

## ONE MORE FAMILY HOCKEY TRIP

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(1) A burning wind whistled through the pine trees on the shore of the lake and I held my breath, waiting for its assault. The blast hit me before I could turn my head, and it set my face on fire again. Michael was gliding down my side of the boards, his smoky breath trailing him. I backpedaled quickly and then slowed down, waiting for him. Would he try to go around me or pass into the middle? His well-trained eyes weren't giving any clues, but seemed to look through me, as if I weren't there. His gloveless hands looked hard and brittle, like dry twigs in an August drought. Finally, he reached me, and our sticks slapped together in our battle for the puck. This duel ended in a draw as the puck flew over the boards and buried itself in a snow bank, bringing a temporary cease-fire.

(2) This was the third day of the war, and the battleground looked nothing like it had on the first day. The smooth, shiny glass was replaced by a battle-scarred surface with all the smoothness of a gravel road. Two ominous cracks, twisting across the length of the ice, were like tree trunks with dozens of other smaller cracks branching out from them in every direction. Tiny chips of ice blanketed the rink, hiding many of the cracks until they were found by a skate blade. The boards, two-by-fours eight feet long with notches cut out of each end to fit them together, were warped and wrinkled with age. The last three days had taken their toll, and many notches were broken by falling bodies slamming into them, leaving gaps in the wall where snow forced its way in. Other boards lay on their sides, still holding their position but losing the battle with the snow. Several shovels and hockey sticks stood motionless in the snow banks around the rink, waiting their turn to be used. In the meantime they were used as coat hangers for anyone who got a little too hot. Other sticks, falling during the course of the game, also stood like so many silent spectators, waiting to become firewood when this last battle finally ended.

(3) The sky was perfectly clear, light blue, as it often is during bitterly cold weather, and the sun reflecting off the snow made it impossible to look out at the ice fishermen without squinting. I looked at the others and wondered if they were as tired as I was. Nobody said a word during the break. The only sounds, except for the wind, were an occasional snuffle or grunt and the crisp, grinding sound of metal on rough ice, as my Uncle Carl slowly worked his way around the boards to keep warm. Hidden beneath a tent-like red coat, my father paused from putting a board back in place to knock off an icicle that had grown on his beard. My older brother used the time-out to put some snow over a bloodstained rip in his sweat pants. Wearing nothing but a T-shirt and a pair of jeans, my Uncle John stood with his head tilted back and

eyes closed, trying to catch his breath. His right hand was locked tightly to his battle-scarred KOHO as if it were a permanent extension of his arm. When the wind died down, steam would rise off the heads and shoulders of each sweat-soaked body, and the hum of snowmobiles would be heard from somewhere across the lake. Sunshine lay curled up into a golden ball outside the rink, trying to bite snow balls out from between the pads of her feet, refusing, like the rest of us, to be the first to call it quits and go in.

(4) Someone found the puck and the battle continued--well into its third hour now, with windchills of thirty below zero. The score had been forgotten long ago; it was no longer important. Still the end wasn't in sight. We had only one assurance that this match would ever end: hockey pucks are black and the sun goes down early in January. Finally, a hard slapshot caught my cousin on the side of the skate, immediately waking up his foot, which had long ago been put to sleep by the cold. The pain of getting a puck on a frozen foot was all too familiar to the rest of us, so no one complained when he said he was taking it in. Someone suggested that the game was about over and there was general mumbling of agreement. One by one we stepped over the battered boards and headed for the shore, with both the sun and the wind at our backs. We could take the rink down later. There was a warm fire, cheese, sausage and plenty of beer and pop to drink back at the cottage. Another family hockey trip was almost over.