

Shot Rock

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The craving for curling is like the craving for love. After a long spring and summer without the former and the last few months without the latter, an enthusiastic Blackie Timmerman stood in front of the Queen Victoria Curling Club looking up at the sputtering neon blue crown above the QV's crest and its motto: "Winnipeg's Friendliest Rink." Blackie had his broom tucked under one arm, his curling sweater in a Dominion Stores paper bag under the other. His curling boots dangled by their knotted laces over one wrist.

He dropped his broom and bag and scratched an itch on his head, but got no relief: his hair was as coarse as lichen and he got no scratching purchase through his gloves. He pulled them off with his teeth, tasted leather, had a good scratch and lit a cigarette.

In Manitoba, curling season arrived in late October, not soon enough for Blackie. It was already below zero most nights, and the urge to curl excited him to the point of sleeplessness. To make matters worse, when he did find a few sweet minutes of unconsciousness, the fact that Deirdre, his wife, had left him shocked him awake and bugged up the night completely.

She had left him the day after their holiday in August.

- You're really leaving?
- Can't stay.
- What do you mean can't stay?
- I've had a revelation. My life is going to shine.

At that moment Deirdre had looked about ten years younger

to Blackie; she was really stirring him up. He wondered if she'd met somebody, but he knew she hadn't.

She hardly hesitated before leaving. Nothing held her back. She'd suddenly acquired a knack for summing things up. His unassuming Deirdre, not his first love but certainly his longest, was getting on with it. These were supposed to be their cream and easy years, people said. Blackie thought that all their years had been their cream and easy years.

– What about all this, the house?

With her eyes he thought she was saying 'it's just a house.'

What was worse for him was what if she thought she hadn't been loved. That would have to be his fault.

And her leaving came just as he thought he had everything he had wished for in life. Goes to show.

Blackie had never been an unhappy man so his crappy bedtimes were new to him. He'd get up and stand in front of the picture window in the front room and stare through the smudged glass. 'Windows don't clean themselves,' Deirdre had written in a note one day after departing. He couldn't help thinking that there was some other idiot looking out his window, too. Most times he'd go down to the refrigerator to get a cold glass of milk.

He had the house on Inkster to himself since Deirdre and then Tino, his only son, had moved out and into the *shmutz* to be closer to university. If Deirdre had asked he would have moved out and let her keep the house, but once she'd made up her mind she'd run so fast to her sister's it was as if there was nothing at home that reminded her of their earlier happiness; maybe she'd never realized how unhappy she was until she made the decision to leave. How had she kept her dissatisfaction in that long? Blackie wondered. Where had she buried all her criticisms of late? Where had she gotten the idea she was unhappy to begin with? Consciousness raising and yoga with her sister Edith?

Untroubled conventional Blackie was ill-prepared for this change. The emptiness Deirdre left behind had acquired

contours for him, albeit blurred because he didn't completely believe she had left for good. When he was away at work or at the rink she came over to vacuum and do a load of laundry and then dry and fold. She called it 'checking in' and left him notes with instructions about how to do things. Like he was lazy or an idiot. The fact that he looked forward to those notes confirmed he was an idiot.

He could have done a load himself, but whenever he went down to the basement with a basket of dirty laundry he found himself staring at the washing machine as if it was a UFO that had just landed. So he just left the basket on the porcelain lid and buggered off.

There was the shame he felt knowing that all the guys knew Deirdre had left and that made him smoke his cigarette down to the filter, sucking courage out of it. He stubbed out his smoke, picked up his broom and paper bag and boots and yanked open the door to the QV. Once inside he felt safer and happier than he'd been for months.

Christ but he loved the rink! Just the smell of it. The sight of the lunch counter and his friends sitting around a table not far away? Just being inside made him feel safer and happier than he'd felt in months. Through the huge windows that inclined down to the rink lay six sheets of ice gleaming under banks of fluorescent overheads. Since it was the start of the season, the ends had been freshly painted. Red and blue circles glowed up from under the ice, and the rubber hacks were wet, black, and snappy. He couldn't wait to get down there.

At the counter of the rink snack bar, Blackie ordered a hot dog and coffee with cream from Rita. 'I can't cook, but I can pay,' Blackie had said to Deirdre when she'd asked him what he'd do for meals.

Rita turned to him.

– You want a jumbo, Blackie?

– A jumbo'll do me.

– The works?

– Oh, boy!

Hands red from the knuckles to her fingertips, Rita let drop a block of lard on the griddle. When it melted in its froth, she dropped a jumbo wiener on it. From the stainless steel space-age warmer she extracted a bun, split it open, and spread relish and fried onions and chilli gravy on it. Rita was so generous with the works that Blackie didn't think there would be any room for the wiener.

– Okay like this? Rita said, wrapping the hot dog in a paper napkin.

– Beautiful.

– And your coffee.

– Thank you.

The first bite felt like biting into a balloon but it tasted scrumptious. It would be nice to have some soup once in a while, or fried chicken, or a slice of liver and onions, or a piece of goldeye, Blackie thought, taking another bite, the green and yellow works oozing out on his knuckles. Or hearing a word from Deirdre instead of having to read those stupid notes, even though they gave him hope she'd come back one day.

Blackie looked around to see if Tino was there but couldn't see him. Tino, who was no longer a junior curler, had moved up to curl for Bunny Rabinowitz, along with that nice *shagitz* kid, Michael MacGiligary, who wasn't there either.

Tino was still a crap curler because he didn't take it seriously enough. But that Michael MacGiligary kid could really hit the button, even when he was a junior. Tall, blond, no pimples — a real Jewess slayer, Duddy Joffe called him — with a pale complexion and blue eyes. They were the same age — 17 — but they looked odd together: the pallid *shagitz* who looked like the young Glenn Gould, very graceful on and off the ice, his hair trim for the times, and Tino, who was olive skinned and had thick black curls down to his shoulders. Tino always looked like his head was covered in

dollops of black shampoo that hadn't been rinsed out. On his first day of school Deirdre had to use half a tube of Brylcreem before she could pack him off, but Tino was too excited about school and the prospect of other kids to play with to care that there was enough grease in his hair to fry a chicken. In the end they gave him brush cuts until he saw The Beatles on Ed Sullivan. Blackie loved that kid with all his might, but he didn't like it that Tino and Michael were always talking between and during ends, even when their skip was throwing his rocks. Blackie thought that was disrespectful and he wished he knew what it was that they had so much to talk about. Most of what he knew about Michael MacGilgarity came from Tino. They had met at the rink in juniors and having both skipped a grade they were the youngest kids taking physics at university.

Blackie wasn't surprised not to see Tino yet. It wasn't league play, so there'd be a lot of horsing around tonight. Between university and BBYO, the kid was busy. Blackie liked that Tino was in B'nai B'rith Youth and that he was busy.

The rink cafeteria was packed and Blackie liked that too. He was always worried that membership would fall off and the QV would fold and fall by the wayside. It was like a thumbtack in his brain. And the revival of the rumour that Max Foxman, the QV president, was going to sell the club had been spoiling his digestion lately. The rumour was probably just that; they were always threatening to close the Queen Victoria.

– Did you hear they want to sell the QV? Blackie asked Oz.

– Never believe anything until it's officially denied, said Oz.

About forty guys were there early, with time to kill like Blackie, and more coming in as excited about being back at the rink as he was. They were changing into their curling boots and sweaters right in the cafeteria because there was no locker room and no showers, not like at the richer clubs. But you didn't need a changing room for curling. The most you changed was from your shoes into curling boots and then you put on your sweater. Christ, it was