



INITIATION

Without looking at me, my brother said—and it might have been Canada itself speaking—“Here’s your stick.”

By TIM BOWLING *Illustration by* JONATHAN DYCK

I FIRST SKATED IN 1969 ON A FROZEN slough at the mouth of the Fraser River, so far west of our nation’s capital that you could taste the brine of the Pacific on your tongue and hear Tokyo accents on the breeze. The ice had that 1950s black-and-white, grainy television look—the shadows under my blades were killer whales poised to break through and gnash an ice-floe-napping seal to shreds. Oh, learning to skate wasn’t just a sweet and happy experience; it possessed some of the terror of a religious experience undergone by a Christian who genuinely believes in the Old Testament god.

First of all, there was the isolation. The slough intersected a small silt island reached by driving out of town for 10 minutes along a winding, unlit dike road, crossing a wooden suspension bridge, driving another five minutes past dark-rutted potato fields and barns like the hulking shoulders of headless giants, until finally reaching the entrance to a bird sanctuary donated decades before by a rum-running millionaire to the federal government way off in the east. Here, the slough was long, narrow and alarmingly secluded.

The second part of the terror involved authority. My brother—23 years old to my 5—wasn’t particularly threatening, but he smelled like beer (which he drank copiously from stubby brown bottles), Old Spice (which he wore liberally, and which emanated off a wicker ball dangling from his Mustang’s rear-view mirror) and animals (which he hunted and trapped when he wasn’t salmon fishing or driving a tractor on the potato fields for a living—my hand, in fact, rested on a tanned muskrat hide on the console between the car’s front bucket seats). Somehow, in a way I couldn’t possibly understand, my brother’s world was adult and intimidating rather than inviting; he was a peculiar Canadian cross between Hugh Hefner and Relic from *The Beachcombers*, right from his open-necked silk

shirts and heavy jewellery to his scale-flecked toque and flapping rubber gumboots. Nonetheless, he was, like most young men of his era, conservative; he had one foot firmly in the gentlemen’s-only side of the local tavern, the other tentatively in the free-love house parties of the swinging ’60s.

Thirdly, the terror was winter. We didn’t get as much of it as the rest of Canada, and so when it came, it came with the fully regal fury of the white witch to Narnia. This night, however, it had come without snow. The landscape glittered white with frost and moonlight from a porthole-sized full moon (the reason we could skate after dark), but the ice on the slough itself shone no brighter than isinglass.

I sat on a crispy bank and gazed as far as I could into the night. Overhanging oak branches all along the near bank; only a skiff of stars low over the far bank. Something flitted through the moonlight like a flipped hockey card. And again. Something black, the size of a gloved fist. My brother, taking no notice of the hunting creature, began to lace my skates. They were like the irons from a Victorian scullery.

This was the only coming-of-age ritual I was ever going to have, and I was having it before I even went to school.

When he tightened the laces, I almost gasped.

“They have to be good and tight, bud,” he said. “Just like your own feet.”

Because I was a contemplative child, fated to become that loneliest of citizens—an intellectual—I wondered how exactly my feet were tight. They certainly didn’t feel tight. Not like the skates. It felt as if my legs ended in stumps of pumping blood. I stood, tentatively. Off in the night, near the entrance to the slough, a pair of headlights swung across the bushes, then glided ghostly towards us. Another pair

followed. My brother's body prickled like a hunting dog's. Without looking at me, he said—and it might have been Canada itself speaking—“Here's your stick.”

Now, at last, came the final and most important component of this Old Testament experience. Out of his white, swirling breath, my brother had spoken. And what he had said began my lifelong love and hate affair with the game that most Canadian media and politicians—if not quite Canadians themselves—consider a major part of our national character. For the first time, I stood in skates on ice, holding a sawed-off Sherwood that was, even so, as heavy as me, its blade like a paddle's, its shaft thick enough to be a safe climbing branch. My brother might just as well have handed me a shotgun. I immediately felt a charge of power, followed by a curious mixture of apprehension and confidence. We were a secular family of Anglo-Saxon heritage who'd been in Canada since the middle of the nineteenth century: this was the only coming-of-age ritual I was ever going to have, and I was having it before I even went to school; others, even today, have it not long after they learn to walk. But no gathering of community, of friends, family, neighbours, necessarily attends the ceremony. In my case, that would come, and soon. On this night, however, I was Joseph alone with one brother, and I wasn't quite sure I could trust him.

He reached into the pockets of his pea coat, pulled his hands back out, and threw something on the ice. He repeated the motion three times until six pucks were scattered like buckshot for rhinoceros on the frozen slough.

“Use your stick for balance,” he said, his eyes still on the headlights—which had stopped. Then blinked off. Now music floated over the stillness, probably from a car radio. “I'm just going to have a quick skate up the bank. You'll be okay?”

It was the first test of the hockey/Canada code. Could I be alone with my fear? Was there enough joy in this new faith to overcome whatever natural panic floated through my veins? This wasn't my father sending me over the boards to take out the other team's goon, but the challenge made me swallow hard. I knew I couldn't refuse it.

My brother vanished in a quick burst of grace and power. His first few strides over the black ice sounded like the workings of a scythe—then the dark swallowed him. The small roar of human welcome that followed came as a kind of dry splash. Trembling, I got to my feet. Immediately—though I did not move again—I felt my balance forsake me. If I should move either foot, I thought, I might vanish too, but not with an eagle's fierce glide; my fate would be the eaglet's, downward to death. And yet, the blood flow that bound my brother to me also gave me courage. I took a small step. Another.

From the tangled woods across the slough, the non-human eyes took my efforts in, blinked and waited. I looked down, the blade of my stick resting on cold, black space, the solid, heavy shaft keeping me grounded. One deep breath and a moist helmet of cloud formed around me. Now. Go now.

The crunch under my blades, first one, then the other, felt and sounded like the crushing of beetles. Second by second I expected the slough to open and a great icy hand to yank me down. What protection did I have? From the loneliness of five years, from the indifferent wilderness, from that oddly disturbing burst of human voices somewhere in the dark? What protection from my own lack of skill?

I had the stick. And it is no exaggeration to say that the stick compensated for my weakness and fear. I leaned on it as I lurched ahead, that intermittent crowd roar turning my attention to the loose constellation of pucks. If I could just reach one.

It happened as much violence happens—before it was possible to prevent it. The stick clattered away. Pain flared along my hip and in my elbow. Earth and sky tilted. And then the great inrushing silence of my insignificance joined the metaphysical to the physical. The eyes blinked from the trees just as if nothing had happened. The wind did not howl. My numb hands touched the ice rough as loose gravel. I might have lain there forever staring at the dim stars had the world not returned to me like a rapid scissoring of the hair close to my skull. Scritch, scritch, scritch.

“Are you okay, bud? That was quite a spill.”

My brother's mildly amused face and voice hovered close. I caught the familiar powerful mix of tobacco and beer, and the smell did comfort me: hockey, the outdoors, cigarettes and alcohol. Were these not the Canadian masculine ideal?

I nodded, and did exactly what hockey players—especially Canadian hockey players—are still widely celebrated for. That is, I toughed it out, I gritted my teeth against the pain and went looking for the number of the guy who'd... except there wasn't any obvious enemy. In a real dark night of the soul, perhaps, the enemy never has a face or a number. And perhaps it is this primitive simplicity of the hockey code that explains its grip on the Canadian psyche? Perhaps the “eye for an eye” or, much more aptly, the “tooth for a tooth” logic and the Darwinian dog-eat-dog philosophy are the Canadian value system? But if so, how to beat what lacks a jersey and a number? Tim Horton, drunk and weary at the end of his career, driving off the highway, or Jean Béliveau, graceful and celebrated all his life long, gritting his teeth against the Reaper. Derek Boogaard downing painkillers against the concussive goon whose jabs never weaken, or Guy Lafleur, in court, wondering what a father can ever

really do to help his son.

The questions, the doubt, would not begin for decades, of course. At 5, climbing up from the grainy surface of a frozen slough, I merely smelled the tobacco and beer, and I trusted. After all, my stick was there, and the pucks. I stood in the centre of the Saturday night TV screen, with the wilds of the world's second-largest country pushing in from all sides. If the wolves had begun to howl, what of it? Even outside, there had to be a horn to end the period.

Wobbly, I stood, waiting while my brother returned my stick to me. He performed a tight turn on his edges, his grin a river in the wilderness. I watched his breath through my breath, amazed all over again that someone who skated so well should choose not to.

A CAR HORN BLARED. DOORS slammed in rapid succession. I looked behind me. One pickup truck had even crept a little onto the ice, then sat like a stalled Zamboni. Within minutes, dark figures flitted along the bank. Men's voices. And... women's laughter. Our last name suddenly shouted like an invitation, or a challenge. My brother, still grinning, whirled away. More shouts. Laughter. A pair of headlights flicked on, then another, and another; the slough was like an airfield in a Second World War movie. The pickup's lights almost reached my skates, where I stood, leaning on my stick, my heart throbbing like a bruise.

“Come on, Bowling! Strap 'em on!”

Minutes later, the figures along the bank became figures on the slough, cutting swiftly through the faint beams, shouting, laughing, speeding in my direction. One by one the still pucks vanished. Then echoed the hard slap of sticks. Swearing. A puck whizzed past my blades. Jovial swearing.

My brother re-emerged, no longer grinning, and swooped me close, holding me against his chest, bent over, our two faces close, his legs providing the power and the guidance, mine barely touching the ice.

“Just wait here a bit, okay. Maybe I can get you a bag of chips.”

I sat on the hard bank. Behind me, 30 yards away, three young, long-haired women stood by the hood of a car, smoking, so close together they must have been whispering. On the ice, the skaters—there might have been five of them; it was hard to be sure, as they changed positions so rapidly—placed two beer bottles in the headlight glow to make a net. My brother came down from the women, carrying what looked like two huge suitcases. He sat on the bank beside me, mussed my toque and began to strap on his pads. They were dark and heavy as saddles left

out in the rain, each one the size of a dog's grave. The leather straps dangled like the straps off an electric chair. Slowly, with that peculiar, existential isolation that marks all goalies, he did them up. It was 1969. He was 23. My brother did not even stuff a balled-up towel down the front of his pants for protection, as he often did for games when he forgot his cup. He skated out onto the slough without a mask, like Johnny Bower or Terry Sawchuk. Or at least without a mask that I could recognize. My heart beat faster.

The moonlight and the headlights together cast a dreamy quality over the scene, but something distinctly undreamlike had settled on the slough now. The hard slapshots, the hollow echo of the puck when my brother made a save—like an axe blow on wood. The figures sped up. The shouts increased. Suddenly a goal post exploded.

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Everything paused, but only briefly. A skater tilted his head back to empty a bottle, then used it to make another goal post. Behind me, more vehicles arrived, their headlights adding a slight brightness to the cold moon glow. Engines idling. Blast of rock music suddenly cut off. A young man in a duck-hunting cap with orange ear flaps whooped and ran onto the slough with a stick but no skates. Ten feet from the bank, he slipped and hit the ice hard. Two skaters whirled close to him, poked him with their sticks and laughed. He swung his own stick at their legs but missed. Then he leaned on his stick, like an ancient Roman on his sword, except to live and not to die. Seconds later, he was skidding around after the puck, which the others easily kept from him. His cap fell off, and for a while it became the puck. Even I could tell that his drunkenness was different somehow, a matter of sport and mockery.

On the bank, by the cars, the women kept right on smoking and whispering. Whenever I looked back at them, they didn't seem to be watching the skaters at all. There was a ghostliness to them, for they stood out of the glow of most of the headlights, their long hair and smoke rings captured mostly by the moon. I couldn't hear their voices, but I understood their gestures as a kind of speech.

My brother did not forget me. After a while, he skated over, very heavily, his long hair wet at the tips, his cheeks red, his eyes vivid.



I caught the familiar powerful mix of tobacco and beer, and the smell did comfort me: hockey, the outdoors, cigarettes and alcohol.

“How are you doing, bud?” he almost gasped. “Enjoying the game?”

At my assent, he merely smiled, then tucked the large lobster claw of his trapper underneath the opposite arm and reached into the pocket of his coat.

“No chips. But I forgot I had these for you.” He gave me two slim packs, each about the size of my open hand. “Maybe you’ll get a Bobby Orr.” He winked. “I’m just going to play for a few more minutes. Do you want to skate some more after, or are you getting cold?”

In truth, I was already cold, sitting on the hard bank, torn between the desire to be warm and the desire to actually send a puck sliding along the slough. The latter desire won out. I told my brother I wanted to skate.

He tapped my shoulder with his lobster claw. “Sure, bud. Just let me stop a few more, then you can take some shots on me yourself. How’s that sound?”

It sounded fine, but my toes were numb, I shivered, and the slapshots and the shouts and the rock songs rising and falling on the breeze seemed to go on forever. I put my mittened hands, each one gripping a pack of hockey cards, into my coat pockets. And waited. After a while, a skater swooped along and shouted at the young women to bring a case of beer from his trunk. With it tucked under his arm, he returned to the game. I went on waiting.

The cold intensified. The time between shivers grew shorter. The dark all around the headlights thickened and grew blacker, despite the moon, which, though full, was small and grubby as a much-used goalie mask. I no longer wanted to slide a puck along the ice. I wanted to go somewhere warm and open my packs of hockey cards.

AT LAST, ONE SHOUTED WORD changed everything, the one four-letter word most commonly associated with hockey and Canada, the fierce competitiveness of both institutions, declaimed in the rink and the boardroom and the caucus meeting.

Then out of the darkness the skater approached me. Second by second, he loomed larger and clearer, gliding through the spotlights, becoming solid as if carved out of the ice and the night. Slightly bent at the waist, his right hand cupping his jaw, he came on. Two other skaters trailed behind him to either

side, falling back like wingers.

He shouted the word again. Then muttered it savagely several times, his face, vivid as the moon and moving towards me; his cupped hand trying to hold the spilling blood, either from his mouth or nose, I couldn’t tell. His hand like a muskrat’s bloodied paw being gnawed from a trap. With his skates still on, he clambered up the bank, a few feet to my side. I caught a whiff of beer, a brief, bewildered glare of pain, the same look cast by tens of thousands skating off the ice on their own power to stitches and scars and worse.

The music stopped. And the slapshots. A strange silence descended, one I had never been inside of before, but which I know too well now, the silence of “too late,” not the trivial silence after an overtime goal by the visiting team, but deeper, more complex, the silence of three o’clock in the morning, 50 years already played, the scoreboard clock frozen, the human silence that the wilderness feeds on without particular appetite or even interest.

“Let’s go, bud. It’s late. I’d better get you home. We’ll come back another time.”

His trapper was under his arm, and he held a stubby beer bottle in his hand. He sat on the bank beside me and delicately placed the bottle down. Then he took off his pads, one strap at a time, wearily, just as, for years, he’d pull in salmon nets by hand, because it was what the land gave him to do. The fishing, the farming, the hunting, as well as the hockey and the drinking that went with it: all somehow came from the land. And it was a complicated, confusing gift.

I never received it. At least, not in the same way. In fact, the rain that fell a few days later and turned the slough back to water, rained all the rest of the winters of my childhood. I wouldn’t skate outside again for over two decades, when, almost 30, I moved to Edmonton in the middle of a fiercely cold February and discovered a little-used outdoor rink in my neighbourhood. But why had I even packed a pair of skates? Instinct, perhaps, or hope. My hands reached into my pockets for those hockey cards, again and again for years, but not to find a piece of cardboard depicting a famous athlete; no, the reach was much more important than that, and much harder to explain. It was the reach of innocence for belief and community and home, the reach we hope our children make, though I have long since taken off that mask and given away that coat. I’m 55 years old. The comforting lies don’t always comfort. And hockey, beyond all else, is this country’s most comforting lie. ■

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