

SHOUTS AND MURMURS



RINK RAT

BY CHARLES MCGRATH

I GOT my hockey stuff out of the closet the other day—to air it out for the upcoming season—and right away my heart started racing like a kid's. I should explain that I'm forty-six, and that my days of hockey glory, such as they were, are long past. I'm one of those guys you see at the rink early in the morning or late at night, when nobody else wants the ice. The snack bar's shut, the parking lot is ghostly, and the stands are empty except for a couple of girlfriends bundled up in down jackets and looking bored. (You know they must be girlfriends, because wives never come.) We're out there warming up on the ice, practicing our rink turns and booming slap shots against the boards—the guys with the taped-up gloves, the mothy, mismatched stockings, the raggedy jerseys (or sweaters, as we still prefer to call them) bearing the names of bars and auto-body shops that folded years ago. A few of these guys still have legs: they can *motor*. But the rest of us, slow of foot and short of wind, can sometimes put it together, sort of, for a game, or a period, or maybe just a single shift, and that's enough. We're faster than you think—sometimes. And we're smarter than the young players. We know that the ice slopes a little over there in the corner, where the door for the Zamboni is, and that the puck can hang up there; and we know that when you're panting after an opponent it's always worth trying

the old trick of yelling for a blind drop pass, because you can never tell when somebody will fall for it.

Why do we do it, give up sleep and drive for hours to play a game, and a sometimes violent and dangerous one at that? Not because we want to feel younger. Playing hockey makes us feel *older*. And not because we're trying to live out athletic fantasies. We know the difference. When we score a goal, we don't ride the broomstick, the way Tiger Williams used to, or slide on one knee, pumping an arm, like Bernie Nicholls; we gratefully accept a stick-slap on the butt or a whack on the shin pads, and head back to the bench.

Part of why we do it is just to be around people who speak the same language. I have no idea what most of my teammates do in real life—only that there's a couple of lawyers (they often commit the unforgivable sin of talking shop before a game), a man who sells meat, one who owns a fleet of garbage trucks, and one who must be in construction, because he once attempted to change the blade on an aluminum stick by heating it with an indus-

trial-size propane torch. (It ignited with a dramatic *whomp*, and for a moment threatened to set fire to the entire locker room.) I'm not even sure I'd recognize some of the others if I saw them on the street. But in the locker room there's an instant bond between us all—a temporary oneness of purpose, however foolish, and a reassuring predictability. We basically have the same conversation every week, with tiny but inspired variations. We insult each other; we expound on everything that's wrong with the Rangers; we relive famous, gory rink disasters (brawls, broken limbs, heart attacks); and we bring up sex as often as we can. (Some of our sex talk is pretty inventive, but we can always use new material; that case of Mr. and Mrs. Bobbitt, down in Virginia, was a godsend.) This may not sound like much, but we older guys don't necessarily look for much. We're connoisseurs of little stuff.

In the end, though, the main reason older guys play hockey is that it's so fast and so difficult that when you're done you're transported—you feel great. You could even say that a hockey game is harder than getting old: it's quicker, more tiring, sometimes more painful, and you score even less often. But in hockey, when it goes right, you get to step outside yourself. You stop thinking and you stop feeling anything except speed and momentum. You glide, you curve and cut, you effortlessly reverse yourself and float backward. You're so happy you don't even know it. ♦

