Hockey nights:

The tough skate through junior-league life

By Guy Lawson


In September the streets of Flin Flon, Manitoba, are deserted at twilight. The town has no bookshop, no record store, no movie theater, no pool hall. Main Street is a three-block strip of banks, video shops, and Bargain! outlets. The 825-foot smokestack of the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company rises from one end of the street, and the Precambrian shield stretches out from the other. In the Royal Hotel, gamblers forlornly drop quarters into the video slot machines. Farther up the street at the Flin Flon Hotel, the front door has been broken in a fight, and inside strangers are met by suspicious glances from miners wearing baseball caps with slogans like YA WANNA GO? and T-shirts that read, with the letters increasingly blurry, DRINK, DRANK, DRUNK. Susie, who works behind the counter at the Donut King, says a major shipment of LSD has arrived in town and half the students at the local high school, Hapnot Collegiate, have been stoned out of their minds for weeks.

Described by Canada: The Rough Guide as an “ugly blotch on a barren rocky landscape,” Flin Flon, population 7,500, straddles the border between Manitoba and Saskatchewan, 90 miles north of its nearest neighbor, The Pas, 500 miles up from Winnipeg, and a thirteen-hour drive due north of Minot, North Dakota. In this part of the
world, Flin Flon is literally the end of the line: the two-lane highway that connects it to the rest of North America circles the perimeter of town and then, as if shocked to its senses, rejoins itself and hightails it back south.

But Flin Flon is also the heartland of Canada’s national game. In a country where every settlement of consequence has a hockey arena and a representative team made up of players twenty years old and younger, the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League is one of the grandest, oldest competitions. And Flin Flon is one of the grandest, oldest hockey towns. I had played hockey in towns like Flin Flon—in a league one level below the juniors—before I went to college. Many of my teammates had gone on to play junior hockey; some became professionals.

One hot day in August, seventeen years after I’d left western Canada, I flew north, arriving from Toronto in a twin-prop plane, to spend the first month of the new season with Flin Flon’s junior hockey team. Hockey, as I remembered it from my own teams, was an untold story. It was also the path I had chosen not to take.

At the airport, I was greeted by the Flin Flon Junior Bombers’ coach and general manager. Razor (like everyone else in hockey, he goes by a nickname) was in his early forties, solidly built, with a deep, raspy voice and the confident, slightly pigeon-toed stride of a former athlete. He had grown up in Flin Flon and had been a defenseman for the Bombers.

He had gone on to play a long career in minor-league professional hockey as well as some games—“a cup of coffee here, a cup of coffee there”—with the Boston Bruins in the National Hockey League. As we drove into town, Razor told me that the previous year, his first full season as coach, the Bombers had finished with the second-worst record in the SJHL’s northern division. This year, he said, was going to be different. He had big tough forwards, speed, and two of the best goalies in the league.

A blast of cold air hit me as I walked out of the 90-degree heat and into the Whitney Forum’s simulated winter for the first time. Meeks, a veteran Bomber left-winger, was alone on the ice practicing his signature trick: tilt the puck on its side with the stick, sweep it up, then nonchalantly cradle it on the blade. Lean and large and slope-shouldered, he was one of the toughest players in the league. As he left the ice, I heard him say to Hildy, the team trainer, “Tell Razor I’m not fighting this year. This is my last year of hockey, and I’m not missing any games.” He was twenty years old. He had sat out a third of last season because he had broken his hand twice in fights. His thumb was still out of place, the joint distended and gnarled.

In the Bombers’ dressing room, Meeks’s sticks were piled next to his locker stall, the shafts wrapped in white tape and covered with messages to himself written in black Magic Marker. One note read MEGHAN, the name of his girlfriend; another said HOCKEY GOD; and a third, WHAT TO DO? While he took off his shoulder pads and
loosened his skates, other players, hometown kids like Meeks or early arrivals from out of town returning from last season’s team, drifted in. Boys with peach fuzz and pimples—Rodge, Quinny, Woody, Airsy, Skulls, Dodger—they seemed to transform into men as they pulled on their pads and laced up their skates. I went to the stands to watch them play.

The Forum is a squat, dark, tin-roofed building on the shores of what used to be Lake Flin Flon but is now a drained and arid wasteland of tailings from HBM&S’s smelter. Dozens of tasseled maroon-and-white championship banners hang from the rafters. Photographs of nearly every Flin Flon Bomber team since the 1920s look down from the walls. And there is a pasty-faced portrait of Queen Elizabeth in her tiara at the rink’s north end,

With no coaches and no fans, nobody but me around, the rink echoed with hoots and laughter. Scrub hockey, like school-yard basketball, is a free-form improvisation on the structures and cadences of the real game. Passes were made between legs and behind backs. The puck dipsv-doodled and dangled, preternaturally joined to the stick, the hand, the arm, the whole body, as players deked left, then right, and buried a shot in the top corner of the net. In those moments, the Forum seemed an uncomplicated place where the game was played purely for its own sake: Le hockey pour el hockey.

The Bombers, like virtually every team in the SJHL, are owned by the community; the team’s president and board of directors are elected officials, like the mayor and the town council; and the team is financed by bingo nights, raffles, and local business sponsorship. HBM&S once gave the Bombers jobs at the mine—with light duties, time off to practice, and full pay even when the team was on the road, an arrangement that was a powerful recruiting tool for prairie farm boys—but these days there are no jobs at HBM&S and there’s little part-time work in town. Some of the players do odd jobs to earn spending money. Like junior-hockey players across Canada, most Bombers move away from home by the time they’re sixteen. Long road trips, practices, and team meetings leave little time for anything but hockey. For decades, players were expected either to quit school or slack their way through it; now the Junior A leagues advertise hockey as the path to a college scholarship in the United States.

The Bombers’ training camp began the morning after my arrival. Eighty-four teenagers turned up for tryouts at the Forum, most driven from prairie towns across western Canada by their fathers. Razor, dressed in a Bombers’ track suit, maroon with slashes of white and black, positioned himself at center ice. His seventy-three-year-old father, Wild Bill, stood in the broadcast booth above, scouting the players. When Razor blew his whistle, the hopefuls skated at full speed; when Razor blew the whistle again, they slowed to a coast. At the scrimmages that weekend, Flin Flonners drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups wandered in and out of the arena, their ebb and flow marking the beginning and end of shifts at HBM&S. Like contestants in a beauty pageant, the players had only a fleeting chance to catch the eye of Razor and his coaching staff; unlike beauty contestants, these
hopefuls were allowed full body contact and fights. Three, six, eleven—I lost count. The fights seemed to come out of nowhere, with nothing that could sanely be described as provocation but, for all that, with a certain unity of form: the stare-off, the twitching of a gloved hand, and the unmistakable message “Ya wanna go?” Then, striptease-like, the stick was dropped, gloves fell, elbow pads were thrown aside, helmets were taken off—a bravura gesture shunning any effete protection—and two players circled each other, fists cocked.

On Saturday morning, Sides arrived in Flin Flon from Moose Jaw. He was seventeen, skinny, shy; he wore a Christian Athlete Hockey Camps windbreaker. Razor and Wild Bill were excited that Sides, a late cut by the Warriors of the elite Western Hockey League, was in town. Rodge and Meeks, twenty-year-old veterans and leaders on the team, had heard about Sides, too, and decided to put the rookie arriviste to the test. Sides had played only a couple of shifts in an intrasquad match before Meeks was yammering at him, challenging him to a fight. Looking both terrified and afraid to look terrified, Sides skated away from Meeks. “Leave him alone,” Razor called down from the press box. “Keep in touch with yourself.”

“Meeks isn’t the right guy. He’s too good a fighter,” Razor said to me. “We’ll send someone else, and if the kid answers the bell and stands up for himself, he’ll be accepted by the team. If he doesn’t, we’ll go from there.” Sides scored three goals that session. The next afternoon he fought Ferlie, a man-child six inches shorter than Sides but an absurdly eager and able fighter. Skate-to-skate, lefts and rights were thrown in flurries. Sides’s head bounced off the Plexiglas as he and Ferlie wrestled each other to the ice. The players on the benches stood and slapped their sticks against the boards in applause. Sides and Ferlie checked their lips for blood, shook hands, exchanged a grin.

Northern Exposure—An Exciting Kickoff Tournament of Junior A Hockey started the following Friday when the Bombers played the North Battleford North Stars. A few hundred miners stood along the guardrails, among them Meeks’s father in a T-shirt that said TOUGH SIMBA and featured a lion cub chewing on a piece of steel. The Forum’s southwest corner was dotted with students from Hapnot Collegiate, the boys near the top and the girls closer to the ice. Security guards in Dadson Funeral Home jackets circled the arena. The Bombers skated out to cheers; the crowd stood, baseball caps off; a taped version of “O Canada” played; then, with sudden ferocity, Flin Flon’s preseason hockey began. Players swarmed off the bench, bodies slammed into boards, the puck flew from end to end. Less than two minutes into the game, the North Stars scored on Dodger, the Bombers’ first-string goalie, in a scramble in front of the net. Thirty seconds later, Ferlie was sent off for roughing. Less than ten seconds after that, a teenage girl in the stands was hit in the face by an errant puck; she casually threw the puck back on the ice. Four minutes and ten seconds into the opening period, Dodger let in a second goal, a wrist shot from the top of the slot. During the playoffs the previous season, Dodger had made sixty-two saves in an overtime loss in Watrous, a feat his teammates spoke of with hushed awe, but today Dodger couldn’t stop a thing. Two minutes and fifty-three seconds later Meeks
got a penalty for slashing. Fourteen seconds later Rodge scored for Flin Flon. Air horns sounded and Bachman-Turner Overdrive’s “Takin’ Care of Business” blared over the speakers. And on it went: sticks whacked across legs, gloves rubbed into faces after the whistle, the game a relentless, Hobbesian cartoon of retaliation, misconduct, inciting misconduct, and gross misconduct. Rodge, the most gifted player on the Bombers, stopped on the way to the dressing room at the end of the first period to sign autographs for children calling out his name. “It’s a Gong Show out there,” he said to me. “It’s always the same in exhibition season.”

Between periods, I followed a crowd to the bar in the curling club next door to the arena. A dozen men were sitting at a table drinking rye whiskey. What did they think of their team this year? I asked. “Pussies,” they said. What did they think of Razor? “Pussy.” A former Bomber, slurring drunk, reminisced about his glory days—when Flin Flon, he boasted, was the toughest town anywhere. Picking up on the theme, a burly man who called himself Big Eyes and whose son had captained the Bombers a few years earlier, told a story about an all-you-can-eat-and-drink charity fund-raiser a few years back at which a brawl broke out. Big Eyes couldn’t remember why or how the fight started; he did remember, he said with a glint in his eye, that the raffle tickets he was supposed to sell the next morning were covered in blood.

I stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. Aurora borealis was out in the northern sky. A few feet away a little boy pushed another little boy onto the gravel in the parking lot. “Faggot,” he said. The other little boy got to his feet and shoved back: “Faggot.”

In the gazebo in front of Razor’s cottage near Amisk Lake a few miles out of Flin Flon, the swarming mosquitoes and no-see-ums kept out by the screen, a red cooler stocked with beer, steaks ready for the barbecue, Razor and Wild Bill and the assistant coaches held a long debate, complete with diagrams, about the dressing room: Who should sit where? Who had earned a prime spot? Who needed to be sent a message? There was also the matter of the tampering dispute with the Opaskwayak Cree Nation Blizzard of The Pas, who, Razor said, had had a Bomber player practice with their team. In compensation, Razor angrily had demanded $30,000 and the big defenseman or two he needed to round out his roster; the Blizzard were offering a forward they had imported from Sweden. The merits of a player from Thunder Bay on the verge of making the team were also discussed: he had the quickness to wrong-foot the defense, but he had a long mane of coiffed blond hair and wore an earring off the ice.

Razor wanted the Bombers to attack. On offense, in the grand banal tradition of Canadian hockey, the Bombers would “dump and chase”: shoot the puck into the opposition’s end, skate like hell after it, then crash bodies and hope to create a scoring chance. On defense they would “build a house”: each player would be a pillar, spreading to the four corners of the defense zone, supporting one another, and moving the foundations of the house as one. Razor’s team would forgo the flourishes of brilliance, the graceful swoop across the blue line, the geometrically improbable pass, the inspired end-to-end rush. They would
play the man, not the puck. They would play what Razor called “ugly hockey.” “You’ve got to play with balls, big balls,” Razor had told the Bombers in the dressing room between periods in one of the Northern Exposure games. “Look at yourself in the mirror before you go back on the ice. Look in the mirror and ask yourself if you’ve got balls.”

The Bomber players were very good, but two or three ingredients short of the strange brew that makes a professional athlete. Rodge lacked all-consuming desire. Woody was too thin, Quinny too plump, Reags too small. Meeks and Dodger were not dexterous enough in handling the puck. When I skated with them at morning practices, though, instead of seeing what they weren’t, I saw what they were. They were fast and skilled and courageous: Rodge, with a low center of gravity, calm and anticipating the play; Woody grinning as he flew smoothly past a stumbling defenseman; Quinny letting go a slap shot and boom, a split second later, there’s the satisfying report from the wooden boards; Dodger flicking a glove hand out to stop a wrist shot; Meeks trundling down the wing like a locomotive, upright, his legs spread wide, his face blank with pure joy.

Scrimmaging with the Bombers, the pace and sway of the game came back to me. Watching out for me—”Heads up, Scoop,” “Man on, Scoop”—the Bombers hurled one another into the boards with abandon, the arena sounding with the explosive thud of compressed plastic colliding with compressed plastic. The speed of the game reduces the rink to the size of a basketball court. Things that are impossible to do on your feet—go twenty miles an hour, glide, turn on a dime—become possible. The body and mind are acutely aware of physical detail and, at the same time, are separated from the earth.

After Northern Exposure, Razor held the year’s first team meeting in the Bombers’ dressing room. Two dozen pairs of high-top sneakers were piled on the mats beside Beastie’s Blades, the skate-sharpening concession next to the dressing room; Razor had recarpeted during the off-season, and no one except Hildy was allowed in without taking off his shoes. This season Razor had also put the team logo—the letter “B” exploding into fragments, a design donated by the company that had supplied HBM&S with its dynamite in the 1930s—on the floor under a two-foot-square piece of Plexiglas, as the Boston Bruins had done with their logo when Razor played for them. The dressing room was a dank cavern at the southeast corner of the arena, rich with the smells of decades of stale sweat. Its ceiling was marked with the autographs of Bombers of seasons past.

In front of their newly assigned stalls, Rodge rubbed Lester’s ear with the blade of his stick and Reags rested his hand on Meeks’s back. Dodger sat in a corner with his head in his hands. In their final game of the Northern Exposure tournament against the Dauphin Kings, with the Bombers trailing 4-1 in the first period, Ferlie had started a line brawl; in an orgiastic outbreak of violence, all the players on the ice had begun to fight at the same time. Now Razor addressed the topic of fighting. Because of the SJHL’s penalty of compulsory ejection from the rest of the game for fighting, Razor said, other teams would send mediocre players out to try and goad Flin Flon’s best players into scraps. “I know things are going to happen out on the ice. It’s the nature of the game,” Razor said as he
paced the room. “But Rodge, Lester, Schultzie, the goal scorers, you can’t fight unless you take an equally talented player with you. If we lose one of our best, we need them to lose one of their best.”

“You told Ferlie to fight against Dauphin,” Rodge said.

“No,” Razor explained, “I didn’t tell Ferlie to fight. We were getting beaten and I said, ‘If you want to start something, now would be a good time.’”

The Bombers all laughed.

Razor turned to Meeks. “Meeks, I don’t want you to fight. The other team plays two inches taller when they don’t have to worry about you. We need the intimidation factor of you out there banging and crashing.” Razor said he wanted to change Meeks’s role. He wanted Meeks to be a grinder, not an enforcer. He wanted Meeks to skate up and down his wing, using his size to open up space on the ice.

At the barbecue in Razor’s gazebo, Meeks had been a topic of concern. The coaches were worried that Meeks was under too much pressure at home. Meeks’s father and brother wanted Meeks to ask for a trade; at practice one morning, Meeks’s father had told me he didn’t think the Bombers had a chance this season because they had too many rookies on the team. Maybe, one of the coaches had suggested, Meeks should move out of his family’s house ten niles out of town and billet with another family in Flin Flon. “I want to give the kid the world,” Razor said. “He deserves it. If I ask him to do anything, he’ll do it. He’s vulnerable, though.”

The rhythms of the hockey season set in quickly: practice at eight in the morning so that the players still in high school could get to class on time, lunch at Subway, long empty afternoons, fund-raising appearances to sell Share of the Wealth and Pic-A-Pot cards to chain-smoking bingo players. Paul Royter, a hypnotist, came to town for a three-night stand at the R. H. Channing Auditorium, and half a dozen Bombers went up onstage to fall under Royter’s spell, which, it turned out, meant lip-synching to Madonna and Garth Brooks. The legal drinking age in Manitoba is eighteen, and most of the players on the team were old enough to go to bars, but Razor had banned the Bombers from Flin Flon’s beverage rooms, a rule he waived only once so that some of the boys could go to a matinee performance by Miss Nude Winnipeg. Nineteen of twenty-three Bombers were not from Flin Flon, and Razor told me that resentful locals would try to beat up the Bombers if they went into a bar.

On the second Saturday in September, Razor lifted the Bombers’ eleven o’clock curfew to let the team watch the final game of the World Cup between Canada and the United States. Late that afternoon, carrying the twelve-pack of pilsner I had been advised to bring along, I went to Ev’s place. Ev was one of the locals playing for Flin Flon, and his parents had taken in Bombers from out of town as billets for years. This season Rodge
and Dodger were staying in Ev’s parents’ basement. With hockey posters and the autographs of the Bombers who had passed through their doors written on the basement walls, Ev’s place was a fantasy land for a teenager living away from home: pool table, beer fridge, a couple of mattresses on the floor beside the furnace, a hot tub on the patio.

At twilight, Bornie, Reags, and I piled into a car and drove past houses, searching for the party. We found that Funk, who had played for Flin Flon a few years ago, was having a shake at his house. Rodge and Woody were sitting on the floor of the den playing a drinking game with Holly, Melanie, and Deanna, the girls who arrived fashionably late for the hockey games and sat slightly apart from the rest of the Hapnot section—the girls whom the players, and the town, called Pucks or Bikes.

“You want to play, Scoop?” Rodge asked me.

I looked down at a salad bowl filled with beer.

“No, no thanks,” I said.

We got back into Bornie’s car and went to Hildy’s billet a few blocks away. More than half the Bombers were there, some sipping Coke, most with a twelve-pack of Molson Canadian or Labatt Blue between their legs. It had been front-page news that in the semifinal match between Russia and America, played in Ottawa, the Canadian crowd had cheered for the Russians and booed the Americans. Now Canada was playing the United States.

“All the guys who treat women with respect are here,” Meeks said as the game started.

“Who’s going to get on the phone and find the chicks?” Schultzie asked.

“Skulls knows where they are,” Ev said.

“I do not,” Skulls said.

“Don’t hold out on us,” Schultzie said.

“I don’t know where they are,” Skulls said. “I swear on hockey.”

The game between Canada and America was played at an astonishing pace. Both teams were dumping and chasing, cycling the puck against the boards, relying as much on muscle and force as on skill. The majority of players in the NHL are Canadian, but because franchises in Quebec and Winnipeg have relocated to major-market cities in the United States in recent years and because the economics of hockey are changing and growing vastly more expensive and lucrative, it is a common complaint that the game is being Americanized. Still, three of the players on the Canadian team had played in the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League, and some of the Americans had played junior
hockey in western Canada as their apprenticeship for the NHL. The SJHL influence on the style of play was obvious. This World Cup game was, in its way, ugly hockey.

“Gretzky sucks,” Skulls said in the middle of the second period. “He’s a pussy.”

“You’re full of shit,” Quinny said. “He’s the greatest player of all time.”

“He’s a floater,” Skulls said. “He doesn’t go into the corners. He’s not a team player.”

Lester turned to Dodger. “That Swede Razor might get from The Pas is gay, eh.”

In the next second Canada scored to take a 2-1 lead. We leapt to our feet and let out a huge cheer. Chief, a big defense man from Patuanak, a Native community in the far north of Saskatchewan, stayed sitting.

“I want the Americans to win,” Chief said. “They’re playing the same way as Canadians and they’re playing better.”

“Yankee lover,” Bornie said.

In the third period the Americans scored to tie the game and then scored again to take the lead. Canada came back with increased desperation. The faces of the Team Canada players were drawn, anxious: Canada’s destiny and national pride were at stake. But the Americans withstood the onslaught. In the dying seconds, a pass came to Wayne Gretzky in front of an open net. Gretzky, so many times the hero, missed the puck as it flitted off the ice and went over his stick. Canada had lost.

“I wouldn’t mind losing to the Russians,” Reags said on the ride back to my apartment. “But not the fucking Americans—always bragging all the time, so cocky. It’s not fair. It’s our game.”

“Fishy fishy in the lake,
Come and bite my piece of bait….

Fishy fishy in the brook,
Come and bite my juicy hook.”
Meeks repeated his good-luck mantra as we trolled for pickerel on the southern shore of Amisk Lake. It was the morning after the Canada-U.S. game, and Razor had organized a team fishing trip. Meeks and I were in a small boat, the outboard motor chugging, a cool breeze creasing the black water. At a Bombers meeting a few days earlier, Razor had announced that Lester would be the captain; Rodge, Airsy, and Woody, the assistant captains. Meeks had hung his head in disappointment. Razor told me he didn’t want to put too much strain on Meeks. “I’m still a leader on this team,” Meeks said to me. During the exhibition season, he had often played doubled up in pain, his face contorted into a grimace. He had, he told me, ulcerative colitis, an extremely painful stomach disease brought on by stress, and he had forgotten to take his medication. He had moved out of his family’s home and was living in town now with Reags’s family.

I asked Meeks what it was like growing up in Flin Flon. “It was different,” he said. “There were a lot of rock fights. Guys’d get hit in the head all the time. Once you got hit, everyone would come running and start apologizing. It was a good time.”

When Meeks was thirteen, his father and brother had taught him how to fight in the garage after school. “I’d put the hockey helmet on, and they’d show me how to pull the jersey over a guy’s head, to keep your head up, when to switch hands.” Listening to Meeks, I couldn’t help but remember when I was thirteen. My father had made it a rule that if I fought in a hockey game he would not allow me to keep playing. The first time he missed a game, I fought. After the game, the father of the player I fought tried to attack me. The fathers of my teammates had to escort me from the arena. It was terrifying.

A few of the Bombers had told me about the present that Meeks’s older brother—a giant of a man and an ex-Bomber, with 30 points and 390 penalty minutes in one season—had given Meeks for his eighteenth birthday: a beating. “Yeah, he did, Scoop,” Meeks said sheepishly. “My brother would say, ‘I can’t wait until you turn eighteen, because I’m going to lay a licking on you.’ The day of my birthday he saw me and started coming after me. I grabbed a hockey stick and started swinging, nailing him in the back, just cracking him. It didn’t even faze him. Next thing you know, my jersey’s over my head and he’s beating the crap out of me. My mom and one of my brother’s friends hopped in and broke her up.”

“Why did your brother do that?” I asked.

Meeks shrugged. “I turned eighteen.”

He expertly teased his line. “I just want to turn into a professional fisherman,” he said. “Stay out on the water and think about life.”

Most days Dodger wandered the parking lots and streets of Flin Flon in search of empty pop cans, nonrefundable in Manitoba but worth a nickel across the border in
Saskatchewan. Because his billet at Ev’s place was at the other end of town, Dodger had taken to storing his jumbo plastic bags filled with crushed cans in the front yard of the apartment I had rented for the month. During training camp I had met Dodger’s father, an anxious, eager-to-please man. “He’s hard on himself,” Dodger’s father said of his son. “I tell him to relax, let life take its part.”

Dodger, like many goalies, was probably the most skilled athlete on the team, agile and fast and alert. He was in his fourth season in the SJHL but had played poorly in the exhibition games and practices. He had let in soft goals and had even pulled himself from a game against the Nipawin Hawks after they had scored six times by the beginning of the second period. He had seemed to disappear into his equipment, his face hidden behind his mask, and the slow, ponderous way he had of moving off the ice had been replaced by nervous twitching. It is a hockey cliché that goalies, who stand alone in their net, are the game’s eccentrics, and Dodger, who would sit quietly staring at the floor in team meetings and didn’t much go for “the rah-rah and all that,” was allowed that latitude. Still, Don, one of Razor’s assistant coaches, was angry that Dodger wasn’t taking the games seriously enough. “He’s going around saying it’s only exhibition season. I don’t like that. That kid’s got to be focused from day one.”

But there was a reason for Dodger’s lack of focus. “I’ve got a real story for you, Scoop,” he said to me one morning after practice. “It’s got nothing to do with hockey, though.” Dodger’s real story, the one that had been playing on his mind constantly, and which he told me in pieces over a few days when I passed the time helping him look for pop cans, began the Easter weekend of 1995, when Dodger was back home in Regina, Saskatchewan. He and Al, his best friend and an old hockey buddy, had been on a jag, hitting bars, going to parties, the same sort of things I did when I was around his age and living in the same city. On Sunday night, after drinking beer and Southern Comfort in the parking lot beside a hockey arena, Dodger was too ill to carry on. Al borrowed Dodger’s fleece hockey jacket, took Dodger’s bottle of Southern Comfort, and went downtown with another friend, Steve, to pick up a hooker. Unable to coax a prostitute into the car, Al hid in the trunk until they found a woman willing to get in with Steve. She was a Saulteau woman from the Sakinay Reserve named Pamela Jean George.

“I was watching the news the next night with another friend,” Dodger said, “and a story came on about the murder of Pamela Jean George, and my friend said, ‘Can you keep a secret?’ I go, ‘Sure.’ He goes, ‘They killed her.’” Al and Steve, white boys from the well-to-do south end of the city, both athletes, popular, good-looking, had, according to Dodger’s friend, taken Pamela Jean George to the outskirts of town, where she had given them oral sex. Al and Steve then took her out of the car, brutally beat her, and left her for dead, facedown in a ditch. Al split for British Columbia the next day without saying good-bye to Dodger. Steve stuck around. One week passed. Another week. Dodger was constantly sick to his stomach. He thought it was only a matter of time before they would be caught. He didn’t know about Betty Osborne, a Cree girl from The Pas, who was pulled off the street and killed by local white boys in 1971. In Betty Osborne’s case, the open secret of who had done it was kept for nearly sixteen years until, at last, in 1987, three men were charged and one was convicted of second-degree murder.
Finally, with no news of the investigation and the growing prospect that Al and Steve would never be caught, Dodger felt that he was going to crack. At a friend’s wedding reception, he told someone who he knew would tell the police. A couple of days later, while Dodger was watching an NHL playoff game, the police called him. “The cops wouldn’t have had a fucking clue,” Dodger said to me. “They were looking for pimps, prostitutes, lower-class people.” Dodger was, he told me, scheduled to testify against Al and Steve in a few weeks, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate on hockey.

“I’ll tell you what I’m really bitter about: people hinting that it’s all my fault. The guy who told me about it in the first place came up to me at a party and said, ‘I know this may sound harsh, but I’m going to have a tough time feeling sorry for you because I know it got out at the wedding reception.’ And I was like, ‘Who the fuck are you to talk to me? Show a little nuts.’ This guy tries to play the role, like it’s been really tough for him. I heard girls were calling him and saying, ‘I feel so sorry for you, losing your friends. If you need someone to talk to I’m always here.’ If girls called me I’d say, ‘Fuck you. Don’t feel sorry for me, feel sorry for Pamela Jean George.’”

Ever since I had arrived in Flin Flon and had heard about the Pucks and Bikes, I had wanted to meet them. Ev, one of the Bombers who was still going to Hapnot Collegiate, convinced the girls to meet and talk with me at twilight at the Donut King.

“I don’t understand why anyone would write about Flin Flon,” Susie said to me from behind the counter as I waited for the Pucks and Bikes. Because I had no telephone in my apartment, the Donut King had become a kind of makeshift office, and for weeks, with increasing bemusement, Susie had watched me shouting over the howling northern wind into the pay phone in the lobby.

There’s nothing to write about,” she smiled. I asked Susie if she ever went to Bombers’ games. “I went this year to see if any of them were cute,” she said. “They might look okay, but once you get up close they have zits or their teeth are crooked. I guess I went to see them lose, because they suck and I want to see them get killed.”

“Would you date a Bomber?” I asked. “I’m not allowed to,” she said. “My sister says, ‘As if I’m going to let you walk around town and have people say, ‘There’s your Bike sister.’’”

Just then the Bikes pulled up in a blue Mustang and I took my leave of Susie. The car smelled of perfume and tobacco and chewing gum. We drove out to the town dump, where we sat and watched fifteen or so brown and black bears pick through the garbage and stare at the car’s headlights. Holly, who had had a long plume of blonde hair when I had seen her at the Bombers’ games and who now had a pixie haircut—the plume had been hair extensions, it turned out—was the femme fatale of Flin Flon: du Maurier cigarette, bare midriff. She told me that when she was dating Rodge last season her ex-boyfriend, a local she had dumped in favor of Rodge, had jumped up on the Plexiglas at
the end of a game and screamed at Rodge, “I’m going to kill you!” This year, though, Holly said she wasn’t interested in any of the players. “I don’t have a crush. I wish I did. I’m guy crazy like hell, but I’m not even attracted to any of them.”

Deanna, who was driving the car and had a pierced eyebrow, purple hair, and an inner-city hipster’s Adidas sweat top on, allowed she had a crush on one of the Bombers. Melanie, quiet in the back seat with cherry-colored lipstick and a sweater around her waist, told me she had one real crush and another crush she was faking so that an awkward, shy Bomber wouldn’t feel left out.

“The players say we’re Pucks,” Holly said, “but they’re the ones who phone us. We don’t even give them the time of day and they’re asking, ‘What’re you doing tonight? You want to come over?’ Without us they wouldn’t have any friends in Flin Flon.”

The spectacle of the bears began to wear thin. The girls suggested we drive to the sandpit on the other side of what used to be Lake Flin Flon and watch the nightly pouring of the slag at the HBM&S smelter. The slag pouring was a disappointment: a thin line of lava red barely visible against pitch black, steam rising and joining the sulphur dioxide chugging out of the company smokestack. Afterward, over strawberry milkshakes at the A&W, the girls told me about teen culture in Flin Flon: cruising around looking for house parties, driving to hangouts in the forest outside town—the Hoop, the Curve, the Toss Off—lighting a fire and drinking beer until the police chased them. Deanna said, “Flin Flon was in The Guinness Book of World Records for the most beer bought per capita in a weekend, or something like that.”

“I hate rye,” Holly announced. “I get into fights when I drink rye.” She told me about the Boxing Day social last year. “This girl pissed me off, so me and a friend tag-teamed her. My friend slapped her and I threw my drink on her and she started blabbing at me so I grabbed her and kicked her in the head and ripped all her hair out. She was bald when I was done.” The girl had to go to the hospital to have her broken nose set, Holly said, now speaking in quiet tones because she had noticed the girl’s aunt a few tables down from us. “And then she went to the cop shop and filed charges, even though she was four years older than me.”

Melanie and Deanna exchanged a furtive glance. They had never been in a fight; Holly had never lost a fight.

Saturday night was hockey night in Flin Flon. Game-day notices in the store windows along Main Street advertised that evening’s match against the Humboldt Broncos. The night before, in the opening game of the regular season, the Bombers had defeated Humboldt 2-1. Beastie, who drove the tractor that cleans the ice at the Forum, toked on an Old Port cigarillo. “Pretty tame last night,” he said. On the ice, the Stittco Flames were practicing before the main event. A dozen girls, including Razor’s eleven-year-old daughter, who had recently given herself the nickname Maloots, skated lengths of the ice
and worked on passing and shooting the puck. At the end of the session one of the girls dropped her gloves as if she wanted to fight and then, in full hockey uniform, turned and did a graceful lutz.

It had been payday at the company the day before, and 700 fans, nearly a tenth of Flin Flon’s population, came to watch the game. In the Bombers’ dressing room, the players sat and listened to Razor, their foreheads beaded with sweat from the pre-game skate. The new jerseys had arrived, and the pants and gloves the Bombers had bought secondhand from the Peterborough Petes of the elite Ontario Hockey League, the only other team in Canada with maroon-and-white colors, had been passed out. Norm Johnston, the coach of the Broncos, had coached in Flin Flon in the early 1990s, and his teams had a reputation for fighting and intimidation. Razor, in his game attire of shirt and tie, black sports coat, and tan cowboy boots, paced the room and told the Bombers that Johnston would try to set the tone of play but that they should not allow themselves to be provoked. What did Razor want to see from his players? He wrote the homilies on his Coach’s Mate as Bombers called them out rapid-fire:

HARD WORK

INTENSITY

INTELLIGENCE

UGLINESS


“We’re going to own the building,” Razor said. “We’re going to rock the Whitney fucking Forum! We’re going to take the fucking roof off!”

Two and a half minutes into the first period Rodge and Schultzie had scored, and twice “Takin’ Care of business” had played on the loudspeakers. Razor’s ugly hockey had the Broncos disoriented and backing off by half a step. I sat with Meghan and her friends in the Hapnot section as they tried, with little success, to start a wave. Meghan was a senior, a mousy blonde, petite and pretty in a woolly-sweater, Sandra Dee kind of way. She was the laughter of an HBM&S geologist; Meeks was the son of a union man. Most afternoons I would see Meghan and Meeks walking down Main Street holding hands. In the stands, she told me she had never seen Meeks fight. “I didn’t come to the games last year, before we started dating. I tell him not to fight, because he’s not like that. He’s really gentle. He should write on his stick: LOVER NOT A FIGHTER.”

By the second period, the Bombers were leading 4-1 and completely outplaying the Broncos, but the Flin Flon fans had turned on their own team. Johnston, as Razor had predicted, had seen to it that the Broncos were slashing and shoving and trying to pick fights. And the Bombers weren’t fighting back. Humboldt would get penalties, Razor had
told the Bombers, and Flin Flon could take advantage of power plays. “Homo!” Flin Flonners screamed at the Bombers. “Pussy!” Woody, the Bombers’ best defenseman, fell to the ice and covered his head as a Humboldt player tried to pummel him. A minute later, Turkey, another Bomber defenseman, did the same thing, but the referee, who had lost control of the game by now, gave Turkey a penalty anyway. Ev was stuck in the stomach by a Bronco but didn’t retaliate.

“You’re a fucking woman!” Meeks’s older brother shouted at Ev from the railing. In a scrum in front of the Bombers’ net, Meeks was punched in the head, but he, too, followed Razor’s instructions and didn’t fight. It didn’t matter, though: both Meeks and the Bronco got kicked out of the game. Meeks was jeered as he skated off.

A chubby twenty-one-year-old sitting near me, dressed in a leather jacket with the Canadian flag on the sleeve and unwilling to give his name in case the players read this article, explained why he was hurling abuse at Flin Flon: “It’s embarrassing to the fans, to the team, the town. You look at all the banners hanging from the rafters, all the tough guys who have played here. The Bombers should have the balls to drop their gloves.”

In the dressing room between the second and third period, the faces of the Bombers’ coaching staff were pale: Flin Flon was easily winning the game, but they were also, absurdly, losing. The Whitney Forum, territory, pride, tradition, manliness were being attacked. The game was, as Razor had told the Bombers repeatedly, war; it was, in the Clausewitzian sense, the continuation of hockey by other means.

At the start of the third period, after a quick shower, Meeks came and sat with Meghan and me. “I talked to my dad and my brother,” he said. “My brother told me to fight. Fuck him.” Meeks and Meghan held hands as we watched twenty minutes of mega-violence. When number twenty-two for the Broncos skated to center ice and dropped his gloves, challenging someone, anyone, to a fight, Bornie took him on. There was a loud cheer. Lester fought at the drop of the puck. Airsy beat up a Humboldt player and winked to the Hapnot section as he was led to the dressing room for the compulsory penalty. Schultzie ran his fingers through his peroxided hair before he swapped blows with a Bronco.

“People are getting scared to play now,” Meeks said. At the final siren, with both benches nearly empty because of all the players ejected from the game, a Bronco was still chasing Skulls around the ice.

The Bombers’ dressing room was a riot of whoops and hollers. Flin Flon had won the game. Flin Flon had won the fights. “That’s the way a weekend of hockey should be in Flin Flon!” Razor bellowed.

In the midst of the celebration the head of the local Royal Canadian Mounted Police knocked on the door and brought a little redheaded boy with a broken arm in to meet the Bombers. “All right guys, watch the swearing,” Razor said. The tiny Flin Flonner went around and shook the players’ hands.
Six days later, in the middle of a five-night, four-game road trip, the Bombers’ bus barreled south through the narrow rutted back roads of Saskatchewan toward the prairie town of Weyburn. Razor and Wild Bill and Blackie, the radio announcer who broadcast the games back to Flin Flon, sat at the front of the bus, Razor thumbing through the copy of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* that his wife had asked him to pick up while he was on the road. Behind them, the twenty-three Bombers were splayed in their seats. The dress code most of the boys follow for official team functions—shirt and tie, Bombers’ jacket or suit jacket, baseball cap—eased as ties were loosened and gangly limbs stretched across the aisle. It was quiet on the bus; after losing to the Yorkton Terriers in the first game of the trip, Razor had told the team that he wanted them to visualize that night’s upcoming game against the Red Wings. Razor had also told Dodger that he would be the starting goalie for the first time in the regular season. There had been a mistrial in Al and Steve’s case, and Dodger’s testimony had been postponed indefinitely; Razor hoped that, with the pressure off, Dodger would begin to play up to his abilities. A few rows behind Dodger, Meeks leaned his head against the window. He was growing his whiskers in a wild, slanted way, with seemingly random slashes of the razor running across his face. He had had a terrible dream the night before. He couldn’t remember what it was, but it was terrible. And his medication wasn’t working, so his stomach was giving him awful pain.

In the back row of the bus, where I had been assigned a seat, I sat with a few of the players and watched the harvest prairie roll by. “I think it’s brutal if people say you can’t play hockey and be a Christian,” Bornie said to me. “I just watch my mouth, try not to swear, and do my job. If you have to fight, you fight.”

“It’s not up to Christians to judge others for swearing,” said Schrades, the other Bomber goalie. “We don’t judge them for not swearing.”

“They can do whatever the fuck they want,” Ev said.

“You’ll go to hell,” Sides said to Ev. “That’s the truth.”

“Judgment Day is so hypocritical,” Ev said. “Christians are supposed to be forgiving, and then they say anyone who doesn’t believe can’t come into heaven even if they’re a good person.”

“It’s hard not to sin out on the ice,” Airsy said.

“I’ll probably go to heaven,” Schultzie said.

When we arrived in Weyburn and walked into the Colosseum I had a shock of recognition. The last time I had been in the Colosseum was in the late 1970s, just before I “got a letter” offering me a tryout with the Regina Silver Foxes, a now-defunct franchise in the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League. Everything about the Colosseum had seemed
huge then, the stands and ice surface and the red-and-white banners hanging from the rafters. I didn’t want to take road trips and miss school, I had a bad knee, I wanted to drink beer and chase after girls. That’s what I told my teammates, Boner and Dirt and Cement. I had lost touch with them long ago, but I knew they had all gone on to play professional hockey. The real reason I quit playing, though, what I didn’t tell my friends, was that at the time, I had grown to hate hockey. It was in rinks like the Colosseum that I realized I had become, as they would say in Flin Flon, a pussy.

By game time, the Colosseum was nearly full. Many of the people in the stands were parents of Flin Flon players from farms and towns in southern Saskatchewan. Weyburn had won the league championship two of the last three years and had a team stacked with imports from Quebec and northern California and Latvia. When the Bombers skated out to a chorus of boos, Meeks, following his pre-game ritual, went straight to the bench and took off his helmet and gloves and lowered his head and prayed. In minutes the Red Wings were all over the Bombers. Dodger’s play, unlike his nervous, uneven play in the exhibition season, was sensational—diving, sprawling, kicking shots away with his leg pads. On a clean breakaway for Weyburn, Dodger made an acrobatic save. A few seconds later he gloved a slap shot from the point. I stood and whooped. The Bombers began to come back, Rodge swooping past the Weyburn blue line with the puck and taking a wrist shot from ten feet out. Frustrated, the momentum now with Flin Flon, the Red Wings started to hack at the Bombers. With only seconds left in the first period, number seventeen for Weyburn hit Woody in the face with his stick.

In the second period, the score still 0-0, Seventeen skated past Sides and whipped his feet out from underneath him. Called for a penalty, Seventeen shot the puck at the linesman. It was, I thought, a familiar script: ripples become waves and rise rhythmically, climax-like, toward the fight. But then, suddenly and unpredictably, the Red Wings scored three quick goals on Dodger. “Sieve! Sieve!” the crowd taunted Dodger. Meeks skated out to take a shift. The puck was dropped, and Skulls, who was playing center, went into the corner after it. Seventeen followed Skulls and slammed him into the boards. Skulls’s helmet came off, and Seventeen, seemingly twice Skulls’s size, kept shoving, ramming Skulls’s face into the Plexiglas. Across the rink, Meeks had dropped his gloves. He skated toward Seventeen, throwing off his helmet and tossing his elbow pads aside.

Meeks had explained his fighting technique to me back in Flin Flon: “I can’t punch the other guy first,” he said. “That’s why I’ve got a lot of stitches. The other guy always gets the first punch and then I get mad.” Meeks took the first punch from Seventeen square in the jaw. Meeks’s head jerked back. He grabbed Seventeen by the collar and threw a long, looping, overhand right. He pulled Seventeen’s jersey over his head. Another shot, a right jab, an uppercut; switched hands, a combination of lefts. A strange sound came from the audience, a mounting, feverish cry: Seventeen was crumpling, arms flailing, as the linesmen stepped in and separated the two. Meeks waved to his teammates as he was led off the ice by the officials to the screams of the Weyburn fans. The Bombers scored four minutes later. Between periods in the dressing room Razor shook Meeks’s hand.

“Great job.”
Two days later we crossed the border into the United States, heading for Minot, North Dakota, and an encounter with the Top Guns, the only American franchise in the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League. The flat of the prairies became the dun-colored hills and valleys of the North Dakota Badlands; the face of each rise marked by massive stones arranged to spell “Class of 19—” for each year of the past five decades.

Ev, who had never been to the United States before, chanted every thirty seconds, “This is the furthest south I’ve ever been. This is the furthest south I’ve ever been.”

“I don’t like it here,” Rodge said. “It’s too far from home.”

“People aren’t as nice in the States,” Bornie said.

“Look at that shitty little American town,” Lester said as we drove through a roadside village. “It sucks cock compared to a little Canadian town.” Lester and a couple of the Bombers began to hum the Guess Who song “American Woman.”

When we arrived at the All Seasons Arena, Liberace’s version of “Blue Tango” was echoing through the building as the Magic Blades, Minot’s nationally ranked precision skating team, worked on their routine. The rink was in the middle of the fairground, a modern complex, new and brightly lit, with no banners hanging from the rafters and no memorabilia on display. Joey, a Minot player from southern Manitoba and a friend of Meeks and Woody and Ferlie, joked with the Bombers before the game. “They play the American anthem,” Joey said, “and we have to stand there and listen, and we’re, like, we couldn’t give a shit.”

For local high school hockey games, one of the Magic Blades told me, the place was packed with more than 3,000 fans, the crowd led by cheerleaders with pom-poms and fight songs, but only 452 turned up to watch the Bombers and the Top Guns.

“Let’s get ready to rumble!” the announcer yelled over the loudspeaker as the Top Guns and Bombers skated out for the game.

In the stands, eating french fries covered with ketchup and vinegar, Meeks told me about the Weyburn game and his fight. He showed me his hands. The knuckles were badly swollen and cut. “Seventeen stuck Woody in the face in the first period,” he said. “I wasn’t on the ice then, but the whole game he was slashing and punching people, going after Sides and Skulls. Between periods, Razor came into the room and said to wait until the third period and someone’s going to take care of Seventeen. He looked at me but he didn’t say anything. I knew my role. I’d be the one taking care of it.”

Meeks couldn’t play and wasn’t sure when he would be able to play again.
“I called Meghan and told her I broke my hand,” he said. “She said, ‘You did not.’ I said I did, I had to fight. She said I shouldn’t fight. She said that I always have a choice.”

There was a long silence. On the first day of the road trip, less than an hour out of Flin Flon, Meeks had asked me how to write a love poem. Should it rhyme? he asked. What should a love poem say? For almost a week he had scribbled notes in the blue spiral notebook that he used to write to Meghan. For now, though, Meeks had given up on writing poetry; he could barely bend his fingers, and he thought his thumb was dislocated again.

After the game, driving through the fairground, it was quiet on the Bombers’ bus. The Bombers had played four games on the road and had lost four very close games. Cokes and the chocolate chip cookies Sides’s mother had baked for the team were passed around. Ahead there was a thirteen-hour ride north through the ancient rock of the Pre-Cambrian shield, through swales of muskeg, endless stands of jack pine and spruce and trembling aspen, the bus swerving occasionally to miss caribou and wolves that had strayed onto the road.

The next day, before I left Flin Flon, I went to skate with the Bombers one last time. At the Forum, Beastie told me about Blackie’s broadcast of Meeks’s fight in Weyburn. “Blackie pretty near creamed his jeans,” Beastie said. “He’s describing the bout, all the shots Meeks is getting in, and he’s yelling, ‘There’s a good old home-town Bomber beating!’”

In the dressing room, Reags came and sat beside me. He was upset that I was leaving with the Bombers on a losing skid. I should stay until Friday, he said, when they were sure to defeat the Melville Millionaires. I pulled on my jock pad, shin pads, shoulder pads, elbow pads, jersey, wrapped tape around pads, and fastened Velcro tags—a sequence I had repeated since I was scarcely old enough for kindergarten. I tightened the laces of my skates and stood and walked out of the Bombers’ dressing room, past a sign with one of those sports cliches on it—it’s more than a game—and glided onto a clean sheet of ice, the smack of pucks against the boards echoing around the empty stands.

After I left town, Flin Flon would suffer another losing streak, and, after a dispute with the team’s board of directors over trading Schultzie for a defenseman, Razor would be fired. Dodger would testify against Al and Steve in the murder trial. The killers, relying for their defense on their intoxication and diminished responsibility, would be convicted of manslaughter and given sentences of six and a half years each, with parole possible in only three and a half years. Dodger would be traded to a team in another junior league. The Bombers’ new coach would ask Meeks to fight all the time; Meeks would lose confidence and would have a screaming argument with the coach. Two games before the end of the season, he would get kicked off the team. He would not be allowed in the team photograph. The Bombers would finish last in their division.
On my last day in Flin Flon, after practice, Dodger stopped by my place to pick up the enormous plastic bags filled with crushed pop cans that he had collected in the past month. As he gathered his cans from the yard, Dodger showed me the letter he had drafted to send to Harvard, Brown, Cornell, and a bunch of other American schools, to inquire about playing for them next season. It was still September, but it had snowed in Flin Flon and the cold of the coming winter was in the air. Shifts were changing at the company, and Main Street was lined with pickup trucks. Dodger zipped up his fleece Bombers’ jacket. Maybe he would try to play professionally in Europe, he said. He was in his final year of eligibility for junior hockey, but he wanted to keep playing.
Take a look at all the highlights from Telford Tigers' clash with London Raiders in the National Ice Hockey League. Game played on 15/03/20.

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