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THE ROAD JOURNAL OF THE DEAF DEFENCEMAN

HEIDI IS UNLIKELY TO QUIT and even less likely to make me talk about what just happened. If she surprises me, where would I start my story? Unable to get a line on the beginning, I could only start near the end, which was yesterday morning, with the tenth and final boy to arrive at our latest camp.

“Look,” his mother said.

His pants were soaked but he stood on his tiptoes and beamed at the other boys.

His mother spoke too fast for me to read her thin lips. Her square jaw was set and her bleached curls spring-loaded.

Sam, my new assistant, said, “What did you expect in a skating rink?”

Veins protruded from the woman’s hairline like hay hooked behind the ear. She must have said, “It’s too cold in here.”

I grunted for Heidi and signed. She said, “Yes, it is cold.”

Heidi took the mother to dry her boy. On my crib sheet, I found their names: Ursula Morey and Jarred, who wets his pants in anticipation of an audience and vomits whenever he loses one. I flipped to a blank page and wrote: Never challenge their stories. I elbowed Sam and tapped my clipboard with its pen.

Parents put their boys in our gear. Those new to the sport made mistakes: a shin pad strapped to the wrong leg; an elbow pad slid on upside down. Some parents also find hockey equipment hard to strip from their sons so we accompany them when taking theirs from the ice to the washroom, but I have a rule: only Heidi can be alone with the boys or lay a hand on their bodies. Sam tried to explain each equipment fix and I pointed to the solutions. When the last boy—Jarred again—was ready, we gave our opening talks.

Sam started with a definition of his autism that included the word cognitive. I tugged my ear, signalling that he should listen to the instruc-

tion I had given him, which was to tell his best story. His father posed as a trainer—tying skates and taping sticks—to get on the bench where he could help Sam. During a small-town tournament, the zamboni died, the owner of the hardware store fetched shovels, and the coaches lined the players shoulder to shoulder on the goal line. Their slow skate straight ahead worked until one kid launched his snow. Boys flung shovelfuls while Sam sat and hugged his knees. Two loads were dumped on his head before his dad carried him off the ice. Sam said, “I regret never going back.”

Parents nodded, palmed their sons’ shoulders, and turned to me.

Almost all of them remember the articles with which it was easy for me to play along—I was even paid to write a road journal. Since then, I have been unable to convince people that I’m anything other than that handicapped boy who persisted despite underdog odds—a young man stoic and strong and, at the same time, kind.

My talk started with the fact I played in my hometown of Swift Current for the Broncos. A friend made the NHL: Kyle Doozer. Heidi and I waited for the boys to settle again and then shared that what I loved most was the wind on my face during warm up laps, which was made better, or so we claimed to please the parents, by my being deaf to the loudspeaker and crowd. Heidi’s lips stopped before my hands: we knew each other’s stories and we let them stand. Earlier, when I answered her question, saying I hadn’t called home for lack of a text telephone, she knew not to offer to make the call.

On the ice, Chicken Legs, with his cerebral palsy and badly bowed ankles, took an early fall. The Professor lifted his feet, as if walking. I taught them all to crouch, lean forward, even lean on their sticks. Heidi got push-chairs for Out-to-Lunch and The Slug, both of whom still struggled to stay on their skates.

The goal of these camps has been to mimic hockey, giving parents a brief, squinty glimpse of children who justify how they talk about their families. We have catered to people like Ursula, whose nose was pressed to the glass. Each time her breath fogged her view of Jarred, she shuffled a step—on pace to do more laps than her son.

Sam was to learn by watching me and listening to Heidi as we taught the boys, starting with how to turn, around and around the face-off circles. Jarred didn’t need to exaggerate each crossover. Arrow Face, who bumped into the back of Lead Licker, should have slowed down. Heidi was breathless with my instructions; while I paused for her benefit, Sam and Twitchy,

another boy my crib sheet noted wet himself, left the ice. After a few strides, I stepped through the gate, jogged down the hall, and touched Sam's shoulder.

"He has to urinate."

I tugged me ear. I wrote: Never do what you're about to do. It's my only rule.

"If the parent isn't around or asks for help in the washroom or—"

Anything like that, get Heidi. You and me, we don't even use these washrooms. We use the official's room.

Sam dropped Twitchy's hand and handed the boy back his glove.

When I was eighteen and first playing for the Broncos I was among the players sent to the elementary school to claim we read books and sell some tickets and t-shirts. I slipped away to take a piss and, unable to hear the teacher call or her heels hit the fluorescent-glare tile, I was down the hall and facing the BOYS door before a hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around to lips stammering about adult visitors and the staff washroom. I get it now. Graham James, the paedophile, coached in Swift Current; around the same time, two Broncos raped a girl with learning disabilities. Though these things happened fifteen years before I was old enough to follow such news and play for the team, I have thought of them non-stop since leaving home and starting these hockey camps, since Doozer raped my sister or my sister said he did.

To end the first day, we let the boys scrimmage. Sam crouched, dragged a leg, and pumped an arm and fist. Jarred scored and Sam was showing him how to celebrate in the style of Gretzky, 1985. Jarred skated to the corner and threw himself against the boards in a more modern boast but fell on his ass. Ursula ran to the gate. Some of the boys laughed with heads high and back. Other boys, imitators, skated toward the boards. Chicken Legs glided in with his ankles torqued, bum out, and back bent; he must have hit first with his knees and then flattened his face against the glass because he stuck before sliding into a heap.

Most of the parents stood and shouted to stop their boys from trying that stunt. I shouted, too: "Sam." Everyone, including the charging boys, their parents, who had their hands circling their mouths in makeshift megaphones, Ursula, Jarred, who was back on his skates and had taken a bow, and Chicken Legs, who was still crumpled, turned to me and what my teammates, other than Doozer, called my dolphin shriek. Laughter shook

Jarred, Arrow Face, Twitchy, and Windup. Lead Licker, Out-to-Lunch, and The Slug started to cry.

Heidi calmed them while I sat Sam in the penalty box and flipped to a blank page: Downplay competition.

Jarred, The Magic Drool Fountain, The Professor, and Twitchy had to pee before we restarted the scrimmage. Sam removed a glove and reached for a little hand but pulled back. "Find the parents?" he said to me. "Wait outside the door?"

After the scrimmage, and after the parents and boys had gone, I had Sam sort the equipment. Each type of pad has its own bin, which, together, filled the back of the van. "Your stride," Sam said as we finished loading. "Why aren't you in the NHL?"

When the Bronco's goalie covered the puck and an opposing forward poked at his glove, I had to clear that player from the crease or put him on his ass. "Get angry," my mom said. "Let the anger spread." I lacked intensity, imagining the thoughts of the opposing forward or my line mates in that same role at the other end of the ice. My mom said, "Hesitation will cost you a career in the bigs." It cost me that and more.

I never said that I disbelieved my sister's story, but she felt I might as well have since I continued to see Doozer. She sometimes seemed overwhelmed by the force of the reaction she drew from our mom but did nothing to cool that temper. "No loyalty," my mom said to me, "after I froze at all those morning practices?" On what would be my last night at home, my parents watched a movie. When the credits rolled, I walked in and turned off the TV. My legs shook so I sat on the coffee table, where I started to sign. My mom closed her eyes and my dad draped his arm over her shoulders.

We locked the loaded van and drove Sam's car toward the nearest town and bar. The land next the highway was without houses, but somewhere out of sight there were family homes and family restaurants, the kind in which waitresses take Heidi and me to be a couple, and in which Heidi eats cold fries, fearing that sending them back will embarrass the cook.

Sam asked her how she got this job.

Her lips moved in the glass: ringette, a degree in special education, and sign language.

There had been other qualified candidates. I hired Heidi because when I asked if she would grow homesick her round cheeks collapsed, as if sucking pucks.

Later, as we drove, she told me about her fiancé. In the story she told most and told best, they had been on only one date when he won a trip for two to London.

“Going with him was a reckless move an invisible girl rarely gets to choose.”

I signed: Don’t say that, though Heidi is stocky with a full-moon face and translucent eyebrows.

They rode a double-decker bus and photographed one another in Trafalgar square’s swarm of pigeons as though those activities were errands.

“We weren’t connecting.”

Then, at a crosswalk, she looked only one way, which had become the foreign way, and the wrong way. She stepped onto the street and he pulled her from the path of another double-decker bus. They joked about story books in which a life saved is repaid with love or service. They joked until that same afternoon, when he looked the wrong way. She can’t remember if her fingertips brushed the waffled nylon of his windbreaker or if her hand stayed at her side. Heidi knows only that instead of flattening, disappearing under the machine, he rolled up the hood and windshield. The car was gone by the time he fell from the sky. He landed on his feet and looked at her before his legs folded underneath him, as if he were packing to go home.

All the other stories she told were from the following year during which he needed her to push his wheelchair. I asked and she said five years had past, and, yes, he can walk again. I knew to offer only congratulations on their engagement.

Our burgers came. Heidi took several big bites and then broke to call her fiancé. For Sam, I tapped my watch and rolled my eyes but his focus stayed on his tower of cream containers.

Waitresses wove between the tables like players between pylons. The youngest had Russian cheekbones, rocket tits, and Gordie Howe elbows. My fantasy was that at closing time she would walk from the kitchen to find me waiting. Her sharp face and features would fall and soften, as if she were looking at her family room after a long trip. We would drive to the grocery store and then her apartment, where I would cook and watch her eat.

When this waitress walked near our table, I scratched a napkin with my pen: You surviving? Her face was as neutral as a clock, which must have been what she eyed behind me. I tapped my glass, pointed at Sam, who shook his head, and then wrote again on the shredded napkin: Fries. They arrived at the same time as Heidi. I placed the basket by her plate and she started

to cry. I signed: I get it—you like them cold. She palmed her face but could not hide her shaking shoulders. Though she could not see, I signed: Sorry.

Back here at the motel, we stood in separate streams of light from bulbs above our separate doors. Sam asked me if he did okay. Heidi slipped her key inside her lock. Sam said, “The kids benefited from today.”

In bed, I held my cock, which grew hard as I thought of Heidi’s strong thighs. I stroked and was soon as close as I had been since leaving home but had to stop. My fantasies had again been outplayed by a sudden vision merging my sister’s story with Doozer’s.

Her princess-pink-covered childhood bed was made instead with my parents’ too-big, wine-coloured spread. She lied on her back. Doozer wanted to be behind her but it was her first time and asking would have given her cause to change her mind. She said, “We’re in the south of France, in a field, under the stars.” They were married and his hockey money had bought a staffed vineyard. Doozer thought of Europe, where the hockey is shapeless like shinny, but there are interesting women. “We can pretend,” he said. “No,” she said. “We are.”

When we first arrived here, I made a reservation at a restaurant for the camp’s wrap-up dinner. The hostess had pigtailed and heavy boobs. I started again, and then again I let go.

Doozer put his hands on my sister’s shoulders and pulled himself up or pushed her down. Her panties slid to the side. Her face grew pinched and then her eyes opened wide and her cheeks burst into bright circles of surprise. This was not France. She didn’t feel full but squeezed for another’s convenience. She was bleeding or bunches in the sheet cast shadows both burgundy and bruise purple.

I tried a rapid-fire slideshow of gas-station cashiers with pert or big tits, waitresses with firm or round asses, and models and actresses and sex stars with wide grins and doe eyes. I stayed with that young and sharp but impatient waitress and was close again when she faded away.

My sister had planned what she would say to her friends afterwards but in the moment felt foolish: a little girl who had furnished a lie like a dollhouse. She frowned at the wall that had long displayed a wood cut out of her name and its meaning: CATHERINE-THE-PURE. Doozer’s hands were at her ears and his arms shook, as if at the height of a last push up. She would have to become a new person, whom mom and dad would love a little less. His arms gave out and she asked him to stop. Whether he came first is the only detail both offered that contradicted the other’s story. I upset both by asking if the

two events could have happened at the exact same moment, and by appearing unconvinced, not only of their rival claims, but their common focus.

I reached for the remote, flicked on the TV, and found a late-night paid program. A girl sat alone at a table for two. A girl talked into a telephone. Both tried to signal desire with their lips and eyebrows, but I stayed soft in my hand. The first was proud. She would never sit with a man who dialed the number at the bottom of the screen. The second lacked confidence. She unwittingly undermined the story told with the camera and lights.

This morning, during the warm-up laps, Sam sped around the rink. The Slug stopped skating and Out-to-Lunch stiffened each time he was passed. Sam learned nothing yesterday, but Heidi laughed and comforted the boys.

At break, we served oranges and Ursula scraped the white stuff from Jarred's slices. Done eating, the others stared at Jarred, who was primed to piss in our equipment.

Sam said, "Let's award a trophy at the pizza party."

I walked him away from the group and wrote: Think of the expense, and it would be impossible to get ten trophies for tonight.

"Only an MVP."

Ursula turned toward us and Jarred snuck that white stuff into his mouth.

I tugged my ear. I wrote: Yesterday, I told you to downplay competition. I tapped the clipboard next to Think. Now, let's get them to go to the washroom. What do you do?

"Send the parents." And go in with them?

"No."

What if Heidi is busy and they say it's okay?

"Well, if they say it's—"

I circled I told you.

We jumped the red and blue lines. The Slug squatted instead, as if to take a crap, but his dad nodded each time. Even Ursula had relaxed, her butt on the bleachers.

The boys were ready to scrimmage but I had one more lesson. If a player holds your stick under his arm or at his hip, you get a penalty for hooking. If he throws himself down, you get a penalty for tripping. Heidi frowned but continued: Take one hand off your stick and look to the referee. The Professor cocked his head. Lead Licker took one hand off his stick. Another boy, Twitchy, had a question, but he only asked to use the washroom. I had

Heidi ask if anyone else needed to go and, when we got no answer, I sent Sam with Twitchy to find the boy's dad.

Jarred banged his stick on the ice but I wouldn't be rushed, giving players scrimmage positions to please the parents. Arrow Face I made a centre so he could chase the puck. Heidi asked if he was excited to take the face-off and he said he had to poo. My face was all frustration when I glanced into the rafters because Jarred was suddenly still, The Slug's mouth was round in a gasp, and Windup laughed. Heidi left the ice with Arrow Face.

I took the remaining boys to where they were to stand. I made Jarred the other centre but he too said he had to pee and poo. He tried to peer around me at the other boys—his audience. I shook my head. He made his claim again with a full mouth and raised veins and then again as though I had said no a second time. Jarred shifted his weight from skate to skate, dropped his stick, and grabbed at his jock. The parents passed wallets, lost in little photographs. Jarred sped up his dance, slipped, and fell on his ass. Boys threw their heads back. Sam hadn't returned and Heidi would be a while. I took Jarred to the gate but couldn't leave the others on the ice. Ursula would have to take her son to the washroom alone. I would only hand him over.

Ursula was not with the parents. She was also not doing her laps. The nearest dad, The Professor's dad, hadn't seen her. He held my clipboard as he read my question to the others. They agreed that I was asking about the woman with tight blonde curls and were relieved to know her name. They pointed at Jarred, who was using me for balance while rocking—from heel to toe and back again—in his skates. The Magic Drool Fountain's mother bet that Ursula had gone to town for coffee; she held up her Styrofoam cup, the kind sold at the concession, and scowled.

Windup was skating laps. The other boys were still in their spots, though Out-to-Lunch was sitting and, having dropped a glove, drawing in the dusting of snow. Down the hall, I would find Ursula, or even Sam, to take Jarred before Out-to-Lunch got frostbite or fingers severed by a skate blade.

No Ursula, Sam, or Heidi, who must have been in one of the washrooms with Arrow Face and his dad. Jarred ground his teeth and his pink gums shone. By that time, he did need to pee and was about to soak our equipment. I kicked open the door to the nearest washroom and kicked again at the nearest stall. Jarred threw his hands in the air and held them there, as if another boast—Olympic style. I dropped a glove, untied the drawstring on his pants, and pulled them down, followed by his jock and underwear. His hands were still in the air so I lifted him by his hips and set him closer, though that pinned me on one knee between him, the bowl, and the stall

wall, where the paper dispenser speared my kidney. I reached back, grabbed the paper, and rotated my wrist to wrap my hand like a goon with bleeding knuckles. Any piss Jarred got on the seat, floor, or me, I could wipe up, but he didn't drop his arms, hold himself, and pee. I waited, worried about the other boys, and then I knew that his mother made him sit. I lifted him by his armpits, and there, half way through my pivot, standing inside the door, was Ursula.

"Why did the other fellow make a big deal each time about not entering the boy's room and now, as soon as I step outside, you're in here with my son?"

I resisted retaliating after this accusation that I had been waiting for the chance to de-pants her boy.

"He went after lunch."

In any given day, Jarred lets loose more liquid than a zamboni and my anger over Ursula's denial must have rushed my face because her eyes and mouth shut tight. I set Jarred down. His legs, too short for the big bowl and too stiff with shin pads and pants, stuck straight out and his skate sliced my track suit and thigh. I stepped toward Ursula and reached for my clipboard—gone. My mouth I opened and closed. I turned so I could see both mother and son and Jarred's face fell. If I weren't deaf, I would have heard his stream splash. I sliced my arm nearest Ursula across my chest toward Jarred to say that her boy was now my proof that he did have to pee.

Ursula's eyes shot about: my calm crotch; my hand in its glove; my hand wrapped in paper. "You have a girlfriend to say you've the normal appetites. You have a family."

The rubber tile on which I stood was clean and dark, newer than the others.

"Even I'm starting to believe that this was nothing at all." Ursula's face was flat but her eye sockets appeared bottomless due to purple rings of exhaustion. "Besides, Jarred has had such a great time at this camp that I want it to end well. He has a shot at that MVP trophy, don't you think?"

I closed my eyes.

"... so play hard and you might win a—" Ursula covered her mouth.

Jarred, no doubt, had, yet again, blasted the bowl.

The Professor's dad did not have my clipboard and he scowled at me but all of the boys were safe on the ice. Heidi followed the scrimmage shouting praise and encouragement. Sam was playing. After I mimed writing, he collected my clipboard from the visitor's bench, rushed to me, and stopped, which sprayed my shins with snow.

“Some of these young people have really improved.”

I pulled the clipboard from his grip.

“You okay?”

I flipped to a blank page.

“You’ve been with Jarred? Is he okay?” On the far boards, Jarred had the puck. “He looks okay. But you—”

I thrust my clipboard toward Sam.

“It’s Sunday, almost five O’clock. Where will I get a trophy?”

The scrimmage ended then, when The Magic Drool Fountain scored on his own net and, unaware of his error, or unable to accept it, held his stick in the air.

Sam unlaced his skates, slipped on his shoes, and stepped out the side door.

Parents, pulling gear from their sons, tossed pads on the floor, turned sweaters inside out, and left skate blades wet. Heidi and I saved, sorted, and stored the equipment. Her chest swelled.

I signed: What?

You left the kids, she signed. Never do that again. That should be your only rule.

The skate in my lap had been unlaced to the last eyelet.

She signed: What’s wrong?

I shrugged.

I was going to ask before. Now Sam hurries off?

The parents were focused on getting their boys dressed again. There were also no deaf players and parents trained to read our hands.

Between each pair of socks I clipped together, I signed: Jarred was just clowning until the attention woke his bladder; Ursula wasn’t there; I wanted to get back to the boys on the ice. Ursula’s accusation and trophy talk I called blackmail.

Heidi’s head shot forward and her mouth fell open. She was laughing at me and my arena-chilled checks burned with sudden heat. Pretending to inspect what might be warped, she stared down the shaft of a stick she pointed at Ursula, and at Jarred, who was still in our gear and squirming. Heidi set the stick down and signed: Poor woman.

I signed: What did I just say?

The hostess again had her hair in pigtails or, as my former teammates joked, handlebars. She approached the wait-to-be-seated sign by which Heidi and I stood, the parents and boys crammed into the entranceway behind.

Her forehead crinkled. She asked if the other adults were a part of our group. Heidi said yes and explained that one more was likely to arrive soon. The hostess went into the kitchen and returned with a cook and dishwasher who added to a table cluster that had been set with rows five-chairs long and heads one-chair wide—my reservation misunderstood.

We were seated and the hostess, who was also a waitress, returned with menus. Windup's dad cupped his hand at her ear. "Water," she said, "all around. If anyone wants an adult beverage or s-o-d-a-p-o-p, flag me."

The parents decided to order pizza as a group though each muttered that his or her boy would never eat his share. The fathers of Lead Licker and Twitchy compared their sons' allergies. Lead Licker's dad dropped his menu. "He shouldn't even eat cheese." Others named toppings their sons couldn't or wouldn't eat: peppers; pineapple; pork.

The door to the restaurant opened and the entranceway filled with a family.

Heidi straightened, ready to work out an order. I touched her wrist and watch to give Sam more time but could do nothing when Ursula removed a pen from her purse. She polled the parents to build a list of allergies. Halfway around the table, the Magic Drool Fountain's mother said, "I refuse to feed my son olives. I don't like olives." Again, all the parents talked at once. The boys shouted, too, but named what they wanted: chicken; pineapple; ham.

The newly arrived family, seated nearby, moved to a faraway table.

Sam was probably in his car, in front of a dark and locked sports or second-hand or hardware store, a shock DJ's chides bringing tears to his eyes. He couldn't turn off the radio because his arms were around his legs holding his knees to his chest. His heels on the upholstery pushed his body into the springy seat: rock forward; fall back.

A hand gripped my shoulder and Sam sat in the chair saved next to mine. He rubbed his hands in the position of prayer. The others must have thought he was hungry, but he was self-satisfied—he had found a trophy.

The hostess set a cola in front of Sam and Windup's dad forfeited a chest full of breath. The boys begged and the hostess was called for a tray of colas. Sam filled his with bubbles. Parents protested but their sons blew bubbles, too. When Jarred overflowed his glass, Ursula scowled and he went pale and puffy but Windup laughed and Jarred beamed.

If I gave him the trophy then, maybe the others would have been less disappointed, still pleased to have pop.

The pizza arrived. Hands shot across the table to try all the different combinations. That distraction, too, would have let me downplay the trophy.

The hostess cleared the leftovers and soaked up the spills. Out-to-Lunch rested his head on the table. Parents leaned back and relaxed their hands on their stomachs. The fathers of Arrow Face and The Slug traded compliments exaggerating how much hockey their sons had learned. The group, suddenly, was a family at reunion. The hostess set the bill on the table.

I signed and Heidi gave my closing talk. We said, as always, that this had been the best group yet. We were proud of the boys for what they did on the ice and proud of the parents for signing them up. We were grateful for their trust and if they felt we had earned it I asked that they give the credit to Heidi. She scratched her nose so that her palm shielded her lips. Even Heidi tries such tricks. She must have praised Sam because Windup's dad crossed his arms.

I should have thanked them and sat and buried my hands in my pockets.

I signed: We have a trophy for a boy who has a lot of on-ice potential.

The Magic Drool Fountain's mom, who doesn't like concession-stand coffee or olives, bit her lip. Others had low eyebrows, blood-filled earlobes, and puckered mouths.

I signed: Every boy deserves to be congratulated. They all did equally well and—

Ursula's eyes and mouth shut tight.

At the same time, this award is important, and the first-ever so—

Jarred smiled, showing as much gum as when he had to pee. The only other hopeful boy was the fastest skater: Arrow Face. Chicken Legs, Lead Licker, The Slug, and others slouched. Jarred, having seen me survey his competition, turned pale and puffy again, a hand over his mouth.

Sam, I signed. Your MVP?

Sam pulled at his pocket: the gold ribbon may have been from a box of chocolates; the little steel hockey player had no doubt dangled from a keychain.

I signed: For Jarred.

Ursula clapped. The other parents were still, like their boys, whose eyes were downcast or wandering the restaurant.

Heidi said, "Let's all be happy for Jarred. And proud. Everyone did a great job."

No one appeared to hear.

Jarred spit: look; trophy; me. He swung the steel hockey player toward the other boys. “Touch?” When no one reached for his prize, his colour faded too fast for anyone to react. His free hand covered his mouth but doughy vomit oozed through his fingers and over his hand. Vomit dripped from his nose. He dropped his medal when Ursula pulled him toward the washrooms.

The Professor wanted to know “What’s wrong with him?”

“Is the pizza sick-making?” said Lead Licker, already holding his stomach.

“The pizza was okay,” Heidi said, “and Jarred will be okay. Ask him what it feels like to throw up or ask him about hockey because he’s a good player.”

Parents stood, wrapped their boys in bright coats, and dragged them to the front, where they paid. Heidi and Sam and I were alone at the table cluster when Ursula and Jarred returned. His face had been scrubbed raw. I winced, expecting Ursula to say she would ruin me for taking her son to pee but she slipped the gas-station-bought-and-built medal over his head and then they walked from the restaurant.

“I can pay for them.” Sam thumbed through his wallet. “I wish I could pay.”

“You paid for the trophy,” Heidi said. “That’s enough.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said.

No, I signed. Nobody’s sorry. That’s the purpose of every story.

“It’s okay,” Heidi said instead of translating for me.

The unpaid balance on the bill was over a hundred dollars.

“Groups,” said the hostess. “Happens all the time.”

I sat next to Heidi. She had sent Sam back to the motel. The hostess came to our too-big table and wiped away the last bit of vomit. “You two have a lovely night.” Maybe she still thought we were a couple. No doubt she wanted us to leave. All the other tables were empty.

I signed: I’m ruined. I explained how Jarred’s skate sliced my pants and how that would back a story of a struggle—some evidence.

Heidi’s hand covered mine. “No one tells stories like that.” Her head was dropped to the side and her eyes were watery and wide.

Back here, I slipped past Sam’s room and knocked on her door. Sleep, as colourless as ice, streaked her face. I went wide, around her, to the bed, where I sat and closed my eyes until her weight further depressed the mattress. She asked if I wanted to talk. My eyes were closed again when her fingers moved through my hair and down my neck.

I moved to the far side of the bed. Together we lied: my head on her arm; my nose touching her breast. Then, as fast as I rolled on top of her, I pressed my lips into hers like a kiss. She blinked, as if one of the more capable children awaiting instruction. I pushed back her hair and she smiled.

With my hands on her shoulders, I pulled myself up the bed or pushed her down. Her fiancé's boxers ripped and bunched against one thigh. Her face grew pinched and then burst into blotches both burgundy and grey. Her eyes opened wide. I closed mine and continued even as her sobs shook my body.

Heidi and I connected right away and our bond grew from camp to camp. She is likely to contest that claim, but, as always, there are no witnesses qualified to referee. We are all loyal to favourable versions of our every battle—each a victory or an injustice. We are all the sum of stories that may have started as play but surprise us one day, like an underdog suddenly unstoppable, which is why, despite Heidi's palms pushing against my pecks, I emptied all the anger that had built up inside.