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Toronto by the blade

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Sometimes the strongest message is no message at all. Rather than deciding to paint-bomb NHL offices or crank-call Harley Hotchkiss or set a bag of poo on fire outside Bob Goodenow's office, I chose a silent protest.

I went skating.

Skating, or playing shinny, is a Zen exercise. It's to fade away from the vagaries of life (and lockout) until the solitude of striding among a handful of other hockey pilgrims with the cold wind hitting your face makes it seem as if yours is the only kind of game that ever existed — unpocketed by linkage, trapping or TV time-outs.

The weekend before they cancelled the National Hockey League season, I decided to skate the city. I wanted to go north to south, moving top to bottom, trying to navigate as much of Toronto by ice as possible. I wanted to celebrate the game — skates scraping ice, puck thwomping against boards, the voices of wannabe Andreychuks peppering the air — where others were trying to destroy it.

9 a.m., Otter Creek Rink: The morning is clean and cold, cast in gold winter light: fine skating weather. The dual ice pads at Otter Creek — a name that sounds pulled from a Robert Kroetsch novel — sit at the end of a cul de sac, surrounded by a high school and a valley. As I peel myself from the warmth of my car, a kid who looks about 10 years old opens the rear door of the red brick building and announces: "Rink's open!" The dressing room is empty except for a coffee and Pepsi machine, a garbage can and a pay phone. I pull on my skates and take that short wobbly walk over the rippled rubber past the kids' pad to the lip of the hockey rink. The boards are a checkered mosaic of puck marks.

Skaterless, the rink feels big, the space irresistably free. Behind me, a few players file into the dressing room. I clack my stick on the ice and step out. Today, I am first.

9:30 a.m., North Toronto Memorial Community Centre: There are a few more skaters here, their blades carving little smiles into the glassy ice. The scene isn't as still or as beautiful as Otter Creek, but the rink's west face backs onto a toboggan run framed by two great conifers jutting out of the hill. There are no hockey players — Sundays, it turns out, are shinnyless — but the pond is dotted with a few spinning kids playing at being Jamie Salé. Rather than sulk about the lack of pucks and goalies, I hide an arm behind my back and enjoy a twirl. Eventually, I retire to the change room inside the adjacent community centre to take off my skates, but then I smell it: chlorine. Summer. Green grass. Melting ice. I hurry to the next cold oval.

10 a.m., Hodgson School Rink: Hodgson faces an old, friendly looking, brown-brick high school. It gives me a faraway feeling, even though I'm 10 minutes from home. There's a lot of hockey being played on both rinks, and when I meet a neighbourhood player, Vince Cosentino, I'm told: "More and more people started skating once the lockout happened. Yesterday, the rink was so full you couldn't see the ice."

A retired gentleman in a Wexford Raiders jacket named Peter McMurtry, pushing around a puck and listening to the CBC on his headphones, hears about my day and suggests: "Go to Rosedale. They have the best shinny in Toronto. Maybe in the world. You've been to Kew Gardens? They're anarchists at Kew

Gardens. Somebody takes a shift, somebody stays on. There's no rhyme nor reason to the play. Go to Rosedale." Peter is old, but he plays shinny four times a week, so I go to Rosedale.

11 a.m., Rosedale Rink:

The Rosedale rink is adjacent to Rosedale park, the site of the first-ever Grey Cup game. It turns out that I've missed the game; there are only five hockey players left on the ice. A rink attendant tells me: "The shinny here is so famous that guys from Maple come down to play, which is weird because I spent my life getting out of Maple."

Sometimes, he leaves the rink key for players who want to play first thing in the morning (Eric Lindros, Jim McKenny and Stu Gavin have all skated the ice), and last year, scrubs lobbied and won the right to start games at 8 a.m., the earliest opening in the city. Today, there were 40 skaters, but the rink is now snowy and ragged. Still, I fire a few pucks, poke a few ribs. Inside the change room I come across the oldest Nescafe machine I've ever seen, with pictures of a guy who looks like Art Hindle drinking coffee with a girl who looks like Trudy Young. I like the Rosedale rink.

'It seems that the more I've skated, the closer I've moved to what is real about hockey'

Noon, Kew Gardens: The old skater was right: It's anarchy by the beach. I count 52 skaters and eight games going on — it's mostly fathers and sons — but I can't make sense of the action. I pause for a moment and stare at the frothy lake to the south, the staid green bleachers to the north and the smooth, iced-over lawn bowling court to the east. I buy a Coke: a hockey drink. Then I hit the highway.

1 p.m., City Hall: I enjoy skirting the eyeless, puckless, mirthless Air Canada Centre for Bay St., where I head straight for the clock tower. When I arrive at Toronto's most telegenic rink, Hot Chocolate is playing over the P.A., which is always a good sign. I talk to a Colombian girl on the bench who is skating for the first time. She is so new to Canada that she struggles to find the word for "cold" ("It is not too ... cold?").

Behind us, a dozen Punjabi kids are filming a music video with the rink as the backdrop. Taking to the ice, there are as many people skate-stepping as skating. The Leafs are represented by a single sweater, with the number 9 and the name Kennedy written across the back.

I ask the girl, who is 15, maybe 16, if it's supposed to be Teeder Kennedy, and she tells me that it is. Her dad adds, "With all the bad stuff that's going on in NHL, the older players seem kind of special." A lot of people are here on first dates. It's a Babel of languages and everyone is smiling and goofing on their rented skates. An old woman steps onto the ice as if toeing a bubbling cauldron. Her daughters appear beside her, one on each arm: "If you can't go very far, Mom, don't worry." Hot Chocolate gives way to Billy Idol, but nonetheless. This is a pretty great place to be.

2:30 p.m., Scadding Court: The washrooms smell like weed. The urinal is blocked by a deck of DuMauriers. For me, it's a skate of firsts for the day: first up-tempo shinny game; first dude yelling at me for making a wrong pass; first line of Fagins calling each other by nicknames ("Chippy! Goob! Brickhead!"); first slash of graffiti on the boards; first curiosity shown by a 12-year-old over my sweater; first time I lock the car outside the rink; and the first moment that I'm reminded of hockey in China, as I skate up ice staring at the Buddhist temple across the street. Inside the change rooms, a young rink attendant wears a baseball cap, baggy pants and untied sneakers with the tongue pushed out. He sits at a table dripping globs of plum sauce over his McNuggets and eyes me with suspicion. "Prince Albert Raiders," I tell the scamp who'd asked about my jersey. "Where's the hell's that?" he replies, fishing for a smoke.

3:30 p.m., Dufferin Grove Park: If Sesame Street had a rink, it would be Dufferin Grove. I arrive to find 30 young Koreans skating for the first time. They're using skates spraypainted yellow, a recent gift from the NHL Players Association in recognition of Dufferin Grove maven Jutta Mason's good-natured shinny-activism. (Jutta was largely responsible for persuading the city not to shorten the skating season.) The first people to use the skates were some young Argentine girls, further proof of Dufferin Grove as a hockeytopia.

In the changing area, there's a wood-burning stove and benches with logs stuffed underneath, and an open kitchen that sells apple crumble, bean soup, delicious small pizzas the size of coasters, pucks, tape and bandages. My half hour goes like this: skate, eat; skate, eat. If hockey is food for the soul, Dufferin Grove is a banquet of life, sport and community.

4 p.m., High Park Rink:

The sky is dimming, absorbed by grey February clouds. It's getting colder. I head to the rink in the middle of High Park, but stop before I can jump the boards. Instead, I take to a W-shaped frozen sluice next to the rink, where I deke trees, fake the occasional stump and bewilder three kids who are sliding on a slippery plastic carpet across the ice. I trip over an outcropping of ice rocks and fall flat against the silver-coloured pond. My jeans stick to the ground so I lie there for a while.

5:30 p.m., Prince of Wales Rink: It's growing dark and I'm at the bottom of the city. My head is cold, feet are sore, body's exhausted. I wrap a scarf around my neck and take one last flight across ice. Reaching the south end of the rink, I stare through the fence at the lake, which sits not a handful of feet beyond the goal crease. The shoreline is in plain view: icicles dripping along the coast, ducks bobbing in the frigid surf.

Skating the city has allowed me to experience Toronto by rink's view through the frost and cold, rather than hide from it in a warm corridor or dark home or car with the heater blasting. It seems that the more I've skated, the closer I've moved to what is real about hockey: the winter wind clawing my face, snow spitting from the sky, two knives strapped to my feet taking one final turn across this city of ice.

Guitarist for Rheostatics, Dave Bidini is also the author of Tropic of Hockey and Baseballissimo. His next hockumentary is The Return of the Hockey Nomad: Into Russia, March 28, at 9 p.m. on CBC.

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