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The arena

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The arena

Abstract
Making little jerks on the small black steering wheel, the driver of the Zamboni machine leans out over the ice, looking. The machine circles the arena, leaving behind rising steam and slick dark-grey ice. I wish the game would start. The driver steers into a controlled slide in front of the net that the other workman has dragged out from the crease. The younger man in a brown uniform rests against the crossbar of the goal while the Zamboni makes another, smaller sweep of the rink. Wet ice shines in pools from overhead lights.

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Making little jerks on the small black steering wheel, the driver of the Zamboni machine leans out over the ice, looking. The machine circles the arena, leaving behind rising steam and slick dark-grey ice. I wish the game would start. The driver steers into a controlled slide in front of the net that the other workman has dragged out from the crease. The younger man in a brown uniform rests against the crossbar of the goal while the Zamboni makes another, smaller sweep of the rink. Wet ice shines in pools from overhead lights.

I should have sharpened Michael's skates. Only a thin strip of old snowy surface remains to be scraped clean, and sprayed with hot water. Melting and bonding ice, the big machine hums and drifts through another curve. Heat from the engine must have peeled away the paint on its hood. Here there's none of that ammonia smell that I remember from my games in run-down arenas. The goal's dragged back into place. The
guy shoves the rusted anchoring rods down into the two holes drilled out of the ice.

Michael, and all the other Rebels, are still in the dressing room. Players on the other team sit on top of the boards, with their long sticks resting on the new ice surface below. Both bench gates have been flung open. The Zamboni drives out with a clank, disappearing at the far end of the rink, under the Quebec and Canada flags stuck on the wall with the clock. Its time, in yellow dots of light behind the screening, matches my watch: 11:59.

There’s no sign of Michael’s team yet; I hope the coach is psyching them up. The waiting players on the other team leap onto the cleaned ice as the high end boards swing shut. Their gold and purple jerseys spread all over the ice: the Royals. Where’s Michael? I might as well sit down, with the other parents.

‘Hi Daniel.’

‘Hello Bill.’ His son, a stubby defenceman, lugs the puck too much. I keep climbing the concrete steps, to get to the warmer seats. That woman’s son skates on his ankles; he hasn’t even learned the off-side rule. I flip a seat down, and face the ice once more. The Royals circle both nets, skating counter-clockwise. One player trips over his long hockey stick. With the fat fingers of his hockey glove, he can’t pick up the stick he’s dropped on the ice. His father should have wrapped tape around the butt-end: there’s no space between the shaft and the ice for his fingers to slip through. The kid throws a glove down, and, with a bared hand, picks his hockey stick off the ice. Michael should be out there with his new stick.

I hear them coming now, high-pitched voices welling up from the open corridor below. It’s hard to tell who they are, with helmets over heads and cages over faces. Michael won’t get a scar on his face like mine. Is that good or bad? That’s him in the red helmet matching the jersey, and carrying a new Koho stick. He steps tentatively onto the ice, then skates in quick, dancey bursts. My insides feel hollow and tight just watching him warm up. I hope he gets a hat-trick today — they’ve lost three in a row. His red top hangs loosely over the big shoulder pads. He’s wearing No 15 again, the same number as his favourite player on the Canadiens, Rejean Houle. Coming off a broken collarbone, Houle scored two goals against Detroit last night, and was named the game’s first star. Michael fakes his goalie, then slides the puck in on a backhand.

The referees begin to scoop up the pucks in preparation for the start of the game. Michael chases a puck down in the corner, then loses it to the son of that guy wearing the fur coat. What does he do? The short ref, in
his shirt with dark blue vertical stripes, skates over to the bench below for the team list. He’s just a kid too, with his chin strap dangling from his black helmet, and a silver whistle sticking out of his left hand. The other official is checking the nets for puck-sized holes. A buzzer sounds, then a long siren, and, more shrilly, the ref’s whistle.

Most of the players skate off the ice, but Michael stays on; I hope he managed to lace his skates tightly enough: he doesn’t want me in the dressing room anymore. Michael rushes towards his goalie, and whacks the large pads with his new stick, in imitation of an N.H.L. ritual, then wheels past the plexi-glass above the end boards — probably admiring his reflected image — as the ref’s whistle sounds again. Michael glides to centre, stopping on the clear ice above the painted red line. The ref adjusts his glasses. Michael’s lined up on right wing, the wrong side for his left-handed shot. The coach should organize them better. Michael, eager, slaps the blade of his stick on the hard ice. My son is the smallest player out there.

The crouching ref throws the puck against the ice. Michael turns as the other team attacks, crossing the blue line into the Rebels’ zone. A long shot goes wide of the net, and the puck is cleared off the boards with a dull boom, onto Michael’s stick. A defenceman in front of him, in a tight gold and purple jersey, skates backwards, stumbles and trips on a cross-over step. You’re in the clear. Michael steers the puck around the fallen player: a breakaway. Come on. He has time to put a move on the goalie. But he’s going in too close. ‘Shoot, Michael!’ The puck hits the huge pads. Number 15 misses the rebound as well. Damn. The Royals’ goalie flops on the puck for a whistle.

I stretch, and look up at the open rafters holding the lights, and the curved wooden dome beyond. The ice below now has countless trails of white cut into its dark-grey sheen.

Here’s Sarah. She must have walked over, through the falling snow. Her coat, and the bag slung over her shoulder, and her dark hair are all speckled white. Spring’s so far away. Damn. Michael’s backhand went wide; the one in practice went in. Her small teeth glint up at me. There’s another whistle, and, with the stoppage in play, Michael skates off. On the electronic scoreboard there’s a round green zero under goals. It should be one to nothing at least. I move over a seat.

‘Why do you sit way up here, Dan?’

‘It’s warmer. Did you see Michael’s breakaway?’

‘No. I just got here. It’s not so cold out anymore.’

‘Yeah? He should have scored.’

‘Well, winning isn’t everything. If you tried your best and had fun,
that's more important, and that's what playing is all about, right?"

'Sarah, what are you talking about?' Her big eyes scan my face, making me nervous.

'It's an ad, Danny, for Quick chocolate. You're supposed to say, "Right," if you're the boy sitting at the table near the fireplace, while the mother makes hot chocolate. I won't tell you what the narrator says in his voice-over, after they kiss.' She looks away, down at the ice.

'You're crazy, Sarah, memorizing T.V. commercials.'

'Michael's only eleven: it's not the Stanley Cup.' She sweeps her shiny, long hair free from the coat collar.

'He's got to excel this year in Midget House League play if he wants to play inter-city next year.'

Her mouth opens partly, then closes without speaking: she's chewing gum instead of saying what she feels. Michael's out there for another shift. She pulls a section of newspaper out of her leather bag. He's on left wing now, where he should be.

'Sarah, Michael's out on the ice.'

'Which one is he?'

'He's right over there, the small one.' Her whole family are midgets.

'Come on Michael! What's the name of their team again?'

'The Rebels.'

'Come on Rebels!' She used to be a cheerleader. She grabs my arm, is screaming: Michael's got another breakaway! Score this time. He hits the pads again. Damn. Damn.

'Oh, Michael would have been so happy.' She squeezes my arm and lets go: a breakaway.

Now the Royals have carried the puck up to our end of the rink. It's in the net. A chunky player shot the puck into the empty space between the goalie and the near post. 1-0 for them. Michael should have done that. The scorer jumps from the toes of his skates while his teammates congratulate him with taps of their gloves and sticks. On the far side of the arena, the players on the Royals' bench, and their parents sitting in the stands above them, clap and cheer. Over here there's silence, broken by Michael banging his stick on the ice. A green one flashes up on the scoreboard. Sarah unfolds her newspaper. How can she just sit there? I should go down to our bench and tell Michael not to get in too close on breakaways because their goalie isn't moving much.

The puck bounces in off our goalie's deflector. Bill's son was caught up ice after a rush. 'It's 2-0 now. They've scored again.' Michael doesn't
bother to slam his stick on the ice this time; he just skates to the bench, head down.

The siren goes before there's another face-off.

'What was that?'

'The end of the first period, Sarah.' 2-0. She just turns to another page of the newspaper. From the bench Michael yells encouragingly at his goalie who is skating slowly towards the other end. He's a nice kid, as Sarah says, not that it will get him very far. 'I'm going down to talk to Michael.'

'What for?'

'To give him some advice.' I brush by Sarah's knees, avoiding her leather boots that are swung towards the aisle, and stand, looking down the concrete steps at the centre red line. At the team bench Michael's red helmet swivels to watch the play sweep by. We almost score. Nearly 2-1. Here at ice level, it's much faster. 'Michael.' He half turns, eyes still on the moving puck. 'Their goalie isn't moving out to cut down the angles, so don't try to deke him; just shoot for an opening.'

'I almost scored last time, Dad. He just got a pad on it.' I pat him on the back, No 15. 'Remember, it's not whether you win or lose that's important, unless you lose.' He twists around; his large, puzzled eyes behind the metal grill search my face. 'It's just a joke.' I pat him again, and start to re-climb the unyielding stairs. I nod at Bill, who is lighting his pipe. I would love to be out there on the ice with Michael's skating speed. I was always too slow for the jerks picking up teams. Sarah moves over to let me sit down. That woman's son goes off-side stupidly.

'Annie told me she had lunch with you last week.'

Suddenly, everything's changed. I am still watching my son in the T.M.R. arena, but he is no longer clearly our son. 'Yeah, at Thursday's.' Annie was staring up at the decorative ceiling, her long graceful neck bared. Sarah always wears turtlenecks or something. 'It was just a lunch.' I should have told her, covered my ass. A long shot goes through a knot of players in front of the net. 2-1. Everybody on this side of the rink cheers, except Sarah and me. It was Bill's stubby son who scored. The father waves his pipe in the air.

'She said you were coming on to her.'

'That bitch!' Both women. 'She must have been imagining things.' She fell asleep early last night again.

Sarah looks across at me, but I avoid her eyes. Michael jumps over the boards for another shift on the ice. Her hard little body hunches forward
beside me. The siren sounds again. The teams change ends. The surface for the final period is old and snowy; it needs to be scraped clean.

'Dan, look at me. We have lived together a long time without lying to each other.'

I have a whole period to find out the score. 'Sarah, I just took your friend and mine to lunch.' Michael, very coolly, has just lifted the heavy black puck over the fallen goalie, into the netting. 'Michael just scored.'

He looks up at us, with his new stick held high in the air, and we wave, together. I'm sorry I took Annie out, tried to hustle her, the bitch. All of us cheer and applaud.

'Up front, Dan. UP FRONT.'

'Quiet, Sarah.' The bald head above the fur coat leans back towards us, and Bill, about to take a puff, stops, his pipe pointing. 'Think of Michael.'

'You didn't. HAVE YOU BEEN FUCKING MY FRIEND ANNIE?'

'Of course not, Sarah.' This is Town of Mount Royal. 'I love you.' I could kill you for doing this in front of everyone.

She picks the wad of gum out of her mouth, and sticks it back into a wrapper, then shoves everything back into her coat pocket. Michael hustles after a loose puck, but a Royal player clears it off the boards. It's icing. The whistle blows, and there's a line change. The coach should leave Michael out there to score another goal. Time's running out. Sarah has never been jealous before. Now it's she who avoids eye-contact.

Annie and Warren have no children. Michael shouldn't be off the ice. They can split up and go to single bars with no hassle, no guilt. The clock keeps running, and he's just sitting there, waiting for the game to end.

Sarah is getting ready to leave, stashing her newspaper in her purse, and buttoning her coat. I'm sweating in this cool air. With only a few minutes left, Michael and his linemates go back on the ice. Sarah's father gave us money for the down payment. She sits next to me, hurt and angry. We had a good chance but that dumb defenceman didn't pass the puck up to Michael; he tried to rush. It's too late now. My legs are numb. The players on both benches count down the last few seconds. The siren goes. Sarah steps quickly past me. 'Where are you going?'

Her eyes are so large because her face is so small. She pauses. She steps away from me, down to ice level, and to her son. He should have scored a hat-trick. The Rebels finish pounding their goalie in congratulations, let him up off the cold, hard ice, and then skate in file past the other team, hitting gloves. A tie feels like a victory when you score the last goal. Sarah waits at the bench for Michael to skate off through the open gate.

The Zamboni sounds its horn and roars on to the scarred ice.