots in here." He raised his voice. "Mom! Where's that beer?"

"Ne, Dedo," Dedo said, smiling at Jimmy and his sister.

He doesn't want to give me another quarter does he?

"Jimmy . . . practice enough and maybe you'll play in the Junior Hockey Championships." Al said.

"He likes football, Lack," Mom said.

"I like hockey." Jimmy didn't want his uncle to think he didn't appreciate the gifts. "They play tonight, don't they?" The Gold Medal match from Prague had Canada going nose to nose with the Russians.

"The Russians will kill them."

"No way." Jimmy crossed his arms. "Canada will win."

"For sure," Teresa said.

"Just don't let your Dedo hear you say that." Al winked taking Jimmy and Teresa into his confidence.

Dedo sat forward on the chesterfield, his hands digging into his thighs. "Huh? Make your beg?"

Jimmy chuckled. Make your beg? Won't he ever learn it's beg your pardon?

"Nothing, Dad," Al said. "The crazy old guy could watch White Christmas forever."

Teresa raised her hand.

"He still roots for the Ruskiess?" Mom laughed.

"Of course, you know that, Jean. Thinks they're his slavic brothers or something."

Teresa leaned forward on her toes and stretched her hand further.

"What is it, Malatah?" Al asked.

"A millionaire bet on the game," she said.

"Oh. Who?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know. He bet a thousand dollars that Russia would win."

"He'd bet a lot more than that if he was a millionaire."

Teresa paused. "Yeah. It was a million, I think."

"Now you're making up stories. Admit it."

"No."

"You're making this up."

"No, really, she's right. Some big-shot bet against Canada," Jimmy said. It really miffed him that a Canadian millionaire would bet against his own country. That was just the pits. He hoped Canada would win and win big. "He did." Jimmy laughed.

His uncle raised an eyebrow. "The odds are thirteen to five for the Russians. Not much of a gamble."

"Russia's gonna lose and so's that big-shot."

Al smiled. "Where's my beer?"

"Lack, why don't we take a picture of the whole family?" Mom said, the Polaroid in her hands.

"Sure. You know how to work it?"

"What's there to work?"

"Good point." He laughed. "Kids, c'mon. Around the tree."

Last year for the group portrait Dad did his obno impression of a Toronto Maple Leaf hockey fan. He crossed his eyes, flipped off the camera, and shouted (to the tune of "go, Leafs, go"): "Ballard start the bus." He was drunk. "I don't wanna be in any

pictures." Jimmy said, backing against a huge chair.

"Hub? Why not, Meeto? C'Mon." Mom pleaded.

"No." He shook his head.

"We always take a family picture."

"I don't want to. No." He bit his lip.

"We don't. . . ." Uncle Aleck motioned to Jimmy's mother with a lazy hand. "Forget it, Gevka."

Baba called everyone to dinner.

"Creat. Maybe now I'll get that beer." He laughed and grabbed Jimmy around the shoulders and hugged him. "So tell me, who's going to score for Canada?"

"I don't know. Fran Huck."

"Fran Huck? He's no Mahovlich."

Everyone in the neighbourhood liked Frank Mahovlich, the Big M. He was Croatian, the closest thing to Matchedone in the National Hockey League--a cultural hero.

"Yeah, but who is?" Jimmy said.

"Good point."

They laughed and headed upstairs.

He heard a swirl of voices as he moved in and out of sleep. After stuffing themselves on peppers, manjah, and zilnick, he and Sis had watched Miracle on Thirty-fourth Street and she tried helping him find rhymes for his Christmas poem. The football player running through the snow just wasn't going to cut it. He wanted something more personal, but what? Sinatra? I get a kick

out of you? No, too corny. Maybe something to do with Christ and unity and bringing people together. No, too serious. He couldn't find the words. Thinking of what to write made him tired and he fell asleep, with Teresa curled against his shoulder. Now, the voices around him quieted. They were too quiet. He drifted, but not toward sleep.

"I look at the kid, raised without a father. A kid without a father. Makes me sad," Uncle Al said in a gravelly voice.

"It hurts Teresa, too. It hurts all of us, Lack."

"Oh, I know. But a boy needs a father. It's the identity thing. He's twelve years old. That's a tough time. You know I love these kids."

"Yes." Jimmy felt his mother tensing, her voice breaking a little. He stayed awake but kept his eyes closed.

"I can't live with him, Al," she said.

Dedo Chris, above the din of the hockey game, said something in Macedonian about the importance of family. Jimmy couldn't make out the score of the game. As usual when Dedo watched the tube, the set was turned down two decibels too low.

"You know I like Stan. I love him. He's like a brother to me. And shit, we've got the same big nose." Al laughed. "He wants you back."

"I can't live with him."

Dedo raised his voice. To Jimmy it sounded like a grunt.

"None of you know what it's like," Mom said, her voice a whisper. "I called you five years ago for help, Lack. You

remember what you said?"

"That was awhile ago. The kids need a father."

Why wouldn't Al admit what he said, Jimmy wondered, the ends of the carpet bristling against the sides of his cheeks. He clenched his teeth and fought the empty feeling in his stomach.

"Stan was here, yesterday. All he did was talk about you."

Mom said nothing.

Dedo again started grumbling, and it wasn't only because Canada was effectively killing off a Soviet power-play. Jimmy peeked, saw Dedo's thick hands pushed firmly into his thighs. His lower lip was snarled and his head was bunched into his shoulders. Dedo again emphasized family and mumbled something about marriage vows.

What the hell does he know about it? He wasn't around when Dad came home drunk. And what about Mom's birthday last year? She wanted an acoustic guitar and Dad got her a banjo and when she wasn't happy he broke the neck against a coffee table. Snapped it in two. Did he see that?

Baba glanced edgewise at Mom and patted Dedo warmly on the wrist. Her eyes were soft and her voice said something low-key about Patience and Mercy.

Dedo threw his arms in the air. "Who asked you?"

Jimmy yawned, stretching his back, pretending to be just awakening.

"Meeto." Mom mussed up his hair. Her hand felt tense. "You sleep well?"

"Yeah." He shrugged.

Dedo sat back in the couch, his arms crossed against his burly chest. Baba smiled at Jimmy and asked if he wanted to yahdee.

If she feeds me any more stuff I'm gonna puke. "No. No." He shook his head.

"Yahdee?"

Jimmy chuckled and rubbed his eyes. "Dosta. Dosta sborvash."

Uncle Aleck, Baba, and Mom almost keeled over laughing. Jimmy grinned. He thought he was maybe going too far telling Baba to shut her mouth, but enough's enough--my stomach.

"The kid knows some Matchedone." Mom smiled. "Doesn't he, Keecho?"

Dedo grunted. "He should know the language."

Jimmy shrugged. "What's the score in the game?"

"2-1," Al said. "Canada."

"All right."

Dedo frowned and Teresa looked up.

"Canada's winning."

"Great." She nodded her head and rolled back over. "Sleepies."

"G'mon. Get up." He wished he had her GAF viewmaster now. He'd click it off in her ear.

"Let her sleep." Baba smiled, tucking the blanket under Teresa's neck. "Malatah." She kissed her.

Russia had pulled their goalie, and had the pressure on,

snapping the puck around in the Canadian end, feeding it to the big center in the slot. He fired a rising wrist shot that goaltender Jacques Perron snatched out of the air with a quick glove.

Dedo mumbled a string of Matchedone curses.

"The old guy says Maikilahov was held on the last play. Should've been a penalty." Uncle Aleck laughed.

Jimmy's cheeks were red. It bothered him that his uncle found Dedo so much fun. 42 seconds to go. The puck was dropped and sticks chipped away. It caromed off the boards and ricocheted to the point where it tangled in a defenseman's skates.

"C'mon," Dedo said. "Shoot, shoot."

The puck rattled off the post. Jimmy's lower lip quivered. C'mon, beat 'em. It rolled along the end boards. Elbows flew. A Russian winger stole the puck off of Defenseman Mosienko's stick and fed it to the slot. Maikilahov fired--right into Perron's pads. Face off. 22 seconds to go.

"C'mon." Jimmy pumped up his arms and paced. Mom nervously laughed.

The Russians called time-out and Dedo ran his fingers through his bristled hair. He yelled about the unfair officiating.

"That's crap," Jimmy said.

"You weren't even watching the game," Al said.

"It's crap." His cheeks were real hot. He pointed at his grandfather. "He should be rooting for Canada." The hell with

that slavik brother shit. "He's a Canadian."

Baba smiled. "The boy's right," she said in English.

Mom laughed.

Jimmy paced. He wanted Canada to win, he wanted to beat his grandfather.

The linesmen stood over the two hunched centers. Steam twirled from their lips. He dropped the puck and Canada cleanly won the draw. Mosienko raised the puck on his backhand and lofted it out of his end. It bounced at the center stripe. Down, down, it rolled past their blue line, down, down, down, towards their empty net. He scored.

Jimmy danced and punched the air with his fists. "Yeah," he yelled.

Dedo shut off the t.v. with a remote control switch.

"All right."

"You're sick," Uncle Al said. "Teh tresna pen jer o."

What's he giving me with the broken windows? I've got a broken window? I'm sick? Dedo's the sick one--rooting for the Russians. "Yeah!"

Teresa poked her head out from the blankets.

"We won," he said.

"All right." She raised up a limp hand. "Give me some skin."

He did.

"Sleepies," she said.

"Get up." He laughed, wanting to save this moment forever. Maybe he had got carried away, but Dedo's such a pain in the

guzzo.

Aleck shook his head. "Sick."

Baba smiled. "Leave the boy alone. He's happy."

Dedo mumbled and hobbled to the bathroom.

"Yahdee?" Baba asked Jimmy.

"Water, please."

"Malatah?"

Teresa looked at Mom. "Pepsi?"

"Yes, you can have a Pepsi," Mom said, smiling. "I'll get them, Ma. You sit down, relax." She wiped the lint off her black slacks and folded her hands together. "Would you like anything, Lack?"

"A beer."

They laughed.

Mom headed upstairs. Jimmy turned on the t.v. The two teams were lined up at their respective blue-lines waiting for the closing ceremonies. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

Uncle Al rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"Want me to get your putter," Jimmy asked, a little nervous, afraid his uncle was still mad at him.

"What you think I play golf all day?" He chuckled. "Don't be such a teekva." He shook his head. "I'll have to take you out on the links--show you some pointers." He sat forward and looked at his fingers. "No . . . I . . . How you kids feel about your dad leaving?"

"I don't know," Teresa said. "I miss him."

Jimmy shrugged. He felt funny talking about it. "Mom did the right thing." The players were shifting excitedly. The fronts of their shirts were sweatstained. The National Anthem played as the Canadian flag slowly rose. Perron nestled the wire caged mask between his left arm and breast and held his head high. The tangled ends of his hair were melted to his forehead. He and the players were singing. Jimmy hummed.

Al took off his fishing hat and twirled it around in his hands. "Well, you kids help your mother around the house. Do dishes. Keep your rooms clean. She needs help."

"Okay," Teresa said.

"You're good kids."

Perron was now belting the words and so was Jimmy. "From far and wide, O Canada, we stand on guard for thee. . . ." His skin tingled.

From the kitchen he heard his mother's voice. Soft at first, but building. "God, keep our land."

"Glorious and Free."

"O Canada. . . ."

And they all stood like that, singing, voices in harmony, voices low soft and proud, voices defeating the odds.

Hope: the Positive Deflection

A writer is who he is and where his imagination has been. Back in grade school and junior high I did stand up comedy routines--sort of a W.C. Fields meets Woody Allen. Words, language, speech patterns, intrigued me. I was an impressionist. When I was nine Mr. Smith asked me to do my Cagney for the whole class and Mrs. Gallagher and Miss Johnson sat in. It was a thrill.

In high school I wrote plays. Other guys were into guitars and girls and cars while I was into satirizing Shakespeare. I had my version of Romeo and Juliet produced along with a radio serial send-up of Flash Gordon.

My past shaped my present. The stories in this collection are a culmination of many factors but I feel my fiction's basic structure of three distinct descriptive acts--an opening (exposition), a deflection (turning point), and a resolution (coda)--grew out of my early interest in theatre. And the strong emphasis on dialog in all of my yarns stems from my love of film and being obsessed, even at a young age, with actors' voices and their varying speech rhythms.

I didn't move directly from high school to the stories in this collection. No, that transition was not a smooth one. Initially, my fiction was tough and hardboiled. I was influenced a lot by Raymond Chandler, Ernest Hemingway, and Nathanael West so I wrote either biting satire or lost generation cynicism which left me, by the end of my second year as a grad student, feeling

pretty used up, like a worn out Gillette razor. Vision, view of the world, whatever you want to call it, I didn't have. I wasn't tapping into what I really felt; I was imitating artists I admired. I was dishonest.

In the Summer of '86 under the tutelage of Professor McGhee I reevaluated what I sought to achieve as an artist. His Coleridge seminar opened my life to a new phase. I saw art in Coleridgean terms, both as a critic and artist. I wanted to make people feel beauty.

From a critic's standpoint, "Taste," a faculty similar to the "hovering Imagination" in the art of creation, is what connects the active (intellect/understanding) and passive (senses/reason) powers (Coleridge, "Criticism," 227). When you feel engaged, your response has been triggered by your "Taste" and you have moved from the concrete image to the universal idea. You've gone from mere agreeability (pleasure at the forms and conventions used) to the spirit that excites, or beauty, recapturing the original feeling of the artist, coalescing with it, and reaching an epiphany of universal truth (Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, 2:251).

From an artist's standpoint I want my fiction to work on the readers' "Taste," letting them feel the pulse beat, the heart of my vision. This principle made me reassess my earlier stories about blue collar people and pool halls and snazzy cars only to conclude that they didn't transcend mere agreeability. How could I expect readers to feel the eternal (God), the universal, in my

fiction when I didn't even know my characters, let alone the milieu they lived in? The time for play-acting was over. I had to write from the standpoint of personal experience and infuse my stories with me.

The same time I read Coleridge I was actively engaged by Jonathan Penner's Private Parties, particularly the stories "Amarillo," "At Center," and "Frankenstein Meets the Ant People," all of which were about kids, a group I was interested in exploring in my fiction. At twenty-six I'm twice the age of twelve to fourteen year olds--that gives me some objectivity--and I like that age because of its blend of innocence and awkwardness which would lend a natural undercurrent of tension to any story. The other factor was vision. The characters were me or grew out of my childhood and because of my familiarity with their voices I felt I could solve any hitch in a story--the dialog, the characters' thoughts would be the right responses because I could feel what they felt. Whether this is true or not doesn't matter, what does matter is that I felt confident in this fictional world and was therefore more able to pull off the verisimilitude. Out of these characters grew my Coleridgean "Initiative," the leading thought linking all of the component pieces within the context of the whole--my Multeity in Unity--what Coleridge would call the balance between each component ("Criticism," 232). Seeing the world through kids' eyes made me discover me and my "Initiative"--a fictional emphasis on hope and a commitment through art to human relationships.

Penner taught me the coda and I'm indebted to him for this structural device. To me it's a good way to end Act III (the resolution) of an upbeat story--you come back to something detailed earlier as a final summing up. In "At Center" Penner's junior high protagonist Bruce just doesn't fit in. He's fat, uncoordinated and can't smoke. Cut off from the guys he hides in back of the school until his concerned Dad, flashlight in hand, finds him, ending the story with a wonderful affirmation--"The frogs were trilling, filling the dark with their cry of urgent love" (90). Father and son discover mutual love. This coda had been keyed by two earlier references to frogs:

From the nearby woods came the mating song of hundreds of frogs, rebounding off the walls of the school until it came out of the dark from everywhere. 86

The frogs, which had grown silent during his coughing, one by one took up their old song. 89

I employ this technique in all three of my stories as a final closer, a statement of hope. "Truth or Dare" is balanced by the game Emily and Geoff always play. But the game has changed in the story's waning moments as Geoff challenges Emily, wanting to know what she thinks of what she saw at the playground. All good dialog has a sub-text and the sub-text here is that Emily needs time to sort out the event and really doesn't want to talk about it, so Geoff eases off, choosing to see it as "weird." The story's final line, the real coda, indicates the change taking

place in Geoff. When he says "I'm gonna score sixty goals tomorrow," I'm deliberately harkening back to the earlier reference in the story mentioning their physical equality--50 goals, 50 saves. The closer, I feel, indicates Geoff's getting stronger; he's becoming more grown up, and physically he's going to surpass Emily. He is becoming more like his hero--the virile Rocket Richard--and the equilibrium (50 goals, 50 saves) between Geoff and Emily is breaking.

"Strike" I didn't know how to end. After Mrs. Hillis bawled out her daughter, a reconciliation between the two characters seemed necessary. Kevan needed to realize the goodness in Kerry and the tough homelife she has but I didn't want his sensitivity for her to come out of pity. And since fiction never sells direct I didn't want him to come right out and say, "Man, your mom, she's got to go." So instead, I deliberately searched for a coda. In "Truth or Dare" it just happened, intuitively. With "Strike" I tried to find the image that stood out earlier in the story. What was it that was a real close-up, an image that would stick with my reader? Well, it had to be Kevan's hat clinging to the dry bricks. In a Coleridgean sense I had to make that earlier scene fit in within the context of the whole or else it would be a flashy image that isn't delivered on--a piece of Muliteity that provides no unity. So why not use it for a closer? The dialog works in the end because the mother is never mentioned, and we get a sense of Kerry's orneriness (she threw the hat on the roof for the hell of it) and embarrassment--I suspect she had a crush

on Kevan way back in grade one, or why else would she keep saying, "I don't know," when asked why she did it? Ultimately, the scene fulfills my artistic vision, my initiative of hope, affirming their commitment to each other and the baseball team. "Let's go field some flies," is the final affirmation. By giving of himself and making concessions Kevan discovers a friendship, gaining more than he has given.

"The Poem, 1969" has the strongest coda of them all and it fits the lyrical title. I really wanted something symphonic, triumphant. As I got to the end of the story I knew I wanted to use the idea of odds, a motif that had been mentioned earlier as a game Uncle Aleck enjoys playing with the kids, but I didn't know how to set it up. Originally, after listening to Al's speech about pitching in, Jimmy went upstairs to help Mom with the drinks and to let her know Christmas was fine, great, that kind of thing. But this was, again, too direct. I wanted subtlety. And it happened--a moment of self-discovery. As with the ending of "Truth or Dare" I felt a click, a chill.

The ending was right because for a Canadian there is no greater pride that I know of than to see your flag raised after a hockey championship at the international level. I may be going into the realm of hyperbole here but I really do believe it is the most intrinsic part of our identity. I can remember playing the Russians in '72 and being down 3-1-1 and then winning the last three games in Moscow to take the eight game series. The games were on during the day and all of us at school rushed to

the gym to watch Canada. When we won game 8 in the last thirty seconds on a Paul Henderson goal I'll never forget that feeling--cheeks hot, back tingling--you wanted to cry as the flag was raised and some of us sang. When I came to the end of "The poem, 1969" I re-lived that moment in the gym and it came out on paper better than it was in real life because in the world of the story the stakes were higher: the survival of a family, the need for unity, acceptance, and forgiveness are greater issues than hockey and Nationalistic pride. The family is experiencing fall-out after Dad has left. Jimmy's upset but he can't talk about it. He wants to forgive his mother, he wants to rally around her, but he can't. And yet, in the end, he can cry out. Full of national pride he begins to sing, a song of love. His mother joins in his cry as does the rest of the family, creating the epiphany, the re-uniting, the coming together of "voices in harmony, voices low soft and proud, voices defeating the odds."

A nice thing about the singing angle is how it grew out of an earlier reference. Remember the opening act, the Sinatra bit, Mom singing Christmas carols and Jimmy refusing to join in? Well, that makes a nice prelude to the coda. And the whole odds thing fits in with the context of 1969. Back then nobody was getting divorced in Canada. It wasn't until '68 that Trudeau, then Minister of Justice, made his famous statement about getting the government out of the nation's bedrooms, and passed his landmark divorce law. Prior to '68 the only grounds for divorce were desertion and adultery. So you see Jimmy's parents were going to

be among the first of the new advent and for a kid that sense of being different, of standing out from the group, is a real fear. But he overcomes that fear, forming a new commitment and this story like the other two has a deflection leading to hope.

Well, this upbeat ending, this feeling of hope can present a problem, especially in this cynical we-have-suffered-through-world-war-II-so-we-know-how-tough-it-is-God-must-be-dead era. As mentioned at the outset I used to avoid sentimentality by writing about poolhalls. No more. Why should an artist be afraid of expressing what he feels? Readers', critics', reactions? Sure they're important but an artist has to be self-reliant, he has to show character. Hope is an intrinsic part of my character and to refuse my world view, to reject it out of a fear that critics will label me a sentimentalist, is wrong and unworthy of my art. On this principle, I decided the key was not rejecting my true vision, but finding a way, what Coleridge would describe as striking a balance, an equilibrium between thoughts and senses (BL 2: 144-45), to avoid sentiment. Wordsworth, too, was concerned about this issue.

If the words, however, by which this excitement is produced be in themselves powerful, or the images and feelings have an undue proportion of pain connected with them, there is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds ("Preface to Lyrical Ballads," 405)

Control is the issue. I share Wordsworth's belief that art should be a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings (400), the purpose of which is to give pleasure (403), and I share his sense of restriction, the need for bridled passion. If the sentiments are too strong you swamp the reader and come across as insincere. For poetry Wordsworth suggests meter as the controlling factor on the passions. As a writer of prose I have chosen to use restrained language and comedy for a bridling pace. In other words, at times I use a Hemingwayesque style to distance myself from the strong emotions I feel when I write. It's a self-defense mechanism as well as an artistic device.

What I really like about Hemingway's style is the absence of adjectives and how he undercuts emotion by seeming so detached and yet giving the situation more punch than all the adjectives could provide. The description of the execution of the six cabinet ministers from In Our Time is wonderful:

One of the ministers was sick with typhoid.
The other five stood very quietly against the wall. Finally the officer told the soldiers it was no good trying to make him stand up. When they fired the first volley he was sitting down in the water with his head on his knees. (51)

That last line is great! We get a strong visual image but we don't get the heavy-handed sentiments of the narrator. Because of the restraint employed, that image is more powerful for me,

because I'm able to fill the void, the blank space left by Hemingway, with my own gut reaction. Those blank spaces are what I like to create, to be infused with the readers' sense of the characters and their own sense of self.

Hemingway also employed an externalized point of view. He does get into his characters' minds but often shows us something through physical details. In "Soldier's Home," the mother's awkwardness around her son Harold is illustrated in one crisp line, "She smoothed her apron" (73), while "Krebs looked at the bacon fat hardening on his plate" (75) shows his inability to communicate with his mother. Details from the physical world reflect the characters' inner working. A reader will find this technique employed in each of my stories. In "Strike," Mrs. Hillis has just bawled out Kevan for leaning against the wall. What's Kerry feeling at this moment? Obviously she's embarrassed: "She stood motionless, her eyes staring through his shoulder." Later in the playground I show Kerry's uneasiness through physical actions--"She leaned against a swing post and wound and re-wound the twine across her fingers." I'm no minimalist. I do believe in sharing inner sensibilities, but at crucial moments I like to pull the camera back, giving my reader the external reality. The same principle's at work in my composition of dialog. I don't tag lines, nor unlike Eugene O'Neill, explain how they're meant to be delivered. I let the language stand alone, giving meaning through restraint.

The other technique I've lifted from the old master is a

short direct sentence, like a left jab, following a long rhythmic bit. "Soldier's Home" again provides an apt example. We have a long internal monologue where Krebs is thinking about dating girls and all of that. There's a lot of sentences joined by "and" as he rationalizes why he's not dating girls, but as soon as the monologue is over we get back to the hardened reality, the bleakness of Krebs's life, "He sat on the front porch" (72). A powerful jab, reflecting his loneliness. Let's look at a couple of scenes and see how I've adapted Hemingway's technique to my style and voice. First from, "Truth or Dare":

The coat bulged again and he hoped that Emily wasn't watching. He especially hoped that Emily wasn't watching him watching. He looked away.

The tone at the beginning of the passage is light and comical, conveyed through the repetition of the word "watching." But the last three words undercut the humor, adding tension and reflecting the seriousness of the event for Geoff and Emily.

Kevan threw his glove on the mound and bit his lower lip. He knew he was sulking but he didn't want to stop. Some friends. They're supposed to back you up. "It wasn't fair. It was foul." He spat.

The above passage from "Strike," has a sulking humor to it, especially the line, "Some friends," but all of that is undercut by the last two words, "He spat," a physical description which

shows frustration and anger. The language is terse leaving gaps to be filled by the reader.

A prevalent theme in Hemingway's work is the characters' inability to communicate--sensitive tough guys who can't show their feelings, who have to repress this scream of pain. I came up with this notion after reading "Indian Camp" and thinking about that guy on the upper bunk who slits his throat because he can't handle his wife's labor and rather than scream out loud he cuts his vocal chords and kills himself. Krebs in "Soldier's Home" also represses a scream. Something happened to him in the war that makes readjusting to civilian life hard. He came home late, thus missing the parades, a ritualized catharsis. His parents don't understand him, and he can't talk to anybody so he bottles things up. When he tries to be honest his Mom can't handle it. She makes him feel "resentful" when she won't let him feel separated from God's kingdom (75) and when he says he doesn't love her or nobody she cries until he takes it back (76). Krebs is not allowed to be himself and as a result of this the deflection ends on a downer as Krebs decides to do the Yuppie thing--get a job like Charley Simmons and become respectable. He has worked out nothing. He chooses to live a lie.

Thematically, I think "The Poem, 1969" is the most Hemingwayesque of my stories with regard to the "repressed scream." Like Krebs, Jimmy is also repressed. He wants to scream out against his mother and father's impending divorce, but he doesn't want to hurt her. He tries to show his love for his mom

through a Christmas poem, but all that comes out is bitterness. Aware of his anger and confusion he regresses into himself and tries not to get close to anyone. At Uncle Aleck's he doesn't want to participate in the group picture. The Polaroid scene is a very Hemingwayesque moment. Instead of saying why he doesn't want to be in the family portrait, I create tension by having him bite his lip, refuse, and back into a huge chair. The gap is there for a reader to fill. Does his refusal stem from his belief that they are no longer a family? Or is it that the event makes him think of his father and that's too painful? Or does he realize things are different and he doesn't want to rekindle the past? Or is it something else? The difference between my story and the Hemingway stories is in the final outcome, which I feel probably reflects divergent views of the world. My story ends with a positive affirmation. Jimmy is able to scream in the end. He doesn't live a lie, nor does he regress like the boy who thinks he's going to live forever in "Indian Camp." Instead, my character matures and hope is affirmed as he cries a song of love. In Coleridgean terms, I differ from Hemingway because my "Initiative," the theme linking all of my work, upholds hope and affirms human relationships.

A restrained tone is one way to bridle passion, another is humour, a technique I employ for purposes of pace, or what Coleridge calls "Multeity in Unity." Humour is a great device to heighten or relax pace and tension. My voice isn't Hemingway's. I do admire his style and emulate aspects of it, but the

"repressed scream" and the kind of voice that theme elicits is not prevalent in much of my work. My voice's distinction rests in its innocence and charm, a style that gets me into trouble with some readers who don't take my work seriously, regarding it as Juvenile Lit.

The tone of "Truth or Dare" and "Strike" is somewhat nostalgic. When writing those pieces I re-lived parts of myself. The events never happened to me, but the characters' thinking-- Geoff's concerns for Bugs Bunny cartoons and missing Hockey night in Canada--was me. His naivete about crushes and his innocence-- "Felt up" sounded dirty but Geoff really didn't know what Randy was getting at; he knew it was bad, but the only image he could think of was Emily lying on a bed having her pulse read"--was my innocence. The pacing is different from a Hemingway story. I wanted to get insights of character that gave the story a gentle charm and a light humor, while avoiding the sternness, the tough terse feel, of a Hemingway yarn.

In some ways I take a tough story and turn it inside out to fit my voice. I modeled "Truth or Dare" after James Joyce's "Araby." Like the boy in "Araby" Emily and Geoff experience a sexual awakening and in Act II (the moment when they spy on the high school lovers) I mix comedy (Geoff getting his nose pushed into the snow) with the seriousness of the subject (the effect, the awkwardness, the change that is going through both these characters as they watch the lovers). It is at this moment, with regard to pace and humor, that I deliver the pay-off, Emily

saying, "Do that again . . . she likes it." Serious tension has been building, both characters feel uncomfortable, so I break the tension with humor, giving the audience a momentary rest, only to be rekindled again with the snowballs whizzing at their feet. The tone of the walk home is subdued. Geoff is curious about what's happened but he's not going to push the issue; Emily is embarrassed and restrained but she agrees to go to his place. So the friendship is still intact but it's different.

What grabbed me most about Joyce's "Araby" was how the protagonist was smitten, crouching in his living room, staring through the blinds at the woman across the street. The angle of a young boy becoming sexual aware inspired "Truth or Dare." But of course, for the purposes of humor and tone, to be consistent with the pace, Emily could not be presented as the physical sensual beauty Mangan's sister is:

The light from the lamp opposite our door
caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her
hair that rested there and, falling, lit up
the hand upon the railing. 29

There is a luminosity to her and I feel Joyce's descriptions are quite erotic. Emily's descriptions in "Truth or Dare"? Are you kidding, there's no air brush here. Everything's turned inside out. When does Geoff first get a sexual tingle toward Emily? When she's taking off her chest protector and he glimpses the sweatstains around her breasts. I mean, this isn't meant to be erotic--she's wearing goalie equipment and baggy pants. All of

that hockey equipment acts as a symbolic layer, illustrating their awkwardness about sex, providing a humorous sub-text, and conveying an innocent world. Joyce's story is much more gritty. It ends ironically, the character realizing the girl would never be interested in him--that's the epiphany, his unjustly berating his vanity. I feel the self-flagelation is unwarranted because the girl really isn't worth it. The epiphany of "Truth or Dare" is more positive. The characters are changed. They see each other differently, but not in negative terms.

The voice of "Strike" I feel is closest to my own. Kevan is me at eleven. Like him I hated to lose. I wanted to take the worst aspect of myself and put that into a character. Kevan's weaknesses are my weaknesses and his strengths (his ability to forgive, to bend, his sensitivity and his sense of justice) are also my strengths. I sought a funnier tone than in "Truth or Dare" and I think I got it. The whole situation is ludicrous, absurd. It's mock heroic. A group of eleven and twelve year old girls on a co-ed baseball team strike for feminist reasons. Kevan sees his predicament in big league terms--the Ty Cobb boycott of 1911. And his fight, his drive to win the title game is funny, to a Torontonain anyway, because the Don Valley area of Toronto only has six public schools. Champions of a six team league. Well, for a kid that would be a big deal.

I think the story starts off faster than anything I've written, with lots of humor (developed through a variety of characters--Shira, the tom boy shortstop who likes to use Valley

girl expressions like "Real narny"; Mike, the resident tough guy who hangs from aerial antennas to spy on people; and Mitch, the dummy who thinks that because the Yankees always seem to have everything they must have had the first midget. (We all know it was the St. Louis Browns!)

What I tried to achieve through the narrative was a slow realization on Kevan's part about himself and his need to make concessions to Kerry. Act II, the scene at the International Tree Club, is where I feel the humor adopts a more serious shade. This is the deflection. Kevan begins to realize how others perceive him when Billy, quoting from reliable sources, tells Kevan he's a sulker and a suck. After that line, Kevan says nothing 'til the end of the scene. Like Hemingway, instead of overplaying the emotions I back off, maintaining a balance between the signal (word) and the meaning (what Kevan's feeling), so when we get to the restrained final line--"I'm going home for lunch"--the conflict has intensified. Kevan is upset. He's no longer pushing his case. It is here I feel he has finally faced up to his opening realization: "Kevan supposed he'd have to talk to Kerry sooner or later, but he didn't like the idea." The mood is somber.

Act III is the showdown at Kerry's. Humor and tension intertwine in the rapid-paced bedroom dialog scene, Kerry and Kevan both landing key blows. Both represent their sides strongly--fun versus winning--and I think the sub-text of the dialog shows that both have strong principles and are strong

willed. And maybe Kerry's always carried a secret crush for Kevan. Although he's on the other side, she admires his spunk, his drive to win. And actually she likes to win herself. Why else would she be wrapping twine around her glove to tighten the pocket? She's really a guy's kind of girl, a pal.

They work out their conflict reaching an agreement, but as an artist I didn't feel the story had delivered a pay-off. The pace was fast and light but it needed a punch--a Joycean epiphany--and that's when Mrs. Hillis, stacking towels entered. That moment really happened. I got bawled out by a Mrs. Hillis type for doing what Kevan did, but I changed the timing in the story for matters of pace. In real life Jerry and I got blistered as soon as we walked into his apartment--he for "tramp, tramping," me for leaning. Later, when the supervisor came, she was real nice, giving us Kool-Aid, cinnamon cookies, and all that. In the world of fiction if I started Act III with Mrs. Hillis yelling it would be too much for my audience to take. I had to set it up and so I re-worked the event having it occur later. I think it's important that Kerry and Kevan reach an agreement before the dramatic moment so that the audience won't feel Kevan makes concessions out of pity. It's a matter of Coleridge's "Multeity in Unity" or Method. I have to balance the events in the right order. We don't want the punch to come early but we also don't want the ending to just fizzle. Things seem to be ameliorated and then I give a turn as Kevan gains insight into Kerry's relationship with her mother:

Mrs. Hillis's back trembled as she gently
rubbed the wall in a circular motion with a
damp rag.

All of her gentleness, her kindness, goes into her walls. She has no love or tenderness for her daughter and that's the scorcher. The voice of "The Poem, 1969" is more subdued--less comical than the other stories-- because of Jimmy's internalizing (his repressed scream), and it is further complicated due to the infusion of a Macedonian culture. It was very difficult for me in writing this story to intelligibly communicate one language (Macedonian) largely in terms of another (English). Baba and Dedo speak very little English and Jimmy speaks very little Macedonian. He understands it, but I've got to allow my readers to understand what the grandparents say without making the translations appear too deliberate or mechanical. One way around it was to let a lot of the Macedonian expressions speak for themselves. Jewish writers such as Richler and Roth, Malamud and others, do this, tossing around expressions like Zeyda (grandfather), Shiksa (whore), and Goy (gentile), figuring on us recognizing the signals, so I thought I'd do the same thing. Why not? The Macedonian culture is in some ways similar to the Jewish one--we both emphasize family bonds, domineering grandparents, ties to old world values, and a love for wordplay illustrated through ethnic speech rhythms--so I saw no reason not to evoke the techniques of Jewish writers, and toss around some ethnic words of my own, like "Dedo" and "Baba," knowing full well you'll

get the meaning because of context. "Ne baba," is also left unexplained but the context reveals that it is said with pride. Ne baba, means child of baba, baba's offspring. In other words, the grandmother is noticing a likeness, a continuity in the generations.

Other times, I get around footnotes by allowing the words to be explained by the preceding actions.

"Ne baba," she said, pushing the plate
against his chest, "yahdee."

Within the context, plate of musleenkes (olives) thrust upon Jimmy, we can guess that "yahdee" must mean, "eat," or some permutation thereof. Another example:

"Sho pryesh, Golomuo?" Jimmy could tell by the way Dedo smiled at Baba that he was impressed. The boy was growing. He looked strong. "Golomuo." Dedo squeezed his cheeks with thick gristled fingers and thumbs until they hurt. "Good boy, good boy," he said, removing a quarter from inside his shirt cuff.

Besides the obvious Jewish-like humor here of an overzealous grandfather (remember Woody Allen's Annie Hall and the Uncle with the quarters? With ethnic families squeezing of cheeks seems to be part of growing up), context allows the words to be explained. "Golomuo" must be a positive term since Dedo is pleased--he is pinching those cheeks after all. As a matter of fact I explain

the meaning of the word (Big one, strong) in the previous two lines--"The boy was growing. He looked strong."

The other way of getting around the language barrier is to tell the audience what the previous expression meant through a comical inner monologue.

Jimmy chuckled and rubbed his eyes. "Dosta.
Dosta sborvash."

Uncle Aleck, Baba, and Mom almost keeled over laughing. Jimmy grinned. He thought he was maybe going too telling Baba to shut her mouth, but enough's enough's--my stomach.

In the above passage, "Dosta sborvash," is clearly explained under the guise of humor and a Jewish-like speech pattern--"enough's enough--my stomach."

"You're sick," Uncle Al said. "Teh tresna pen
jer o."

What's he giving me with the broken windows?
I've got a broken window? I'm sick? Dedo's
the sick one--rooting for the Russians.
"Yeah!"

Teh tresna pen jer o? No one except a fellow Matchedone could possibly know what that expression means so I plug it into Jimmy's thought processes and complete the translation. Maybe this is too mechanical but I love the expression too much, and it feels authentic--it is the kind of thing Al, who is proud of his Macedonian roots (remember he's the one who asks how come the

kids can't speak Matchedone), would say. I suspect when he gets real mad and emotional a Macedonian phrase comes quicker to mind than a Canadian/English one.

Along with translating the language comes the difficulty of having Dedo and Baba occasionally speak English. To get around this language thing, sometimes I deliberately translated, filtering what they said for my audience, through Jimmy's consciousness.

Baba smiled. "Leave the boy alone. He's happy."

In the above passage Baba is not speaking English. I have filtered what she said through Jimmy's sensibilities, in order to avoid the encumbrances of explaining foreign dialog. The speeches spoken by Baba and Dedo are for the most part paraphrased, translated. However, during the Canada-Russia game, Dedo, because he's angered, does let a little anglo sneak through. It's this language barrier which makes that one line of Baba's, "The boy's right," she said in English" so funny and engaging. No reader has said why bother with the whole second language angle because the topic of Christmas has been written about so often and the ethnicity of my story gives the cool Yule season an added dynamic. Moreover, the two languages provide a natural theme--a conflict between old (Matchedone/Russia) and new (English/Canada) world values. When Baba delivers her punchline in English she is rejecting her husband's old world values (conservatism, and an emphasis on family) for Jimmy's new world values (redefined

through a new language, a new concept in family, and a more liberal outlook on the reality of human relationships). Her speech is her own statement.

Because of the seriousness of the theme--divorce and the fragmenting of a family--humor and pace in this story more than the other two, works to lessen and increase tension at the same time. I like to think of comic relief in a Sean O'Casey Juno and the Paycock vein, coming before a moment of crisis, anticipating tension, not just relaxing it. Give your audience some humor but make them uneasy, awaiting a punch. Undercut the comic with the serious. "The Poem, 1969" starts off subdued. Jimmy's is trying hard not to have a good time. His mother's singing irritates him as does Teresa's excitement. However when they're around the tree I relax the pace, giving my audience a breather with the humorous bit of Teresa's gift for her mother--the plastic cups wrapped in cellophane. But right then I undercut the humor with a very dramatic cinematic close-up:

Teresa flicked the switch on Tumblin Tomboy
and it flipped over twice at the hips and
wedged itself against the coffee table. Jimmy
walked upstairs and closed the door behind
him.

This scene ends on a downer. Somehow Jimmy has made a connection between the Tumblin Tomboy and himself and decides to retreat in isolation. I feel the closer is cinematic because of the word "wedged"--it really draws attention to the image, and

the image itself stands out, perhaps too much so, from the context of the whole. Multeity in Unity might be a problem here.

Act II, the before-dinner scene at Dedo's, is lighter and more humorous than the opener. In a Coleridgean sense I sought to strike a balance between thoughts and senses. I've just had a heavy scene, established under a pattern of tension-humor-tension and I felt Act II should move back to an emphasis on humor, giving my audience a breather. Al with his golf clubs, putting into a beer stein, and constantly asking for a beer that never arrives, provides the ballast. He is an avuncular figure, providing laughs, relieving tension. Of course, he's more than just that--he's a mediator, a balancer between the two cultures, who legitimizes the Dedo by giving Jimmy a hard time during the hockey game for ragging his grandfather--but for a good part of Act II his role is that of stand-up comic.

The act ends positively and does provide a long breather from the emotional traumas of a family going through a divorce, but it also has an undercurrent of tension--no doubt the Polaroid incident makes my readers uneasy and I bet my audience is left wondering, well where do we go from here--a downer or a rousing clincher? There's only one way to go with my world view and I felt because I had ridden that tension-comedy-tension streetcar one station too long I needed to pull all the loose strands together in one poetic moment.

Juno and the Paycock had provided my example. O'Casey had been mixing the comic with the tragic in order to propel his

play. It was his method of pacing. In the final moment he fused the two. Joxer and Boyle's drunkenness, which previously earned laughs, this time does not. Johnny, Captain Boyle's son, is dead, so Joxer's "darlin story . . . darlin story," isn't funny within the context of the moment. The final scene's comic element is charged with dramatic irony (Boyle doesn't know his son is dead), undercutting the laughs, and making Boyle's final statement "I'm telling you . . . Joxer . . . the whole world's . . . in a terrible state o' . . . chassis" (89) chilling. This is a pathetically tragic moment. I don't fuse the comic and tragic as does O'Casey, but I do fuse disparate themes, unifying my coda. The singing of "The Poem, 1969's" conclusion ties together national pride, family unity, love, and looking toward a new future. Macedonian, Canadian, whatever, it doesn't matter. They're all one.

I've spent a great deal of time discussing pace in my stories because fiction's movement must maintain a hold on the readers' poetic faith. Readers want to believe your story, Coleridge would say, and the best way to hold them is through involvement--character, language, tension, conflict. I feel the use of a tension-humor-tension pattern helps achieve a degree of hypnosis, gripping readers in the story's world. It's related to Multeity in Unity--all of the component parts of the fictional journey must make for a completed vision. The humor works as a buffer, a break from emotion and passion that may be getting too serious, and the tension checks the humor, keeping it from slipping into frivolity.

It seems strange to me that the models which most influenced my art differ greatly in scope. Their vision is not my vision. O'Casey, Hemingway, Joyce, all see the world as chaotic, bleak, paralytic. The deflections in their work rarely lead to positive affirmations, but I am indebted to them and feel my relationship to them is similar to filmmaker Howard Hawks's relationship to the many genres he transformed. When he did Chandler's The Big Sleep it became Hawks's Big Sleep infused with his own brand of witty, bristling dialog and the protagonist's search for self. He upheld many of the hardboiled conventions: tough heavies, a wisecracking shamus, and sudden violence. The mood was film-noirish: a chaotic underworld portrayed through dark grainy shadows. I think only one of the film's scenes was shot in daylight. He re-worked the basic mystery story, minimalizing it, making it the narrative sub-text--a harsh environment Marlowe can't understand--and transcended the genre, making the main narrative Marlowe and Vivian's search for each other. Their search for love is the film's quest, not what's Gieger got on Carmen and who's Brody and where's Eddie Mars's wife and what's he got on Mrs. Rutledge? Chandler's Marlowe is a knight, alienated from the corrupt world; Hawks's Marlowe, played by Humphrey Bogart, has transcendent power. The scenes between him and Bacall speak a universal truth the novel lacks--the need we all feel to find companionship. That's the unifying idea, the vision of Hawks, and it affirms human relationships.

Hawks goes beyond the models he emulates and interprets. His

Marlowe finds real love and therefore breaks away from the hardboiled convention. My vision of hope makes me seek new ways to use Joyce, Hemingway, and O'Casey, to do what they do, but turn it around to my way of thinking. Joyce's "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," for example, influenced, "The Poem, 1969." I liked the idea of ending a story with a poem and was intrigued by the emphasis he placed on Irish locations and Nationalism. The Parnell poem spoke truth, but the story's resolution, Hynes alone, separated, and the rest of the group rejecting Ireland for a foreign King is bleak. Powerful stuff but not Grant Tracey stuff. Inspired by the emphasis in this story, I reworked the Nationalism, changed the poem to a song, and fit all of it into my world context and fictional vision. I can only hope that "The Poem, 1969," too, reverberates truth, activating my readers' "Taste" to feel beauty.

I feel the three stories in this report speak truth. They are composed as Coleridge would have me compose--out of love and a concern for the universal. Coming at them from a standpoint of personal experience I feel I've been able to infuse them with the pulse of real life. Not imitative form, but life. And I think they speak to all people. Whatever their faults are I feel they're honest and sincere and they reflect how I as an artist really see and feel the world. The positive deflection is a part of me. Hope is eternal and intrinsic. I don't suspect I'll write about 12-14 year olds for the rest of my life. But right now I feel most akin to that age group because I have the necessary

distance that allows me to spin my magic with the fewest webs of pretension. Someday maybe I'll be able to write realistically about snazzy cars and poolhalls, but somehow I doubt it.

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Hope: The Positive Deflection

by

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My report consists of three short stories, "Truth or Dare," "Strike," "The Poem, 1969," and a Critical Afterword. Each story affirms hope and focuses on young boys (twelve to fourteen) growing up in Canada, dealing with friendship, commitment, and forgiveness. "Truth or Dare" is about Geoff's coming of age and the changes he feels towards his goalie-pal, Emily. "Strike" deals with three girls quitting Kevan's co-ed baseball team and his need to bend, make concessions, and talk to star player Kerry. The theme is dignity. "The Poem, 1969," my most autobiographical work, searches the emotions of a boy whose parents are getting divorced, and his need to cry out with anguish and forgiveness. The mood is sombre and the story has an ethnic (Macedonian) as well as National (Canada--hockey) bent. The Critical Afterword examines the manner in which my stories have been affected by Coleridgean esthetics, primarily his concept of "Muliteity in Unity." I also discuss the three act structure of my stories, the use of the coda, and the literary influences of Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce.