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Riding the Pines

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On her left hand Waitress X wears an African ring made of flattened Napoleonic coins, a ring that speaks of atrophied amber light, of flux and loss. She tells me with some pleasure where those corroded colonial coins have traveled, first from French ports to fevered West African outposts and returning, by steamer, to France in their hammered incarnation, then moving to yet another colony, across Canada’s few acres of snow to live on Waitress X’s hand, in this city, the ring now against my cheek. She connected the dots. Perhaps those coins once belonged to a conscripted peasant torn from his family, tossed into the sea in mid-voyage, dead of the tropics, of yellow fever or malaria, shrunken and bent and stitched into a brown blanket and lowered to the fishes, his coins moving on without him, like the family face; a Senegalese reshaping them into this ring, smashing them into something else and now here beside the bartender — flesh colored Band-Aids like stars all over his big hands. In his beard and hat the bartender resembles Cowboy Flett who played with the Leafs and the WHA Oilers and for Freddie the Fog, RIP.

Upstairs, I knock at the hotel door and Normie Ullman answers, naked. I don’t care to see Normie Ullman naked. Curly is after puck bunnies and Dino is chasing anything. Yvan Cournoyer is tanned and grinning and chasing anything. No wonder they call him the Roadrunner. Maybe he’s spending the check from the
big Zeller's ad we did. They're fighting with fire extinguishers. Their ex-model wives are thousands of miles to the east, Orient pearls swept up on their necks, the cooler shades of love. There are days it seems that all hockey players are pervs or nuts or stickmen. I'm sure several are normal, but there's not a lot of evidence. We're away from home a lot, in decent shape, and for a brief while we possess money and youth. We try to rid ourselves of both.

Waitress X worries her hammered ring while strange flowers behind her hair bow towards Chinatown. We finish the fish, explode the last fortune cookies: "A challenge is near."

"Yes," says Waitress X, "paying our bar tab. I should be working. Is that Tom Waits over there? He lives in Petaluma, now."

He's chasing a veal cutlet like it's a live lobster.

"He looks more human than on his albums," Waitress X says. "He is certainly a curious man. Does he still smoke, do you think? Those homemade tunes. What goes on in his dollhouse head? Of course what goes on in all our heads." She looks at me pointedly.

Later, I call my machine for messages and hear the place being trashed. I get home and my door is gone. A single cloud rises up in a perfect question mark. Sea planes rush the harbor, barely clearing the granite and brick buildings lining Wharf Street. One plane, the very kind I'm in all too often, clips a tugboat and cartwheels across the freezing inlet. No one is hurt, just hypothermia and shock and legal questions. Of course, it can't happen to me. Gulls go down, fleshy feet hanging over the sun, gliding downstream to spend the night at sea, dreaming, dreaming of the fragrant dump.

In the corner I get my purple glove hard in the
new guy's face, mash it around a bit. He hisses, "You're dead old man!" I'm maybe four years older than this seagull, this floater. When he turns, I stick him behind the knee where there's no pad. I'll show him a trick or two before the clock releases us for the evening and we can breathe again. He'll thank me someday, age making him wistful, false.

The blinking coach fined me for having too impressive a suntan. He felt it displayed a lack of commitment to the team. I never play well in LA. I ride the pines until doomsday. Where is Bart Crashley when I need him? This place enters and alters your cells like salt. I like that.

Milk Truck opens one of his own beers after the game. A guy on the kid line, not even of age in this state, asks if he has any others.

"Here," says Milk Truck, tossing the bottle cap, "sniff this."

I have the worst sense of smell in the world, but even I can smell alcohol on the center. He floats at the red line; he won't check anyone and he can't take a pass. I saw him before the game using an ax to shorten his stick, leaving splinters all over the black rubber mats. We were killing ourselves laughing, but meanwhile our best forward is benched, waiting for a trade, while this idiot plays. It'd be funny if we won a few, but we don't. I'm the only D-man who stays at home, and they're making noises about another trip to the farm. Choking chickens. If I get beat it's because I'm the only one back on a 3 on 1.
You have to play the pass and hang in the middle, ignoring instinct, refraining from charging the guy with the puck. The rest of the team just watches, already thinking up their excuses for not helping out. You guess where the pass will go and you feel stupid when they tic-tac-toe it into the net. You look naked and stupid because you’re the only one back there. That’s your reward.

Our captain is furious. We’re playing like garbage, he screams, like horseshit! I skate harder. I get to the corner first. I’ll show them. My stick is down and my back is to their forward, bracing myself, waiting for him to smash into me, but he swings wide to try and lift my stick and steal the puck. I pivot with the puck, my hip out. He slams straight into the boards hard and falls to the ice, holding his dripping face. The end of his nose is slit open like that scene in *Chinatown*. The zebras give me a high-sticking major for drawing blood, and I’ve done nothing. My stick was on the ice. He put himself into the boards. I argue and get extra time. Unsportsmanlike conduct. Piss me off. The other team is yelling at me to watch out, they’ll get me back, and I’ve done nothing. I rush their bench, enraged, exultant and leap at them and bop some cement head on the nose. My team is silent, unsure about what exactly happened in those three seconds. I have a rep for elbows. Thanks guys.

My old car is detailed, waxed, gleaming, looking skanking, mint. When in Rome... Otherwise you’d feel like a loser in a grubby bucket of boils. I listen to FM, 10,000 watts out of Mexico. Beer is so much cheaper here. I can get twenty-four Pacifico for the price of a six-pack of no-name in Canada. I can get out fishing anytime with a friend, roaring under the piers and bridges.

On the nude beach a man passes me a handbill.
Others toss them, but I always take them. I like them.

ALTERNATIVE CANCER TREATMENTS IN MEXICO
BIO-ELECTRICAL MEDICINE
(THE ONLY CLINIC ON NORTH AMERICAN CONTINENT TO FEATURE THIS TREATMENT)
7PM — FOLLOW SIGNS

The clinic is Mexican, but the spiel and sizzle seem as All-American as a naked bootleg. No one hands you anything like this back home. You’re behind the wheel of a Batmobile. Dudes chase me in the American city with new age weapons that look like electric shavers. They wreck my hands for kicks. I still inhabit my face. I wake one morning, the spitting image of my father. My father refuses chemotherapy or any treatment. I’d do the same. We talk a bunch on the phone. The bird is the word, says AM radio. This is supposed to be the new world, sings X down at the Whiskey-a-Go-Go. The punks are visibly aging.

I don’t want to go to Disneyland, but the Intended convinces me and I have a riot, running from ride to ride, joyously nauseated, going on Space Mountain just one more time while a thirteen year old Samoan gang member takes a bullet in the spine, in section H, the “Happy” parking lot. Right where we parked. Why not the “Grumpy” section of the parking lot? The brawl eventually involves ten people. Another bullet hits a kid in the elbow. I am lounging on the boring Pirate Cruise. A hole in my poor old Volvo. The Anaheim police take the .308 cartridge as evidence. Later the Highway Patrol stops one of the cars heading south on the San Diego Freeway. A shotgun in the back seat. The thirteen year old dies at 3:00 a.m. at Scripps. Hockey is pretty pas-
sive compared to these jokers. This is big time violence with Uzis and shit. It makes Dave the Hammer’s brand of destruction seem quaint and shy and antique.

At morning practice, a bunch of us are fooling around, like kids bumping, tackling for a joke, submarining each other, getting giddy. One guy leaps in the air to land on his buddy’s back, but his good buddy is turned to skate up ice, one leg behind him. 210 pounds land on this one outstretched leg and 210 pounds pull it backwards. It’s unnatural. I see the leg give and I see the man’s face. It makes me sick. I can’t look at the guy who did it, do not want to know more, do not want to know that the knee was yanked right out of the socket, even though I know. Knee injuries make me cringe. The stupid thing is, they help me stick with the team, make a few more pay days.

Most of the guys are drinking gasy draft, eating pickled eggs, pigs’ feet, turkey gizzards, beer sausage. I learn to take a can of Florient on the bus with me, spray it at their noxious clouds. I enter techno-zombie state after the third city.

Another new assistant coach. Power of positive thinking at the defaced chalkboard.

“OK guys, we got ‘em on the ropes, keep pressing, good pressure, good pinching at the blue line.”

We’re down 2-0 and we got them on the ropes? PHD, he says — Pride, Hustle, Desire.

“One game at a time,” he opines.

Yeah, versus what? Just once I’d like to hear a coach say, OK guys, seven games at a time.
Flying around the ice like a hyped-up racehorse, you barely see the puck drilling right at your head, a rising black line, not a disc. Instinct says: move here. I could never play goal. I could never be a coach.

Spittle and bits of ice fly from the coach's mouth. “GET ON HIS TAIL! STAY ON HIS FUCKING ASS!! Check him. I SAID CHECK HIM!! Oh shit . . . .” Their guy scores.

The coach is on the bubble, but we may all get cut before he's canned. It's a guessing game, tiptoeing around. Our best winger had his anterior cruciate ligament ripped in half and the medial ligament torn from the bone.

Tuesday I stopped a 90 mph shot on the side of my anklebone and couldn't walk or skate. But a day later it's fine, just a deep bruise. I keep walking, twitching, knees swollen like basketballs, geography lessons, coins for long distance. I read the calendar — February 14 — thought it said Valium Day. I misunderstood. Yes, I misunderstood.

The Intended is already asleep when I slip into bed. She jumps, frightened, claws at me in the dark; half asleep, she doesn't know who I am and rakes at my neck, my shoulders.

“'I got eyes,” the Intended says to me another time. “I got eyes.”

Now what could that mean? We're listening to some ancient, scratchy ballad.

“Who is this?” asks the Intended.

“Some way back blues singer. Floyd Tillman. I taped it off an old 78.”

“Floyd Tillman,” she says. “Floyd’s hurting on this
tune," she says. "Floyd's a hurting dude," she says.

I have scratches healing all over my face. I play an ancient ballad. No one has turntables anymore.

When I was younger, perhaps eleven, I wore a ring of twisted metal. I found it in the meadow by the lake. There used to be a beached paddlewheeler there; we dreamed of making it float. Someone else's father owned a small white car that could drive right into the lake and then move in the water. How we envied that — to be on the lake and still be in the car. This seemed the height of science's fruits. This seemed so cosmopolitan. Soon we would be sipping martinis, for sophisticated outside worlds were moving their centers closer. We were in awe and we were bored. My brother began teasing me in front of two girls we liked. He crossed some line and I hit him in the face, not thinking about the ring. I fled, but I still see him staggering around, bent over and clutching his jaw. I threw away the ring, swearing I'd never wear another. That ring may have settled its metal into the grass of the path leading away from the meadow. Sexton beetles may have buried it. Now gravity pulls it toward the center of our earth, or perhaps someone found it, put it on, hit his brother, hit the family face.

I step into a guy just as the whistle blows the play offside. He catches my knee with his. In considerable pain I roll around, convulsing, yelling at everyone, "Leave me alone!" They look on, faces suitably serious, pretending concern. Later, over beer, the masks drop. Milk Truck laughs, asks, "What the Hell were you doing on the ice — the funky chicken?" Everyone cracks up.
I worry about finding work after this is over, after my "career" is over. My dreams go inexplicably back to my gray warehouse job, the fork lift, the infinite afternoon shift, dust suspended in shafts of light in the loading doors, dust over the itchy cardboard boxes, dust over the taverns across the avenue, waiting, like loan sharks. You never lose those brain cells.

When I'm sleeping and the telephone rings at 2 a.m., I know it is Shirt Is Blue and he's drinking again. He always calls late, holed up in central Alberta, a few too many from Big Bob's Bloody Mary Mix.

"Make it to that rodeo you wanted to register in?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, hooked up with that, Whitecourt. Didn't make any money. Drew some bad steers."
I laugh. Bum steers.
"They were. Not my fault," he insists. As usual. The rope hits the ground. Another truck hits an Alberta ditch.

He called me when I was in New York state and I had to ask, "Say, do you understand how these time zone thingies work?"

His phone bill is always in dispute. "One and a half hours? That can't be right," he protests. He starts putting an alarm clock beside the phone when he calls anyone. He has a few more drinks, sleeps two or three hours, starts drinking warm Labatt's Blue on his tailgate at 8:30 a.m. Later, another impaired charge, another claim of innocence, another protest. The judge calls him a liar. Shirt Is Blue's pissed off. "Not my fault." The telephone rings at 2 am. Hang up, says the Intended, just hang up, but I have to listen. I've known him since day one.
The Intended is dangerous with the remote control — an average of 3.5 seconds on each channel. This channel surfing drives me mad. Some days I wonder why the Intended and I are together; some days she seems terminally pissed off at me, my late hours, my drinking. We supply each other with our forty miles of bad road, but this is something we have together, something real we depend on in a hallucinatory world. I don’t know how long it can last. I wasn’t made for making ends meet, scratching backs, getting to church on time, weeping and wooing, cakes and cream.

The other times I know it’ll work out okay; we’re related, linked, blood. We know each other on some monochrome level that doesn’t show up on a graph. We’re in love and we like each other.

“I hate frills on watches.”

“Me too,” agrees the Intended. “I mean, what’s it supposed to do, take out your eye?”

I see watches going for thousands and we need a working washing machine for a few hundred.

She says, “We’re so afraid of being poor.”

We’re listening to really fine Mexican music, downing luscious guacamole with lemon and searing Pace Picante.

“I hate waiting for my period. I want my period! Men don’t have anything like this. I hate men.” She pauses. “Let’s go have sex.”

I think of Waitress X and old Mr. Keats, “drowsy with the fume of poppies . . . .” What a good line. We’re in this together. We’re all in this room, in a body.

“Did you cough?” My Intended wakes me in the middle of the night. “I thought I heard my mother cough,” she says. She is upset and lies on top of me, half
asleep, spooked.

I dreamed my lady came and found me dead . . .

I revived and was an emperor, a king. Everyone wants to be like someone else, and they’re willing to pay through the nose. I don’t want to be a god, an emperor; I just want to be like I was. Now I wear glasses, my hair falling out and going silver, poisonous weight on my face. I’ll never again have a Waitress X. She was a peak and a nadir of sorts. The things which I have seen I now can see no more. Everything is possession, it seems. Everything is pornographic, even Romeo and Juliet, even Walt Disney, even the voice of the surf.

I tag along on another player’s 38-foot fishing boat looking for swordfish and thrasher, but he catches some huge fucking shark in a gill net just eleven kilometers off a packed beach, a surfing beach. This shark is the size of a pickup truck. How many minutes would it take the shark to swim to that beach, to hit someone? It has a big mouth like a whale, teeth like an assembly line rolling you over a few rows of razors. Those tiers of teeth will make you think twice before you dangle your ankle in the water or put on a wet suit and look like a seal, the shark’s favorite menu item. It’s not supposed to be working around here, but then neither are a lot of people. It doesn’t need a green card, a damage deposit, or H-1 visa. We climb a hall of heaving ocean and the props flail out of water briefly. You can smell diesel. We have iced bottles of Mexican pilsner, cashews like tiny claws. I fell trying to carry up sandwiches from below. The other player shoots the shark in the brain, shoots out that weird evil eye and fills our sneakers with blood.
I had a beer with the ambitious assistant coach. “I’m tired of just blowing a whistle,” he said. “I’m tired of picking up pucks.”

He’s looking discretely for other positions.

In 3 on 1 drills, I wipe and bang my knee hard. A lump that night. Why always my knee? I can’t sleep, so I limp around with a cold Lowenbrau, Ritz and Oka cheddar on a breadboard, watch Brett Hull shrug and smirk at David Letterman.

“What’s for breakfast?” the Intended asks several hours later. “Dry roasted peanuts, mmm-mmm.”

She’s happy. Her period has started. I can’t sleep. I bring her tea and the paper. Our team is getting better, winning some tight games, the ones we used to give away.

Trailing smoke with flimsy struts and wings tilting each way, Shirt Is Blue touches down his Fokker at John Wayne Airport, leapfrogging down from Canada to visit us and check on his 7-11. I don’t know how he makes it over the mountains. His drunken plane looks ready to break. The prop is visible as it turns, the body like cheesecloth, and the wheels dangle, seeming to belong on a child’s wagon. He seems on some hyper sugar rush. He won’t sleep and he won’t stop drinking. He’s always yelling and knocking glasses over, shouting into the telephone at 3 a.m., slamming cupboards, refusing to sleep. I feel hypocritical saying anything because I’m drinking too, but finally with some regret I tell him to leave. We can’t deal with it.

“Oh yeah, I love hockey,” I told the American friend. This friend used to run numbers in New Jersey.
“I’m surprised,” he says. “How can you justify the violence?”

“You call that violence?” An American taking me to task over violence? I’m still getting over Disneyland’s shoot-out, the holes punched in my car.

Last seconds of the game: we’re down one and have pulled our goalie. They’re bottled up in their own end. I know we’re going to score, put it into OT. Some idiot flips the puck right up into my face, trying to clear the end zone. He cuts my eyebrow. Blood spots the ice as the clock runs out. “Stop the clock,” I’m yelling. “Stop the clock!” The referee, Mr. Potato Head, puts something on my cut.

“Hey what’s that?”

“A tampon.”

“A tampon? You put a tampon on my face?”

“Sure, they’re efficient at soaking up blood. Any first aid course will tell you that.”

Logical or not, I don’t like a tampon on me. I was reminded of John Lennon in LA with Harry Nilsson. Lennon had split up with Yoko Ono. Lennon was misbehaving. The waitress said to Lennon, “Sure, I know who you are. You’re an asshole with a tampon on your head.”

Don’t celebs know how ignorant they sound? Just like Gretzky at Harpo’s: “Don’t you know who I am?” The millionaire trying to save a $3 cover charge. The bouncer made him pay like everyone else.

They did not stop the clock. We did not put it into OT.

Finally we put together a good streak, the happy underdogs winning, and we finish second — but then a
fourth place team knocks us out. They just ran us and it seemed over in a minute. We couldn’t buy a goal. We collapsed, went into shock. What a crappy, frustrating way to end what seemed a decent season, to end what seemed easy, what should have been.

Also two goals against me on one shift. This eats me. Our goalie let both in from the wide side, but if I’d stopped the guy there’d have been no shot, bad angle or not. I play three good games sick. I get better and have a rotten game. The worst part is, we had a real chance versus the number one team. We know we could have taken them. The fluky fourth place team will get slaughtered. Our club’s GM says to the reporters, “We’re looking for some young, mobile defencemen.” That doesn’t sound like me. I can take a hint. Europe may be next. Better beer at least. The wild colonial boys spinning back to haunt them, to rattle a few bones and mangle their verbs.

Neon phones next.

“You could pick up a small boatload,” he says. “Easy,” he says, “No risk. Absolutely.”

“I want nothing to do with it okay. Nothing to do with me. I’m a dumb jock, an amateur deckhand, understood?”

“Hey no problem. Just don’t come crying to me when I’m flush and you’re out in the rhubarb. Just don’t look a gift bird in the mouth.”

“Rhubarb? Bird in the mouth? What the hell are you talking about? Are the cops after you?”

“The cops? The cops are probably in on it. One of them OD-ed in the parking lot by the Royal. Some of them don’t get out of bed without a little something, a little juice, a little pick-me-up.”

“No way.”
“Yes way. That French guy and his partner. Mr. Shakedown? Thumbs in the pie.”

“Gotta go. Up early tomorrow.”

“Think about it, OK old sport?”

“OK. I gotta go, though. OK. Sure. OK.”

From a distance the line of white surf seems static, a neat trim of lace frozen around the whole continent. Wash, dress, be brief in prayers, for we fish at dawn for insane yellowfin tuna — Wahoos, they call them. One guy tosses a beer can and the crazy fish play volleyball with it — bop, bop, bop — three different yellowfin hitting it, keeping the gold and silver can between the sky and sea. Finally they miss, but none of us can believe what we’ve seen, this wild talent to juggle our flotsam, our shining discards, this ability to connect. Later in the day, the sky and water push more light than the pierced human eye can hope to possess. The light is beautiful and painful. My nose is burning.

I think of my father’s not wanting help, their radiation, their machined light. Gulls touch base with us, patient, wheeling in light, hoping for entrails and a chance to scream. The tide’s ancient noise. The tides are strong and our lines are so thin. And I’m catching nothing. I’m not pulling my weight in the loaves and fishes department. My Intended snags a big, seagoing bass, diving the hook just in front of the streamlined flesh, the compact body and mouth. She connects the dots and she is rewarded with the desired pairing; that much is simple. One swims away while another wants the hook. No random meeting is without its consequences, its altering of innocent cells. Why seek a lesson? The fish’s silver skin shakes and
alters in our hands. Waitress X has an African ring. My Intended’s fingers have no rings, but the scales from the bass place themselves like jewels on her singlet, on her shoulders. We’re out in a radiant sea and it won’t stop moving. *A challenge is near.* That last fortune cookie . . . . I test my porous memory. In whose hands was it broken?