I made the team as a rookie, and I had a new weapon in my arsenal now. Trust. I trusted that these elite players would go to the right place, make the right moves, put themselves exactly where they needed to be. My passes were the solder that welded our attacks together. I loved the thrill of knowing that I'd sent someone into open ice, left them a gap in the defense, a lane that led to the mouth of the goal and that blinking red light. I scored when I could, but my passing game became electric. I made the Marlboros as a centre. A playmaker. A skater.

If hockey had been the only arena in which I was tested, I would have won in a rout. But it wasn't. I was still the Indian kid from northern Ontario. During a press interview following the announcement that I had made the team, I mentioned learning the game in broken-down boots with horse turds for hockey pucks. That made me even more of an oddity. No matter what I did, I remained the outsider. My teammates never called me Chief, but they didn't use my name either. They never called me anything but "thirteen."

"Thirteen don't talk much."

"I heard they're like that."
Or, "Thirteen never smiles."

"None of them do."

They took my passes, though. They let me fry that ice with my speed and hurtle forward with the puck. They allowed me to carry the game sometimes, waiting until I flipped the rubber to them. But they came out of a system that culled elite kids from the pack and made them special. They'd grown up with hockey moms and dads driving them to practice through sleepy morning streets, coaches they'd known for years pushing them to excel, fans expecting big results from their gifted kids. These guys weren't mean. They weren't vicious. They were just indifferent, and that hurt a whole lot more. I'd leave the shelter of the game and walk the streets of the city in something close to desolation. I lived only for the whistle that started the game.

Every team we faced that season was cut from the same cloth as the Manies. The players were fast, precise, relentless and creative. They were warriors. They played at such a tempo that all I had to do was close my eyes on the bench and the vision settled over me right away. I was a whirlwind in those first games, and nobody could miss that. But the press would not let me be. When I hit someone, it wasn't just a bodycheck; I was counting coup. When I made a dash down the ice and brought the crowd to their feet, I was on a raid. If I inadvertently high-sticked someone during a tussle in the corner, I was taking scalps. When I did not react to getting a penalty, I was the stoic Indian. One reporter described how I looked flying across the opposition blue line with the puck on my stick: I was as bright-eyed as a painted warrior bearing down on a wagon train. This explosively fast, ordered game I was learning to

*indian horse*
The fans picked up on it. During one game they broke into a ridiculous war chant whenever I stepped onto the ice. At another, the announcer played a sound clip from a cheap western over the PA. When I scored, the ice was littered with plastic Indian dolls, and once someone threw horse turds on the ice in front of our bench. A cartoon in one of the papers showed me in a hockey helmet festooned with eagle feathers, holding a war lance instead of a hockey stick. The caption read, "Welcome the new Marlboro man."

Soon, players on other teams were following suit. I was taunted endlessly. They called me Indian Whores, Horse Piss, Stolen Pony. Elbows and knees were constantly flying at me. I couldn't play a shift that didn't include some kind of cheap shot, threat or curse. And when I refused to retaliate, my teammates started leaving a space around me on the bench. I sat alone in that territory of emptiness, eight inches on either side of me announcing to everyone that I was different, that I was not welcome even among my own. Finally, it changed the game for me. If they wanted me to be a savage, that's what I would give them.

I began to skate with the deliberate intention of shoving my skill up the noses of those who belittled me, made me feel ashamed of my skin. One night against the London Knights I made a no-look backhand pass through the legs of one player over the outstretched stick of another, right onto the stick of our right-winger. He scored on a clear-cut breakaway. As we were skating back to our bench the Knights centre slashed me behind the knees and I fell
to the ice. There was no whistle. The crowd howled. My teammates even laughed. He was seated on the Knights bench by then and I skated over lazily. They all looked at me and made faces. I flipped my right glove off at the last second and drove my fist right into this face. I fought three of them before they hauled me off the ice. That was the end of any semblance of joy in the game for me. I became a fighter. If an opposing player directed any kind of remark toward me, I dropped the gloves and started swinging. Any questionable hit was sufficient excuse for a tilt, and my bodychecks were hard, vicious and vindictive. I was bitter. I wanted the game to lift me up. To make the world disappear as it always had. But as a Marlboro, I could never shake being the Indian. So I became a puck hog. Instead of making passes to my open teammates, I skated and whirled until I could make the shot myself. One night, after an end-to-end rush that resulted in a goal on a nifty change of direction at the goal mouth, I dropped to one knee at the other team's blue line and mimed taking a shot at the net with a bow and arrow. It infuriated the crowd. The other team sent their biggest, toughest player after me on the next shift, and the fight that followed was titanic. I drew a game misconduct penalty and marched to the dressing room, bloodied but filled with a roaring pride.

"We didn’t bring you here for this, Saul," the Marlies coach said to me in his office after the game. "We brought you here to be a player. Not some cheap goon."

"Hey, I'm just giving them what they want," I said.

"Who?"

"The crowd, the team. Don't you read the papers? I'm the Rampaging Redskin."

_Indian horse_
“That was an unfortunate bit of cheap writing. I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said.

“Yeah, well, maybe I’m better suited to a tomahawk than a hockey stick.”

“You and I both know that’s not true.”

“I’m the Indian. That’s all they see.”

He started to bench me for long stretches in games. When I hit the ice I was effective. I scored twenty-three points in nine games. But the taunting from the stands continued, and I fumed and smoldered and racked up one hundred and twenty minutes in the penalty box. I caused the Marlies to play short-handed a lot of the time, and we lost seven of those games. Finally, they benched me completely. After one night of sitting in the stands, I packed my bag and got on a bus back to Manitouwadge.
There was a girl I remember from St. Jerome's. Her name was Rebecca Wolf and she arrived there with her younger sister. They were beautiful. When I saw them for the first time they were getting out of the car that had brought them to the school. I was raking grass, but I stopped what I was doing to watch them. Rebecca saw me looking and gave me a little smile.

Rebecca's skin was clear and brown, and her eyes shone. She was tall for her age and slender, not gawky like other girls her age. I'd see her in chapel or walking through the hallways. I'd try to get her to notice me, but she almost never did.

Rebecca's sister, Katherine, was small and timid. She was scared of the nuns, but when she tried to run to her older sister for comfort, they strapped her and locked her in a broom closet for hours at a time. Then they started putting her in the Iron Sister.

The last time they brought Katherine up from the basement, she was broken. She began to wet her bed at night, and the nuns beat her for that. They would haul her into the aisle and strap her. When Rebecca tried to protect her...
sister she earned a trip to the basement herself. And while she was down there, Katherine died. No one knew what happened. She went to bed and the other girls found her dead in the morning.

They didn’t bring Rebecca up from the Iron Sister for four days. When they told her she just looked at the faces of the nuns and didn’t react. Then she turned slowly, walked to the front entrance of the school, and stood at the top of the stairs and screamed. She tore at her hair and face. No one moved to help her, for fear of retaliation from the nuns. But her wailing and sobbing cut all of us kids to the quick.

I was in the barn alone the next evening, practicing my shooting on the linoleum. I was so intent on the mechanics of my wrist shot that I missed the first few notes. But those that followed made me raise my head and listen. A voice shimmered through the evening air, and I walked to the door of the barn to see where it came from. Rebecca was standing in the rough grass of the Indian yard, her palms raised to the sky, and she was singing in Ojibway. It was a mourning song. I could tell that from the feel of the syllables. Her agony was so pure, I felt my heart ripped out of me. I stood crying in that doorway, offering what prayers I could for the spirit of her sister.

I never saw the knife. Not until the song was over. She knelt on the fresh-turned earth of her sister’s grave and slipped the knife from her coat and plunged the knife into her belly. As I ran to her, a whole crowd of kids burst from the school. She was dead when we got there, blood everywhere. We stood in a circle gazing down at her. No
one said a word. No one could. But when someone began to sing the song Rebecca had sung we all joined in, the outlaw Ojibway rising into the air. When the song was over, we filed back into the school, past the nuns and the priests who'd gathered at the bottom of the stairs. None of us looked at them.
It was late at night when I got back to Manitouwadge. I walked from the bus to the Kelly house, knocked on the door and then waited on the steps with my bag at my feet. After a minute I heard footsteps. The door opened and closed, and Virgil sat down beside me in the dark. He lit a smoke. We sat there staring at the lights of the mill.

“What happened?” he asked.

“It was for shit,” I said.

“Read about you. The Rampaging Redskin.”

“That and more,” I said. “Lots more.”

He snapped the butt away with one finger, and we watched it spin through the night and land in a rut in the road. “You ripped it up, though, didn’t you?” he asked finally. “Twenty two points in nine games.”

“Twenty three,” I said.

“Jesus, Saul. That’s a season for most guys.”

“So were the penalty minutes.”

“You had to fight back. Shit, I know that. Glad you finally learned, actually.”

“You got a spot for me on the Moose?”

“Hell, yeah. But what about the NHL? With stats like
that over a full season in Major Junior, you’d be a lock to be
drafted.”

“I just want to play the game, Virg. I can’t do it with all
that bullshit getting in the way.”

He nodded. “So, what are you gonna do now?”

“Go to work, I guess.”

“Mines or mill. That’s all you got to pick from around
here.”

“I know. It’s good enough for you.”

“You were born for more, Saul.”

“Says you.”

We sat in the dark, and there were no more words. The
silence was enough. Finally, he reached out to clap me on
the back. After he went in I stayed out there a while look-
ing up at the stars. When the chill got to be too much, I
picked up my bag and walked into the house to sleep.
Fred Kelly got me on a forestry crew as a deadfall bucker that fall, and I became a working man. When trees fell down or when the wind knocked them over I took a chainsaw and cut them into lengths that the log skidders could haul to the trucks. It was hard, heavy work, but there was something in the strain that I liked. I took to picking up eight-foot lengths of log and bearing them out of the tangle on my shoulders. I became known as a hard worker, industrious, and after a few weeks the company shipped me off to their logging camp on the shores of Nagagami Lake.

It took a float plane to get us in, and I watched the great green carpet of the land roll out below my face pressed to the window. When we landed I could feel it all around me, like the press of a living thing. The view from the bunkhouse was stark and beautiful. Any fear I'd carried about my first venture into the bush as a logger vanished. I'd stand on the rocks in the dim hours before any of the others had woken and feel it enter me like light. I'd close my eyes and feel it. The land was a presence. It had eyes, and I was being scrutinized. But I never felt out of place. Late in the evenings I'd walk into the trees, stride through the
bush until I was wrapped in it, cocooned. The stars that pinwheeled above spun a thousand light years away. Time, mystery, departure and union were there all at once. I wondered if this was what it meant to be Indian, Ojibway. A ritual. A ceremony, ancient and simple and personal. If I could have borne it with me into the day-to-day life of the camp, things might have been different.

But they weren't. These were northern men, Finns, Swedes, Germans, Quebecois and Russians. They were lumberjacks. They were as efficient with the giant two-handed rip saws, axes and horse teams as they were with chainsaws and tractors. They were steeped in the tradition of it. They were huge, brawny men who bellowed and roared and skipped back and forth between languages over the course of a conversation, so I never knew where the gist of it was leading. Drinkers. Hard and deliberate. They spent their evenings in the loquacious flow of liquor, smoking and playing cards. Brawls erupted quickly and ended the same way. Then they'd return to their game, the blood of them cut with the next fresh deal, fists clutching cards like a throat.

They didn't know what to make of me. There hadn't been an Indian in their midst before. So I never joined them in their evening distractions. When I came back in from the bush I'd huddle in my bunk and read. When they started calling me "Chief" and "Tonto," "Geronimo" or "wagon burner," I'd heard it so often before that I didn't offer a reaction. That bothered them. I suppose they took my silence for high-mindedness, the books in my hands as a rebuff. They began to take my measure in the only way they knew how.

*indian horse*
They'd push me hard in the woods and wait to see if I could keep up. I always could. When they pressed hard with their saws and axes through the trunks of great trees I did the same and I carried heavy lengths of sawn timber through the bush without a complaint. They tried to find a weakness in me, but I was determined that they would not. So they made it personal. They saw to it that I drew the assignment to clean the outhouses. I dumped lime and swept and battered at the flies that congregated in swarming masses. I washed dishes. I mopped the kitchen floor, carted garbage and shovelled up the mess bears and raccoons left scattered about the small gravel pit the camp used as a landfill. I oiled and greased tractors, hosed down trucks and skidders and washed down the bunkhouse each day before my shift started. The more they tried to exhaust me, the harder I worked. I did all of it without saying a word. Then I'd lie in my bunk and read by flashlight after they tumbled into bed and be awake and in motion by the time they rose.

They took to more insulting name-calling and swearing at me. Even when they took to pushing me and tripping me and swiping at me when I passed, I'd just level a blank look at the offender and keep on with the work.

Only on the land did I find calm. There I could relax. I could rest. I could sit looking out across the wide expanse of lake forever. But the time always came to turn back to the bunkhouse. I'd squint hard at the lighted windows of the camp and I'd draw into myself. I'd haul in a lungful of air, hold it, compact all my dark energy until it sat in my gut like a black marble, cold and glassy and hard. Then I'd
walk back into their midst and they'd stop their game and challenge me. I'd walk to my bunk and lie down and read long into the night.

Then one night a big Swede named Jorgenson called to me, gestured crudely toward me. I stared at the ceiling for a moment. Then I rolled off the bunk and walked slowly to the table where he sat playing cards. As they laughed, I planted my feet wide. Jorgenson stood up and swung a meaty fist at my face. I blocked his punch with my forearm and reached out with my other hand and latched onto his throat. I squeezed. Hard. I walked forward slowly with the man's throat in my hand, wordlessly, lifting and pushing and squeezing at the same time. The big Swede clutched and grabbed and swatted at me, but the pressure of my grip was so great he weakened and dropped to his knees, red-faced and gasping with his eyes bugging out. As I let him drop to the floor I punched him in the head with everything I had, and he crumpled onto the floorboards. I turned to face the rest of them. I was frigid blackness inside, like water under a berg. I wanted another one to stand, wanted another one to swing at me, invite me to erupt. But they stayed seated, and nobody spoke as I walked slowly over to the table and picked up Jorgenson's discarded hand of cards. I studied the cards, then smirked and tossed the hand back on the table.

"Game over," I said. They never bothered me again.
When I came out, I brought the intensity of the bush camp out with me. I was seventeen. I was still a boy. But this mistreatment made me hard. When I took to the ice with the Moose, the anger funnelled out of me, and my game became a whirling, slashing attack. It didn't matter who we played. I played as hard against the white town teams as I did against reserve teams. There was no lively banter on the bench. Instead, I glared at the ice until they opened the gate to release me. I still had grace, the flowing speed, but my eyes were feral beneath my helmet. I blazed up the ice with locomotive force, and when anybody hit me, I hit back. When they slashed me I slashed back harder, breaking my stick against shin pads and shoulder pads. When they dropped the gloves with me I punched and pummeled until I had to be torn off by my teammates. There was no joy in the game now, no vision. There was only me in hot pursuit of the next slam, bash and crunch. I poured out a blackness that constantly refuelled itself. The game was me alone with a roaring in my gut and in my ears. I heard nothing else. When the other members of the Moose stopped talking to me, I knew that I was beyond them, the tournament teams and the game, forever.
I left Manitouwadge the year I turned eighteen. I'd saved enough of my wages to buy an older-model pickup truck that was outfitted with a steel box to carry the tools I'd assembled. There was no plan. I was just leaving. I was a working man. Work was everywhere. The highway led west to the prairies, the mountains and the Pacific coast, and I had never seen any of them. But it wasn't a yearning for new geography that drove me—it was my tiredness of the old. The bush had ceased to be a haven. A vacant feeling sat where the beginnings of my history had once been. That part of myself was a tale long dead, one that held nothing for me. So I was heading out to create whatever history I could with muscle and will and no constraints. I was leaving the bush and the North behind. I didn't think I needed them anymore. The echoes of those I'd travelled with slid into the trees I was leaving behind.

The Kellys took my departure with worry, though they didn't try to stop me.

"It will be tough, Saul," Fred Kelly said. "A working life is made easier by a home. People. Noise. Distraction. They fill you when you're tired and depleted."
“Feels like I’ve had enough noise and people for a while,” I said.

“That Toronto business was hard,” he said. I’d never told anyone about the ordeal of the bush camp.

“Yeah.”

“But you can let it go. You can stay here, work, get a life under your feet.”

“I’ve had a life.” It came out blunt, hard, and I could see that it hurt him.

“I know,” he whispered.

Virgil was characteristically blunt. “Feels like you’re fuckin’ running.”

“I’m not.”

“What would you call it?”

“I’m just moving on. Time for a change.”

He levelled a long look at me. “We’re supposed to be teammates. Wingers. You. Me. Nobody wins alone, Saul.”

“I’m used to alone.”

“You’re used to thinking you’re alone. Big difference.”

“I’m not disappearing,” I said.

He shook his head sadly. “Seems to me you already did.”
I stood in the kitchen and looked out to where the boards of the backyard rink sat in the pale spring sun. There wasn't a way that I could think of to tell them how the rage felt against my ribs, how it tasted at the back of my throat. I had to leave before I collapsed under the weight of it.

I took one last walk through the house, trying to memorize the degrees of light in each room and the sound my footsteps made on the floorboards, the feel of the jamb of the front door against my palms. Then I walked out to my truck and was gone by the time I started the engine.

Medicine Hat. Fort Chipewyan. Wabasca. Skookumchuck. Tagish Lake. I worked in all those places and more. The resonance of those names haunting me with memories. I followed the rumours of work that tumbled from the lips of the men I met and became migratory, a wandering nomad with my eyes on distant hills. I covered long charcoal stretches of highway, the undulating yellow line like a river bearing me somewhere beyond all recollection. Or that's what I hoped. I would drive unthinkingly. Music was my constant companion. I loved it for its ability to fill space, to occupy the empty passenger side of the cab of the truck, and the rooms I rented in two-bit motels in the mill towns,
mining towns and work camps where I landed. I learned about it with the help of books, and once I discovered Dvorak's cello concerto, I turned to it again and again through my travels to suspend the desperation clutching at my gut. Work and music sustained me for a long time. I could vanish into them and surface at my choosing. I preferred being alone to inquisitive company. I became a carpenter, roofer, miner, lumberjack, highway paver, railroad labourer, dishwasher, hide scraper, ranch hand, tree planter, demolition worker, steel foundry yardman and dock worker. I did not offer to be a buddy to my fellow workers. I did not become chatty. I did not move beyond the safety of the wordless barrier I erected between myself and other people. The rage was still there. It sat square in my chest whenever I heard “Chief,” “Tonto,” “Geronimo,” “dumb Injun” or the hundred other labels men applied to me. But I never reacted. I wouldn't risk the explosion I knew would follow. The feel of Jorgenson's throat in my hands. The blackness inside me. Instead, I threw myself harder into the discipline of labour, losing myself in the grunt work I favoured.

A part of me missed the banter of the bench and the dressing room, though; the brash gutter talk and the teasing. So I began eating lunch and supper in beverage rooms and taverns where working men slung jibes back and forth, engaging in verbal arm wrestles that bristled with energy. I would sit and listen. Drink it all in and grin at the wit, the laconic retorts, the garrulous drunken voices rambling on about everything that concerned a man. I'm not sure when I began to drink myself. I only know that when I did the roaring in my belly calmed. In alcohol I found an antidote
to exile. I moved out of the background to become a joker, a clown, a raconteur who spun stories about madcap travels and events. None of them had actually happened to me, but I had read enough to make these tales come to life, to be believable and engaging. Amid the slaps and pokes and guffaws that greeted them, I discovered that being someone you are not is often easier than living with the person you are. I became drunk with that. Addicted. My new escape sustained me for awhile. Whenever the stories and the invented histories started to unravel, I'd move on to a new crowd in a new tavern, a new place where the Indian in me was forgotten in the face of the ribald, hilarious fictions I spun. Finally, though, the drink had me snared. I spoke less and drank more, and I became the Indian again; drunken and drooling and reeling, a caricature everyone sought to avoid.

Now I had a different reason for needing to be away. So I drifted. When I could find work I was mostly a high-functioning drunk, keeping just enough in hand to get me through the day, and then sinking into the drink alone when the day was over. I'd pass out listening to music or with a book cradled in my lap. I'd wake up in the early hours, switch off the light, take another few swallows and fall back asleep. You can live for years like that. You experiment to find out how much you need to swallow to get you past a certain chunk of hours, how much you need to walk steadily, without your hands shaking. I was an alchemist, mixing solutions I packed in my lunch kit to assuage the strychnine feel of rot in my guts. It was a dim world. Things glimmered, never shone.
I don't know what brought me back to northern Ontario in 1978. I don't remember deciding to head there. I don't recall thinking of it. I just wound up near Redditt where my brother had found my family before we set out for Gods Lake.

I arrived on a rainy day without much money in my pocket. After I'd settled at a small motel, I made the rounds of mills and lumberyards, the railroad and a few construction companies. I managed to get onto a crew breaking up rock at a quarry and put in a good couple of weeks. But after that there was no work to be found. I was tired of my life, really tired, and I lost my ability to hold things together. Before long I was too broke to get out of town and too wasted to care. I hung around the draft joints cadging drinks and hoping for a break. I was at a table in the corner of a workingman's bar, almost passed out, when someone shook my shoulder.

"You need to wake up there, fella."

I looked up and I expected to see the waiter or a cop, but the man was older, white, dressed in coveralls, a John Deere hat and work boots.

"Why?" I slurred at him.
"I don't drink with sleepers," he said.
"Why the hell would you want to drink with me?"
"Ojibways are the best storytellers I know. Got a story or two in you, I imagine. Don't ya?"
"Maybe. If you're buying."
"I'll buy. You just sit up and look proud."
"Sitting up I can manage."
"All of us got pride. You just need to remember you have it. Your people? A real proud people. Been my pleasure to know a lot of them."
"That why you sat here? Because you're proud of who I am?"
"Proud of your people. Seems like enough to start a conversation, anyway. Sift is my name. Ervin Sift," he said and stuck out a hand.
I shook his hand limply, though I managed to grab the draft beers the waiter dropped firmly enough. Sift let me be, and I was grateful for the lack of talk.
"Eat?" he said after another round of drinks.
"I could, yeah."
He ordered us steaks with mashed potatoes and beans. When the food arrived, he folded his hands right there in the bar and offered a prayer. Embarrassed, I cast a look around to see if anyone was watching.
He lifted his head, folded his napkin in his lap. "Soon's we're done this we'll head on home." All I could do was stare at him.
Over the next three days he nursed me through a killer hangover. I'd come to and he'd be at my bedside with a wet cloth to wipe my brow or a cup of soup he'd hold while I sipped it. He talked to me when I got scared, calmed me.
down. When I was over the worst, he helped me walk out to the porch for fresh air. All through it, he never asked a question.

Erv Sift was a farmer with a good-sized acreage where he managed a dozen head of cattle, a few sheep, chickens and an old burro left over from when he’d had horses. He ran a wood-cutting operation to augment his income. His last woodman had walked off unexpectedly, and he needed someone to take over. I drove his extra pickup truck around and cut firewood from deadfall, from slash piles the forestry guys had left behind, or from trees other landowners needed cleared from their property. Sometimes I winched dead trees out of the bush. I hauled everything to Erv’s woodlot, made sure the piles were arranged according to the kind of wood and the amount of time they’d been seasoned. It was easy work. I knew my way around timber, and I got to work alone. I delivered firewood to homes all over the area. It didn’t pay any screaming hell, but it was good, honest work, and I felt that I owed it to him. He gave me a room in the farmhouse. He was a widower. His wife had died a decade before, and he lived alone. They hadn’t had any children.

Erv didn’t drink much and he was a good hand at the stove. He never charged me for my meals. There was nowhere to spend my money, so soon I had a bank account for the first time in a long time. I fell into the routine we’d set up, and there was a degree of comfort in it. But there was a restlessness in me, something that wouldn’t settle.
We'd play cards late into the night listening to the radio, and if I didn't feel like talking he never pushed me to it. Instead, I always felt like he could see into me and understood that there were territories in me that I never travelled. He was content to see me recover and get my feet under me again.

"Saul," he said. "You ever pine for anything other than this? Ever have dreams of family, your own home, things like that?"

"No time for dreams," I said. "I had some once. They didn't pan out. I don't have them anymore."

He looked squarely at me and I held the look. Then he nodded and let it go. That was the first real conversation we ever had. For the most part he let me work and let me be. We were friends. There were always more silences between us than words but we understood each other's need for privacy. I knew he missed his wife. He wore it like clothes. He told me some of it. How they'd been together almost thirty years. How he'd drive his father's tractor twenty miles just to park on the hill overlooking her house on the chance that he might see her. How he met her at a country dance
and she knew who he was. Had seen him on the hill. A far-away look would fall over him and he'd light his pipe and sit back in his chair and smoke and I knew to let him be.

Erv Sift was an angel. I have no doubt of that. He understood that I bore old wounds and didn't push me to disclose them. He only offered me security, friendship and the first home I'd had in a long time. But there were times when I would get up suddenly and feel the need to walk, to be away. It billowed in me like a cloud. He wouldn't say anything and neither would I. I would walk beyond the boundary of his fields and into the bush. Most times I would just wander. Sometimes I would find a tree or a rock and sit there and look out over the land and let the silence enter me. For a while the effect of the land was enough to keep me grounded. But there were always things swimming around in me that I could neither hold on to long enough to comprehend or learn to live with. It was like the change in the air that comes before a storm. You feel the energy build but there's nothing you can do to stop it. That's what it was like for me.

When those times came I couldn't talk. There was no language for it. I suppose when you can't understand something yourself it's impossible to let anybody else in even if you're motivated to. I wasn't. The bleakness and me were old companions by then, and the only thing I knew how to do about it was to drink.

At first it was only a few furtive sips while I worked. Then it became longer periods of walking out alone and coming back when I knew Erv was asleep. Then it became a morning gulp or two. And then the roof caved in.
I sat out on the tailgate of the truck with the saws and the axes around me. I'd stopped to pick up a crock in town before heading out to where I was cutting a good sized deadfall of fir trees. The sun was out. The day sparkled. But I felt dead inside. There was no reason for it. Everything was on the rails and it was looking as though I could stay with Erv for as long as I wanted. The work was good. I had money. I had a friend. In the end, that was what busted it. As I sat there drinking I thought about how much I actually owed Erv, how much I owed him the truth about me, of where I'd been, what I'd done, the whole shebang. There was a part of me that really wanted to do that. There was a part of me that desperately wanted to close the gap I felt between myself and people. But there was a bigger part that I could never understand. It was the part of me that sought separation. It was the part of me that simmered quietly with a rage I hadn't ever lost, and a part of me that knew if the top ever came off of that, then I would be truly alone. Finally. Forever. That was the part that always won.

So I drank. I finished off that crock and threw the tools and gear into the box and drove back to Erv's place. He was gone. He was out making arrangements for a few head of cattle from another farmer thirty miles away. I put the tools away. Then I walked into the house and gathered my belongings. I stood in the emptiness of another kitchen in another house in another life that only meant to offer me shelter. I couldn't take it. I couldn't run the risk of someone knowing me, because I couldn't take the risk of knowing myself. I understood that then, as fully as I ever understood anything. I didn't know why it was that
way with me. I only knew it was. I only knew that I would
run and that I would always continue running because I'd
learned by then that it was far easier to leave if you never
truly arrived in the first place. So I drained the one bot-
tle of wine Erv had under the kitchen sink, and when the
buzz had me hard I scribbled a note telling him where he
could pick up the truck, and I drove away. Again. I was on
a Greyhound bound for Winnipeg within an hour, with
another bottle in my coat and the taste of another dried-up
dream in my throat.
It's funny how bartenders always tell you to drink up. When you're lost to it like I was, you always drink down. Down beyond accepted everyday things like a home, a job, a family, a neighbourhood. You drink down beyond thinking, beyond emotion. Beyond hope. You drink down because after all the roads you've travelled, that's the only direction you know by heart. You drink down to where you can't hear voices anymore, can't see faces, can't touch anything, can't feel. You drink down to the place that only diehard drunkards know; the world at the bottom of the well where you huddle in darkness, haunted forever by the knowledge of light. I was at the bottom of that well for a long time. Coming back up to daylight hurt like a son of a bitch.

The first thing you have to realize is that what you need to survive is killing you. That's the tough part. There's relief after a few big, hard swallows. Everything gets endurable. You can actually convince yourself that things are going to be okay even though you know in your gut that they're not likely to. So you fess up and try to stop. Stubborn bastards like I was at the end come to believe that we know enough about the weaning to be able to handle it ourselves. We cut down. We measure. We time our shots.
It never works. We’re always just as drunk as we always were because the only way to really stop is to stop. That’s how I wound up in the hospital. The seizures hit me and I collapsed on a sidewalk in Winnipeg. They had to strap me down because the withdrawal terrors got real bad. I saw things I can’t even begin to describe and I was reduced to an incoherent babble and thrashing about. After five days of enough medication, I calmed down. I held down my first solid food after seven days. I sat up in my bed after eight.

The social workers told me about the New Dawn Centre. They said it was the best place for Native people to get help. It was on a hundred acres or so of land north of the city, and it was calm and restful. I resisted at first. But the doctors told me what a mess I’d made of my body and how another bout of drinking like I did would likely kill me, and for some strange reason I listened. I don’t recall wanting to listen. I just did. When I got here, though, it was all about getting strong enough to leave. I was as addicted to leaving as I was to the booze. But the funny thing is that as my head got clearer, so did my recollections, and it spilled out pretty much on its own. Getting to the part about that long, dark downward spiral let me surface into the light for the first time in a very long time. I don’t know if I was glad for it. Not at first. I felt as though I stood there blinking before I could move.
There wasn't much to write about after that, though. As hard as I tried, I couldn't come up with anything else. I felt dissatisfied. I thought I'd discover something new, something powerful that would heal me. That's what Moses said the whole thing was supposed to lead to. When it didn't, I took to walking in the bush alone again. I felt as though nothing had changed. I felt as though the only thing I had done was quit drinking. Only the land offered me any kind of solace. So I walked every day for a while and explored the territory behind the New Dawn Centre.

A family of beavers had a lodge in the middle of a small pond a few miles into the woods. I'd sit in the cedars and watch them. They were delightful. That day they stayed active all through the afternoon, and when they finally disappeared into their lodge, it was early evening and my chances of making it back to the centre were not good. I walked up to a small table of rock I knew of. There was a lot of deadfall there, and I gathered enough for a good fire. If anyone came looking for me, they'd see it.

The night was alive with stars. I lay on my back on the moss and watched them. The longer I watched them, the
more I could sense the earth turning in the heavens. It was late when I fell asleep.

I don't know if I was awake or dreaming when I heard a sound in the trees. There was a slip of a moon in the sky and a low fog hung just above the ground. The air was still. The fog amplified every rustle of movement in the trees, and far off I could hear the cautious steps of deer. But the sound that woke me did not belong to an animal. It was like a moan, a low humming. It died off, then came again a moment later. This time I scanned the line of trees, but there was nothing. Only the fog. Then a shape began to appear. At first it was just a blur, but as I stared the dim shape moved closer. It didn't walk. It floated. My guts cramped with fear. But I couldn't take my eyes off it. The moan came again. It sounded desolate. Human.

I began to see the shape of a person and behind it something huge and lumbering. I was prepared to bolt, but the voice, now easing into an Ojibway song, held me in place. As the strange duo drew near, the human shape moved one arm, and I could see that the big shape behind it was a horse.

The sheaths of fog parted, and I was looking at a man I knew was my great-grandfather. He was dressed in a traditional smock and pants with a porcupine quill headpiece. In one hand he held an eagle wing fan, and with the other he led the horse by a rope braided from cedar root. His song was low, and he walked in the measured step of it, coming to a halt mere yards from me. Shabogeesick was old. Terrifically old and thin. I could see the jut of his bones beneath the smock, and the spray of wrinkles running down his face. But his eyes were sharp and steady, and he regarded
me curiously. He raised the eagle wing fan and shook it at me. As he passed it over his body, I saw my father, my mother. My brother. My uncle. My aunt. My grandmother. I wept at the sight of them. My grandmother held a finger to her lips and crinkled the corners of her eyes at me. Then they turned, and the old man lifted my grandmother up onto the horse's back. My family walked slowly into the depths of the fog, and I could hear them singing as they retreated. I closed my eyes, feeling an incredible weight of grief and longing, and when I opened them again the slender silver arc of the moon hung high above me. The fire had died down. I threw another piece of wood on it and sat with my arms hugging my knees. I cried again as I stared into those orange flames. I sat there all night, and when the first grey light of morning eased upward I kicked dirt over the fire to kill it. I was leaving again. Only this time I knew exactly where I was going.
“I don’t know why I have to go. I just know I do.” That’s what I told Moses.

He only studied me some and then nodded. He’d been around a long time and he knew drunks. “We’re here if you need us,” he said. “Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t,” I said.

Once I’d checked out, I caught the bus east and promptly fell asleep before we’d hit the highway outside of town. It was a dreamless sleep. I woke to a dull morning in the fog of northern Ontario, and while the bus refuelled I sat in a diner and drank coffee and had a small breakfast of dry toast and fruit. Everyone seemed as bleary as I felt. They took tables alone or meandered through the parking lot sipping coffee and smoking to kill the time. When we loaded up again I stared at the land flashing by. I remembered how I’d watched it as a kid in the back of that sedan with Lonnie Goose and the girl whose name I’d never learned.

White River hadn’t changed all that much. It still looked like a northern mill town. There were newer chain stores now, and the main street had been widened. The old arena had been replaced with a newer, bigger version. The gravel road that had led out of town beyond the quarry was paved
now. But the sweep of the land was still the same. Past the quarry it dipped down into lowlands, the marsh and the stream where we’d bagged suckers, then wound upward through thick bush. As the cab I’d caught rounded the last turn, I could see the school.

I paid the cab driver and stepped out at the head of the driveway. The old sign drooped sadly off one post. Someone had shot out most of the letters with a shotgun so that only the first S of St. Jerome’s was legible. The post it hung on was nicked and bitten off by bullets. Old wine bottles and rusted-out beer cans were strewn about the ditch. Lumps of human excrement sat by the post itself. I unhooked the chain across the entrance and laid it on the ground. The cab driver honked as he pulled away. The driveway was pocked with potholes. The fields where they’d grown potatoes and cabbage and turnips were overgrown with weeds.

The school itself was crumbling. Hollow. All of the windows were smashed. The ones on the top floors had been shot out, bullet holes splayed on the sills and sashes. I could hear the flutter of birds from within and the coo of pigeons in the eaves. Graffiti covered the walls with epithets and damnations. The leak of them like blood. The scrunch of my steps echoed through the gaping windows. It was like being followed by ghosts.

The classrooms had occupied the first floor, and beneath their windows people had laid flowers. They were withered now, in bouquets wrapped in plastic and tied with string or ribbon. Here and there I saw a doll or a teddy bear. I knelt and picked up a small yellow truck and spun its wheels with my thumb. Inside, the desks had been smashed and

*indian horse*
the chalkboards torn from the walls. There was a heap of black rubble in the centre where someone had lit a fire that didn't take. The feel of the room on my face. Desolate.

The outbuildings were in ruins. I walked past them toward the barns. They too had been ransacked and they smelled of decay. The wet rot of hay and straw. When I rounded the back end, I saw that the boards of the rink were still standing, mostly, though the chicken wire that had stretched across the ends had rusted through. Coils of it hung down like webbing. I stepped through a break and stood in the mud and weeds. A pad of earth. That's all the rink was now. I knelt to touch it.

"You can't be here, mister."

An older, bent-legged man strolled toward me from around the corner of the barn. He was scowling, but the ruddy good health at his cheeks gave away the effort it took to create the look.

"I used to live here," I said.

"Don't matter. Lots of them used to live here, and you can see how heartwarming an experience the visits have been."

"I haven't seen it since the sixties."

"They closed her in '69. Fact is, she was pretty close to being done a few years before that. Most of the kids had run off, and no one could be bothered chasing them down anymore. The town's looking to sell the land."

"Ransacked pretty good?"

"There's nothing left now but junk. People still come here though. Some nights I see their fires. I generally wait until morning to chase them off. They're hung-over or just wore out by then. Sometimes it's the same ones. Time after time."

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He stretched out a gaunt hand and I took it. “I’m Jim Gibney.”

“Saul, Indian Horse.”

“Jesus. That’s a handle isn’t it? Our Indians around these parts are mostly Foxes, Martins, Wasacases or Wabooses. How long were you here?”

“I left when I was thirteen. Came when I was a little guy.”

Gibney swept an arm toward the rink. “You play when you were here?”

“Some.”

“Any good?”

The rink was smaller than arena-sized ones. I saw that now. Its corners were sharper, and it was shorter by about fifteen feet. The boards weren’t as high as they should have been, and I remembered us hunting pucks down in the thigh-high snow, heaving them back over the boards to the players, who waited impatiently, their breath like storm clouds in the crisp winter air. “They couldn’t keep me on the team,” I said.

“Well, not everyone’s Gretzky. Listen, Saul, you take your time, and when you’re ready to leave make sure you hook the chain back up at the head of the drive. Keeps the cows out, leastways.”

“I’ll do that.”

As Gibney sauntered off, I walked over to the boards and propped my elbows on the top. The wood wobbled. The only sound was birds calling in the trees at the edge of the field. I closed my eyes, and in the still air I could hear the wild calls of boys and the sound of sticks clacking on ice and hard rubber pounding into board. I remembered the prick of ice crystals and the numb feeling in the soles
of my feet in their thin rubber boots and the shovel in my hand as I worked, thrilled at seeing open ice emerge, each laboured breath making child's play of man's work.

I cried then. I stood there and looked at that sad ruin of a rink and wept. And suddenly, I remembered.

I remembered standing at the boards with Father Lebou-tilier on a perfect winter's day. The clouds of my breath rose around my face and the sound of the boys skating was magnified by the cold, still air. As we watched the scrimmage, he pointed things out with his stick. I paid close attention. He pounded the top of the boards with one hand at a very nice play, and I did too. He turned to look at me and smiled. Then he rubbed my head with his hockey glove.

"This game brings out the best in you, Saul," he said.

I remembered the two of us alone in his quarters, watching a game on television. When the Canadiens scored a goal, we celebrated. I jumped up and down in boyish glee, and he clapped his hands. Then he stood up and pulled me toward him. He pressed my face into his body as he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. I could feel the broad warmth of his hand on the back of my head, smell his soap, feel the scratch of fabric on my skin and the buckle of his belt against my chin.

"My angel," I heard him say.

When he knelt down and cradled me in his arms, I felt no shame or fear. I only felt love. I wanted so much to be held and stroked. As he gathered my face in his hands and kissed me, I closed my eyes. I thought of my grandmother. The warmth of her arms holding me. I missed that so much.
"You are a glory, Saul." That's what he always told me. It's what he whispered to me in the dim light of his quarters, what he said to me those nights he snuck into the dormitory and put his head beneath the covers. The words he used in the back of the barn when he slipped my trousers down. That was the phrase that began the groping, the tugging, the pulling and the sucking, and those were always the last words he said to me as he left, arranging his priestly clothes. "You are a glory, Saul." Those were the words he used instead of love, and he'd given me the job of cleaning the ice to buy my silence, to guard his secret. He'd told me I could play when I was big enough. I loved the idea so much that I kept quiet. I loved the idea of being loved so much that I did what he asked. When I found myself liking it, I felt dirty, repulsive, sick. The secret morning practices that moved me closer to the game also moved me further away from the horror. I used the game to shelter me from seeing the truth, from having to face it every day. Later, after I was gone, the game kept me from remembering. As long as I could escape into it, I could fly away. Fly away and never have to land on the scorched earth of my boyhood.

I felt revulsion rise in me. My throat was parched. Rage was a wild heat that rose out of the base of my spine and through my belly, and I punched those rotting boards until my knuckles were raw, the tears erupting out of me. I fell to the ground and buried my head in my arms. I had run to the game. Run to it and embraced it, done anything that would allow me to get to that avenue of escape. That's why I played with abandon. To abandon myself. When the racism of the crowds and players made me change, I became
enraged because they were taking away the only protection I had. When that happened, I knew that the game could not offer me protection any longer. The truth of the abuse and the rape of my innocence were closer to the surface, and I used anger and rage and physical violence to block myself off from it.

When I sat up again, the sun was sinking low. A gathering chill rode in on the breeze that kicked up dust at my feet. It was a very long walk back to town, and I knew where I had to go from there.
I slept on the bus ride north to Kenora. I stopped just long enough to eat in a small café, and then flagged a passing taxi that took me as far as Minaki. It was early afternoon when I got there. The town was still an underused railroad stop and work camp for railroad labourers. There were a lot of Ojibway people around, and from what I could see most of them were living in the rat-trap government houses in a hollow behind the upscale Minaki Lodge, which catered to moneyed tourists. I found someone in need of some fast cash with a boat and outboard motor, and I arranged to rent them. I loaded the boat with supplies, extra gas and a small tent. No one asked any questions. The boat owner was content with the handful of bills I gave him, and I saw him in the lineup for liquor while I was shopping. The sun was just starting to slip behind the trees as I aimed the boat downriver, in the direction of Gods Lake.

The river was like I remembered it, black as tea, swirling with secrets. The water level was high and the current powerful, turning the river into a huge, serpentine creature, undulating and curving. I mostly let the motor idle and allowed the river to haul me forward, giving it gas
intermittently to stay in the deepest part of the current and avoid the huge rocks that sprang up irregularly in the hidden shoals.

The river opened wide into channels and gaps between spare rock islands and larger wooded clumps of land. The light eased down, giving the river's edge a mystical feel, and I remembered the stories my grandmother had told about how this waterway fed the souls of our people. The silence was profound. There was no wind. I eased the throttle back and kept one hand on the arm of the motor. I was like a piece of flotsam, borne wherever the current might take me.

As I felt the air chill, I headed for a larger island to make camp for the night. Before long I had a fire blazing. I sat close to it, warming myself as I stared into the flames. The land felt good around me, but there was a hollow ache in my belly now. Thought of the school filled my head and I could feel a moan building in my gut. As it escaped me, it frightened me with its ancient sound. I wrapped a blanket around myself, and curled into a ball and pressed my eyes tight.

You're free. That's what Father Leboutilier had told me that last time I saw him. Free to go where the game could take me. I shook with anger as I recalled it. I was never free. He was my captor, the warder of my innocence. He had used me. I felt hate, acrid and hot. "You are a glory, Saul." I repeated those words over and over, until the pressure inside forced me to my feet. I kicked at roots and stones and the jut of logs as I howled, ragged, rough and sore. When I couldn't scream any longer, I picked up the small hatchet I'd bought and began to whack at a stump. I
hit it with everything I had, until my arms and shoulders burned and it seemed that every ounce of fluid in me had drained out through my sweat and tears. I hobbled to the river, waded in up to my knees and splashed water over me. I cupped my hands and drank. When I'd calmed some I walked back to the fireside, spent. I woke at dawn to smoke spiralling lazily from the dying fire and fog settled over the river. I broke camp and aimed the boat downriver.
I made Gods Lake by early afternoon. My insides still felt like sandpaper. There was an eerie silence as I made the portage, feeling the bush close off behind me. The shadows were deep and ominous. When I stepped out onto the western edge of the lake and looked across it, it was as though I had never left.

I'd never walked the shore of the lake completely. But I did so that day, and every step closer to our old family campsite transported me further back. The angst in my belly disappeared. My thoughts cleared. I walked in a peace I could not recall having experienced before. I reached out to touch the broad span of ferns, the trunks of trees, leaves, grasses. A part of me remembered each sensation. The smell in the air was rich and earthy, with a wisp of swamp and bog. Dying things and living things together. The air was filled with birdsong. I broke through the trees fifty yards from the foot of the cliff. As I knelt on the stone beach, gazing up at the cliff, the clouds at its upper edge moved as though it was a living being, breathing. I closed my eyes, close to weeping, and I heard my name whispered. I opened my eyes to see a flotilla of canoes gliding toward the shore.
Benjamin. My grandmother, with my Grandfather Solomon. My mother and father. Strangers I took to be ancient members of my family. Wind-tanned, leathery faces, deeply creased and lined. My people. And there was Shabogeesick himself, paddling solo in a birch bark canoe that looked ancient and brittle but rode the water like a wisp. He raised the flat of his paddle in salute, then beached his canoe and stepped ashore. He stood a pace away from me, studying me intently.

“You have come far,” he said finally.

“Yes,” I replied.

“The journey you make is good.”

“What am I to learn here?”

He swept his arm to take in the lake, the shore and the cliff behind us. “You’ve come to learn to carry this place within you. This place of beginnings and endings.”

I looked up to see an eagle circling the rim of the cliff. Shabogeesick laid a hand on my shoulder, and we were suddenly on the top of the cliff. He put a hide pouch in my right hand and a broad eagle feather fan in my left. Shabogeesick gazed at me kindly. I closed my eyes again, and when I opened them he was gone.

I stood on the edge of the cliff with my pouch and eagle feather fan and my family stood around the fire in the trees looking up at me. Soft singing, low like a prayer, came from the boats below. I took a pinch of the tobacco from the pouch and held it up to the evening star. As I did, the sky eased into purples and blues and indigos. The singing from below rose higher and the great northern lights emerged to dance beneath the unblinking eye of the moon. I cried in great heaving gasps. I let myself mourn. Allowed every
ounce of sorrow and desperation, loneliness and regret to eke out of me. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore. Then I heard my name.

"Saul."

The moon hung in the sky like the face of a drum. As I watched, it became the shining face of a rink, where Indian boys in cast-off skates laughed in the thrill of the game, the smallest among them zooming in and out on outsized skates. I offered tobacco to the lake where everything started and everything ended, to the cliff that had made this the place of my people, and I offered my thanks aloud in an Ojibway prayer.
I went back to the New Dawn Centre. I hadn't planned on it. I hadn't planned on anything. The only thing I had known for certain was that I had to backtrack, to revisit vital places from my early life, if I was ever going to understand how to live in the present. Call it intuition, I suppose. But I needed to go to the school just as I needed to return to Gods Lake. So I went back to talk. I went back to learn to share the truth I had discovered locked deep inside me. I went back because I wanted to learn how to live with it without drinking. I went back because I needed a solid start on a new road and I knew it would be hard. Sometimes ghosts linger. They hover in the furthest corners, and when you least expect it they lurch out, bearing everything they brought to you when they were alive. I didn't want to be haunted. I'd lived that way for far too long as it was. So I put in the winter there. I worked closely with Moses and I learned how to lift the lid off my life and inspect what was contained. It was hard work. It terrified me a lot of times, but I made the journey, and when I felt strong, confident, secure with my feelings and my new set of skills, I returned to knock on a door that I hadn't knocked on in a long, long time. It was just after the first thaw.
When Fred Kelly opened it, his face cracked into a wide grin. He’d aged well. His hair was silver and he’d gained a bit of weight. “Look who’s here,” he said. He held the door open and I walked in.

The house looked the same as when I’d left it. It was orderly and neat, with light pouring in through the windows, and filled with the smell of baking. I wondered how people could live with things set in place, fixed, their places determined by the power of the recollection they contained, the memories they held. It was what made a home, I believed; the things we keep, the sum of us. Fred excused himself and went upstairs, and I found a seat on the living room couch. When he came back, Martha was with him. They stood in the doorway with their arms around each other, looking at me without speaking. I stood up. None of us knew what to say.

“We should sit down,” Martha said finally.

They took chairs opposite the couch. I sat on the very edge of it, my forearms on my knees and my hands clasped together. I tapped my toes nervously on the carpet. Martha stared at me, her eyes shiny with tears, balling the corner of her apron up in her fist. Fred reached over and put a hand over hers.

“Thought I’d know what to say once I got here,” I said. “Turns out I don’t.”

Fred shrugged. “People put way too much stock in words. Sometimes it’s better to just sit. Kinda get used to each other again.”

“I never put stock enough in talk, really. But I’m learning how these days. More than I did before, at least,” I said. “There are things I found out that I never told anyone.”
“About the school,” Fred said quietly.
“Yes.”
“We know, Saul. We always knew,” Martha said quietly.
“Not specifically. But we were there too.”
“They taught us to hide from ourselves,” Fred said. “It took forever for me to learn how to face my own truth. I ran from it for years and years.”
“It’s hard,” I said.
“The hardest,” he said.
“Were you...?” I asked, the words dwindling off into space. I looked at him and he kept his head down, clasping his hands together.
Then he looked at me placidly and nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Many times.”
I felt tears building and I pinched my lips together and gazed out the window. “Cost me a lot,” I said.
“It costs everything,” Fred said. “It bankrupts us in every way. The lucky ones rebuild. There’s a lot of those kids who never got that chance.”
“I went back there,” I said.
“I still do.”
“Even now?”
“Every year. Just to lay tobacco down and try to find forgiveness.”
“Did you find it?”
He took a drink and set his cup down slowly. “It’s a long road,” he said.
“I don’t know if I can, you know? I don’t know if I even want to.”
“It’s part of it,” Martha said. “It took me a long, long time, and even now I don’t know if I’ve truly done it. More
like I just live my life here, and it heals me. Time. Distance. Not thinking about it."

"Did they rape everyone?" I asked.

There was a long silence. In the distance I could hear the sounds of the mill and a train. I waited and they both looked at the floor.

"It doesn't have to be sexual to be rape, Saul," Martha said.

"When they invade your spirit, it's rape too," Fred said.

I nodded. "That's how I felt. Invaded."

"And now?" Fred asked.

"Now I'm just tired of the way I've been living. I want something new built on something old. I wanted to come back. This is the only place I felt like something was possible for me. Don't know what I want to do. Just want to work on the idea of what's possible." I wrung my hands together and looked at them.

Fred reached over and took Martha's hand. They smiled at each other. "We hoped you would, some day," she said. "We all wanted to go out and find you, but we knew we couldn't. We knew you'd have to find your own way. The hardest part was that we knew how hard your road would be—but we had to let you go."

"They scooped out our insides, Saul. We're not responsible for that. We're not responsible for what happened to us. None of us are." Fred said. "But our healing—that's up to us. That's what saved me. Knowing it was my game."

"Could be a long game," I said.

"So what if it is?" he said. "Just keep your stick on the ice and your feet moving. Time will take care of itself."

"I know how to do that," I said.

"I know you do," he said.
Virgil was a supervisor at the mine. He was married and had three boys. The days of the far-flung reserve tournaments had long gone, and there were Native teams in town leagues and amateur leagues across the North. As more Indian hockey players made the National Hockey League, it had become easier for Native kids to get on established teams. The reserve tournaments had evolved into huge annual tournaments in places like Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury and Timmins. Those tourneys featured up to twenty-four teams, and the skill level was so impressive that big-league scouts were no longer oddities in the stands. The Moose had all grown up, married or moved away, and what remained of them was called the Manitouwadge Miners now. They played in a Senior B circuit and had yet to come close to a championship. But they were good. Fred filled me in on everything as we ate the lunch Martha prepared for us.

"You're only thirty-three, Saul," he said. "They could use you on the Miners."

"I haven't played since I left here. Haven't been on skates since then either."

"Talent like yours doesn't go away."
While we ate I told them about Father Leboutilier. I told them about how the game was the means of my emotional and mental survival. I told them how I could lose myself in it and how when I found I couldn't any longer, the joy I'd found and the elaborate cover it offered me both disappeared. They listened and nodded, and when I had finished we sat in a well of silence.

“So I think what I want to do is coach,” I said finally. “Kids. Native kids. I want to bring them the joy I found; the speed, the grace, the strength and the beauty of the game. I want to give that back.”

Martha smiled. “Virgil’s looking for a coach. The mine sponsors a bantam team. Virgil’s been trying to coach them, but it’s hard to make time, with shift work and all.”

“They’re practicing tonight, if you want to have a look,” Fred said.

“End of the season, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Two more games. Still, you should take a look at the squad.”

“Where?”

“Town built a big expensive arena a few years ago. You can’t miss it. It’s got a white roof you can see from most anywhere. I can drive you over.”

“Think I’ll walk. Be good to see the old town again.”

“She ain’t changed much. A few bigger stores, more people. But she’s always been a mill and mining town and she’ll never get away from that.”

“Sounds perfect to me,” I said.
He was leaning on the boards, directing the players with a hockey stick. I could hear him shouting orders as soon as I stepped away from the concourse and began walking down the steps. His back was to me. It was a broad back. I took a seat fifteen rows up and watched him as he worked. He was like his father. He let them play the game, and he only whistled them to a stop when he had something specific to point out. They listened. They looked at him with their mouths open, down on one knee and breathing like stallions at the gate. He spoke in a low tone that I couldn't hear, but I remembered how the voice would sound, deep, rumbling, serious. When he'd made his point, they scrambled to their feet and took their positions and he blew the whistle and sent them into the high-speed whirl of the game.

They were fast. They had a lot more polish and they were a lot more acrobatic than kids had been when I was their age. They'd been well coached. Virgil ran them through a fast skating and passing drill that sent them up and down the ice in waves of three at a time. I could hear the excitement in their voices. After five minutes or so, he let them run through it on their own and they raced through the drill a half dozen times before he blew the
whistle and called them to the bench. I moved a few rows closer so I could hear him.

“Full scrimmage now,” he said. “But I want you coming out of your ends fast so there’s no chance for the defense to bottleneck the neutral zone. Use your speed. Cut through the open ice and make yourself a strong target. I want those passes crisp and I want those rushes to end in a wrist shot from no further than fifteen feet out. No slappers, no dekes for now. Just set up the shot. Ready? Go!”

He skated to centre and dropped the puck and then drifted backwards to the boards and leaned on his elbows. The team was relentless. They flew up and down the ice smoothly, efficiently, and each rush was capped with a strong wrist shot. They skated a full ten minutes before I inched up behind him.

“Fifteen’s a natural centre,” I said. “He sees the ice too well to waste him on the wing.”

He turned his head slightly and arched an eyebrow when he saw me. “He’s a sawed-off little runt. The big boys’ll take away his ice.”

“Not if he uses that speed.”

“Everyone’s the same speed when they’re flat on their back.”

“Same size too,” I said.

“Well, you’d know. Your whole career was spent on your back.”

“You obviously missed the half when I was face down.”

“Didn’t. Just too sensitive to your feelings to want to mention it,” Virgil said. “When did you get back?”

“Long enough for lunch and a talk with your folks.”

“You look good.”
“You wanna kiss me now or later?”

He snorted. “Think I’d as soon kiss the north end of a southbound moose.”

“I was a Moose once.”

He spun on his skates and leaned on the boards to look at me. He was stern when he spoke. “That seems like a long fuckin’ time ago right now. I wanted to punch your lights out for leaving.”

“Still want to do that?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Depends on what you have to say for yourself. You want to get a beer and talk it out?”

“I don’t drink. Not anymore. Used to. Didn’t really work for me.”

He nodded. “All right. I’m gonna get these guys into the dressing room and talk a little strategy. Why don’t you wait for me outside? Ten minutes, tops.”

“Okay,” I said. I watched him bring the practice to a close and when he followed the players off the ice and into the walkway under the stands, he looked at me.

“Don’t disappear again,” he said.

“I won’t. I’m there. Ten minutes, tops.”
We settled for sitting in the stands while the rink man cleaned the ice. There was a long silence and I struggled to find words to break it. Virgil sat with his hands cupped in front of his face, staring straight ahead. I understood then how hard years are to get a hold of, how elusive the life in them can be to capture and retell. I understood then too that time does not heal all wounds. I wanted to say it all in one brilliantly executed sentence, encompass all of it in a succinct, effortless rush. But I couldn’t. I was at a loss where to begin. In the end, he did it for me.

“You’re one of those kids, aren’t you? One of the ones the schools fucked up. My dad told me some of what he went through. When they said they wanted to bring you out of there, I guess I kinda knew why, even then. Knew it wasn’t all about the game.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “Not for a long time. Not until just this past year.”

“Jesus.”

“Don’t think he had anything to do with it, really.”

He turned in his seat. “I know. I’m sorry. Crap choice of words.”
He stared down at the ice while I told him about Father Leboutilier. I told him about my family and how I'd come to be at St. Jerome's. I told him about the rage that built in me that I had never understood and how it corroded everything, even the game. I told him about the road, the jobs, the towns, and then I told him about the booze.

"The ultimate device," I said. "It lets you go on breathing but not really living. It lets you move but not remember. It lets you do but not feel. I don't know why I fell into it so easily, why I lost myself so deep. I just thought I was crazy. But turns out I was just hurt, lonely, guilty, ashamed—and mostly just really, really sad."

"Did you want to hunt that fucker down? Make him feel some of the same pain?" Virgil asked. He still couldn't turn away from looking at the ice.

"At first, yeah. Then, the more we got into it at the centre the more I realized it was more than just him. I'd be hunting a long time if I lashed out at everyone. In the end, I learned the only one I could take care of was me."

He turned to me finally. His cheeks were slick with tears. "Five minutes alone in a room with each of them. That's what I'd wish for. For what they did to my dad, my mother, my grandparents, you. The fuckers."

"I know. It still hurts. It will for a long time. But I know that now. I know that and I have ways to deal with it. Better ways than running, abandoning people, fighting, drinking."

"Yeah? And what are those better ways?" He leaned back now and shunted so that he could half-face me.

"Come back here, for one thing. I always felt most like home here. Get a job. Work. There's a lot of healing to be
had by picking up a lunch pail. Then I thought maybe I'd shop around for a team to coach.

He raised his eyebrows. "You're still young. You could play. Shit, the Miners could use you."

"They could use that other guy, Virgil. That bag of antlers with the speed and the moves. But I'm not that other guy anymore. I want to get back to the joy of the game. That's for sure. But if I learned anything while I was at the centre, it's that you reclaim things the most when you give them away. I want to coach. I mean, if I could get my hands on that number fifteen, I could turn him into something."

Virgil smiled. "That's my son. Billy. He's eleven, almost twelve, but he's skating with the bantams. Reminds me a lot of another speedster I once knew. He knows about you."

"He does? How?"

"You're a freakin' legend, Saul. No one ever played the game like you. Every guy who was on the Moose has told their kids about you."

"The guys are still around?"

"Not all of them. Most of them. They're all beer-bellied and fat now. Got a basketful of kids like I do, all married up and hog-tied, but we get together for shinny late at night sometimes when the ice is free. We talk about you."

"Think they'd want to see me?"

"We got ice tonight. Why don't you see for yourself?"
The white glory of a rink. I found a used pair of skates at the sporting goods store and a good stick and I stood at the door to the player's bench looking out at the ice and trembling. I told Virgil that I needed some time to get my legs under me. He knew that I meant more than getting used to skating again. So he arranged to let me have the ice to myself for an hour before the guys showed up. I dressed on the bench. My head down lacing up my skates and my nose full of the smell of a rink. Wood. Sweat. Spit. Leather. When I stood and faced the ice itself, it was dazzling. I stood at the gate and it spread out in front of me as if it were its own special world—and it was. I knew its geography. I knew its breezes. I knew the chill of it. It took me five minutes before I could push off.

When I landed I couldn't move my feet. I glided straight across the ice to the opposite boards and gripped the top of them with my hands. Then I turned and leaned on them and just looked at the wide oval of ice. I pinched my lips together hard. I understood then that when you miss a thing it leaves a hole that only the thing you miss can fill. The feel of the rink on my face. I closed my eyes and pushed off from the boards. I turned lazily at centre and
skated slowly around the red circle. Then I headed for the boards and pushed along them and around the end behind the net. When I turned up ice I pushed off harder. There was no rhythm. There was only the effort of propelling myself along.

There'd been a practice just before I'd arrived. Someone had left a wad of tape on the ice. When I reached it I scooped it up with the blade of my stick. It felt like a horse turd. I skated loosely from end to end with that ball of tape on my stick. Then I tucked it backwards between my legs and spun on one blade to pick it up and cradled it on the blade. I snapped it into the top corner of the net. I laughed then. I opened my mouth and I let myself peel off a great bray of laughter. Then I scooped up that wad of tape and began to move faster around that blazing white glory of ice.

I skated until sweat was pouring down my face. I skated until my legs became elastic and my breath was hard in my lungs. I didn't have anywhere near the speed I used to have, but I could still skate. When I bent to scoop the tape out of the goal, a real puck caromed around the bottom bar. I turned and Virgil was at the gate with Fred and Martha.

"Even up here in the sticks, we like to use a hockey puck to play hockey," Virgil said and pushed out onto the ice.

"Old habits," I said when he reached me.

"New days," he said.

"The guys here?"

"Them and more," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He waved his arm and Fred stepped out onto the ice. Behind him were five of the original Moose, still recognizable despite the years. Behind them were some kids
of assorted ages and sizes and behind them were young girls and older women. Everyone had a hockey stick. They skated toward us in a wide stream and stood in a circle around us. Martha waved from the bench.

"Best way to choose up sides is the old-fashioned way," Stu Little Chief said with a nod to me. "Do the honours, Saul?"

"Sure," I said.

Everyone dropped their sticks in the centre-ice circle. I skated in and began pushing sticks toward each blue line. When they were all cleared from the centre, the teams were set. Virgil was on the opposite team. He skated to the faceoff circle.

I met him there. At least eighteen of us were on the ice.

"How are we gonna do this?" I asked.

"Gotta hit the post to call it a goal. No raising the puck."

"No, I mean with all these people. How are we gonna play the game?"

He smiled and tapped my stick with his. "Together," he said. "Like we shoulda all along."

I smiled. He won that first faceoff, but I didn't care.