

A Night at the Rinks  
by Mike Varley

“I don’t know if I want to go anymore.”

Chris Waltrip voices his backseat uncertainties not thirty seconds out of the driveway.

“It’s too late for that now, you’re going,” replies Jasmine from behind the wheel. She punctuates her words with locked power doors, as though tuck and roll had passed through Waltrip's mind.

The destination? A Central League Hockey match-up between the Southeast division Laredo Bucks and the Austin Ice Bats. And don't think too poorly of Jasmine for her callous response. Waltrip is still reeling from a bottle of Irish whiskey he drank twelve-hours previous. He's legitimately afraid he's done something terrible to his liver.

“Why did I even come out? It's because of Steph and her image of me.”

“What do you mean?” I reply from the passenger side.

“Well last week she was talkin’ with me and Jen about going out and she said ‘Yea, you guys don’t go out too much, huh?’ And of course that made me feel like a failure as a boyfriend. And then later that week she saw me getting dressed to leave the house and asked 'You going to the liquor store before it closes?'. And I *was* going to the liquor store before it closed. So now I feel like I’m projecting this image of being the drunk who never leaves the house.”

“No one thinks that,” I say.

“Are you sure?”

“No, no one thinks that,” Jasmine adds. “Though I didn’t like it when you called me a forty-year old because I wouldn’t go to the movie.”

“Oh yea. I apologized about that,” Waltrip says.

“You were really upset about that?” I ask, half laughing.

“I may have cried a little in my room, yea.”

“He didn’t mean it, he was just trying to goad you into going to the late movie, just like we goaded him tonight.”

“Yea. And then I went and Borat was really funny and I had a good time.”

“See? Look at that, everything works out for the best.”

“Miscommunication, man,” Waltrip laments. “The same thing happened to me with Parker like the second day I moved in. You know the song *Green Onions*, by Booker T and the MG's? Well apparently I said something like *Green Onions* is 'tired music.' Then flash forward six months later to the New Year’s party and he’s talking about how that comment ‘seriously affected him.’ He said it changed the way he thought about music. I didn’t even remember that I had said it, or that I even meant it. People just have realize I’m just an upfront dickhead about ninety percent of the time. I never mean anything by it.”

Such is life in collective housing, where every flippant comment, careless mannerism and one sentence email is analyzed, over-analyzed, pained over and finally stored away, with you, the original culprit, completely unaware of what your minor stupidity has become. It will reappear months later, hopefully at some house party when everyone’s happy and drunk, but possibly as an ad hominem afterthought in an email

war or through a third-party housemate during some gossip session. And only then will you understand why she didn't frost your birthday cupcakes like she did for everyone else, or why he, as maintenance officer, made sure your windows were screened last, months after mosquito season.

"So tell me what the game's going to be like?" Jasmine asks.

Though a fan of the TV version, she's never been to a live hockey game.

"There's beer, and lots of yelling, lots of fighting, and hopefully blood," I reply. "Don't worry, Waltrip; you're gonna have a great time." I myself have never been to a minor league hockey game, but I have been to about forty or so New York Islanders games, which is pretty much the same thing.

We get to the arena twenty minutes later. The game is already underway and the lot is packed. We're forced to park on a side street a quarter mile down the road. The weather is windy and misty and Texas miserable. Waltrip gives his coat to Jasmine for the walk over.

We're met with a sight at the front door: a line for tickets in the lobby about thirty deep. Apparently rolling in right at game time and expecting tickets isn't such a hot idea after all. We fall in at the end of the line and my eyes take to wandering. There's no ticket booth to speak of, just a desk on rollers stationed by two cashiers. Metal pylons with retractable straps corral us to little purpose. Beyond the ropes are some wooden benches, rentable lockers, and a very modest concession stand tucked in a corner. A section of the ice can be seen through a set of double doors, but not enough to make any of the action within decipherable. Sidling up against the line, in prominent view for all to see, is a brand new,

camouflage colored All Terrain Vehicle, apparently the primary sponsor of the Ice Bats. Growing up in the suburbs of Long Island, I've never seen an ATV in person before. It's much larger than I imagined it to be. There's a brief compulsion in me to take off my sweatshirt, throw on a vest of some sort and ride that baby to the nearest Dairy Queen.

People mill about beyond the ropes, but one in particular catches my eye: long dirty blonde hair, wiry soul patch, a wife beater, nylon skating pants and standing in skates like they're a pair of sneakers. He looks like Jason Mewes with a few years of weight training under his belt.

"Look at that guy," Jasmine says.

"That's a rink rat," I say. "A man who's devoted his entire life to the hockey lifestyle. Any way to be around the action. I bet he's from Minnesota or something."

Five minutes of standing in line and we've yet to move one inch. It seems questionable that buying the tickets is even worth it anymore. After some deliberation with the group, I go over to ask an usher if he thinks three seats together is still feasible.

"Excuse me, sir, I have a question. Is --"

"The bathrooms are down the hall and to your left."

"Ah, thank you. But I was wondering, do you think getting three stadium seats together this late in the game is still possible?"

Some sound escapes his mouth, but nothing anyone would consider helpful. This is clearly above his pay grade. Out of nowhere appears a bubbly P.R rep to save the usher.

"Hello sir, is there anything I can help you with today?"

“Yes. Is it reasonable to expect three stadium seats together at this stage of the game?”

It’s too pleasant to be a grimace, but P.R. lady’s smile falls in line with that general idea. “Ooh. I’m not going to say no, but there’s a pretty good chance not. However, there are standing room seats for \$12.50.”

“Alright. And do you know how much time is left in the period?”

“About ten minutes,” she says, shaking her head in a vigorous affirmative.

I thank her and return to the line, which has moved a bit in the past few minutes. We decide to tough it out and write off the first period.

Finally, we get up to the ticket counter after close to half an hour. Our cashier is one big man, maybe forty-eight or so, strong-bearded with a camouflage Longhorns hat. It quickly becomes apparent why we’ve been on line for thirty minutes.

“Hi, I’d like to buy three stadium seats please,” Jasmine says to the cashier, clearly and succinctly.

The cashier stares at us for ten seconds. Now I know you can’t be fully appreciating that last sentence, so indulge me in a little exercise. Stop reading for a sec and count off ten Mississippi in your head while staring at a wall – maybe with your mouth slightly open if you want. Good? Now visualize yourself as a cashier and that section of wall you’ve been blankly staring at as a customer you’ve just flaked out on. What’s the appropriate reply in such a situation?

“What?” he blurts, leaning in real cozy-like.

“Excuse me,” I interject, “Do you have three stadium seats together?”

“Uh huh huh huh,” he...laughs. “No.”

“We should probably all get standing room only seats then,” I say to Jasmine.

“Yea, okay.”

Jasmine puts in her order and the ticket man pecks at the computer like a trained T-Rex.

“Hey, where’s Waltrip at?”

“Maybe to get beer?” Jasmine replies.

“That sounds pretty good right about now, Uh huh huh,” the cashier says, suddenly displaying an acute sense of hearing. Let me state this plain: this man does not need another drink. This man needs all the customers to leave so he can go pass out in the mascot’s locker room and maybe retain a shred of dignity.

“What would you like?” T-Rex says.

“Two standing room seats, please.”

“Twenty five dollars.”

“Here, out of thirty.”

I leave T-Rex to his devices and turn to Jasmine.

“Maybe I should go find Waltrip,” she says. “Do you think it’s safe to leave him alone?”

In swoops P.R. lady, blessed with some sixth sense for customer service.

“Were you looking for your friend? He’s over at the snack bar.”

It's like she has the energy of three employees, which is good because the usher and cashier need all the coverage they can get.

"Oh, thank you very much."

"No problem at all!"

"Here you go, two tickets," the cashier says to me.

"Thank you. And my change?"

"Oh...how much did you give me?"

"Thirty."

"Right. Here you go."

"Thanks."

Jasmine and I get our tickets glanced at by the usher and that's it. No frisking or metal detector that has become so commonplace in professional sport. We walk over to the concession nook to find Waltrip. He's on line for food after eating dinner an hour earlier. He settles on a chili burger of some kind and a 48 oz. Dr. Pepper.

"Why would you let me near the concession stand when I'm drunk!?" He demands.

Finally, we enter the arena. The Ice Bats moved here at the start of the 2006-2007 season, over from the Travis County Expo Center on the East side of town. The corresponding press release cites "scheduling conflicts" as the primary reason for the move, with the rodeo taking over the arena one month out of the five-month season and additional events forcing them to remove and replace the ice on top of that. Ice Bats President Jeff Buch looked forward to the move for several reasons, including superior location, site stability, and the intangibles of the Chaparral Ice Arena as a venue.

According to their press release, "It's fun, it's loud, it's exciting and it's an intimidating place for opponents to play."

Stepping into the "arena" paints a different picture entirely.

According to the Travis County website, the Travis County Expo Center seats sixty-four hundred. To my eyes, this building can't possibly hold more than two thousand. No organization would take over a two-third cut in attendance just for venue stability or location unless it was going through hard times financially. And as for intimidation, the arena has about as much mystique as a high school gymnasium. If anything, the Ice Bats might be demoralized from playing in a building that's likely hosted more birthday parties than hockey games; they almost certainly get taunted about it by players from other teams. But what choice does an organization have when attendance slips from 6,239 a game to 3,399 a game just ten years after its inaugural season?<sup>1</sup>

We show our tickets to another usher inside, who tells us standing room only is literally anywhere you're not too in the way. We circle the rink and find room in the right corner, near where the Zamboni comes out at intermission. There are two rows of bar stools for seating, but other than that it's just a passing through point to get to the big bleachers on our right. The buzzer sounds on the first intermission almost immediately after we arrive, with the score tied at 0-0.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://centralhockeyleague.com.ismmedia.com/ISM2//Documents/HTH.pdf>

To me, intermission entertainment at hockey games is as much a part of the ritual as the game itself. The entertainment generally falls into two categories: carnival-type games and little kids playing hockey. The games range from center ice shots through puck-sized slots to win car dealership riches to drunken men in sumo suits falling on ice without shame. Thus far, my only clue to the entertainment tonight is six guys in their twenties prepped at the Zamboni entrance wearing skating helmets.

The Zamboni doors open and the men walk out to the excited sounds of the P.A.

“La ha fa ya tha ca ca!!!”

I have no idea, either, but all of a sudden the Ice Bats mascot tears out onto the ice riding one of the sponsor's camouflage ATV's, circling around the contestants before stopping near mid ice to do these crazy stationary spins, how exactly I have no idea. Jasmine is jealous; apparently she's a big fan of spinning around in circles really fast.

“Wo wo wo wo Wooooooo.”

Another grown man in an animal costume comes speeding out onto the ice riding a camo ATV, which I am fast considering a practical and perhaps necessary investment on my part. But what is a bobcat mascot doing at the Bat Cave?

“Any idea whose mascot that is?” I ask Waltrip.

“I think it's the Texas State mascot from San Marcos. I have no idea why he's here, though.”

All this four-wheeled spectacle doesn't go very far in explaining what the intermission entertainment is, but a big piece of the puzzle is

taking the ice right now. Out from the Zamboni port, being pulled along on a string like a Fischer-Price dog on wheels, is a target practice deer statue, complete with realistic fur shading and a simulated live weight of a hundred and fifty pounds. The deer is set up right in front of the goal, and while the P.A.'s description of the game is indecipherable, I'm starting to get a feeling for what's going on here. What throws me for a loop is when Fang, Ice Bats mascot, pulls out a neon pink, water balloon slingshot from some unseen fold in his wings. So here we have standing at out at the blue line six men in their twenties with hockey helmets on, two mascots, one in no way associated with the home team, two camouflage ATV's, an announcer connected to a crappy PA, a bucket of hockey pucks, a water balloon sling shot and a target deer set up sixty-four feet away. Can you ask for anything more?

The first guy steps up, indistinguishable from the other contestants in every way. The hockey helmet seems to neutralize anything definable about a person. He tries his best, but none of the shots even come close to the deer, hitting the boards behind the net and startling the little kids with their faces pressed up against the glass. Sharpshooter two makes of big show of it, waving his arms around to pump up the crowd. The crowd does their part, but he does not, with shots that are best described as impotent. Any time you need help from a mascot to pull back your sling shot you know you're in trouble.

Contestants three and four are also busts, and suddenly it's a very real possibility that we won't get to see this beautiful plastic buck take a hockey puck to the abdomen. Contestant five manages to get one in the net,

but no more. The collective hopes of the Chapparral Ice Arena rest on the shoulders of contestant six. The first two go into the net, a promising sign. The third shot somehow manages to clang the post without so much as grazing the deer. The fourth sails just above the goal, and we're down to the final puck. It's clear contestant six has a beat on this game. You can see the fear in the deer's marble eyes.

Contestant six draws back the slingshot, putting all his strength and accumulated knowledge into the elastic. He lets it fly and the puck wings an antler, sending it up straight into the air and down to the ice. The crowd erupts in cheers, finally given an outlet for the built up suspense. Fang holds the antler to his head and skates around the ice. Still, I can't help but feel a little disappointed. I wanted the eyesore thoroughly nailed.

The disappointment is short-lived, as the announcer garbles something into his mic and Fang steps up to the challenge. When his first shot sticks the back of the net, it's clear to everyone watching that Fang means serious business. This is a bat with hours of puck hunting under his belt.

Fang takes careful aim and fires.

"Mu mu Mew Mew!!!"

A direct hit to the midsection! The crowd goes wild as the deer slowly slumps in the direction of its assassin, feet anchored to its little wagon. It hangs there suspended above the ice at a forty-five degree angle.

The contestants leave the ice, leaving Fang the center of attention, skating around the ice with a dozen or so Frisbees to throw out to the crowd.

"Man, I always hate this," I say to Jasmine and Waltrip, watching Fang throw Frisbees up to the fans at center ice.

"Why?"

"Because whatever it is – tee shirts or Frisbees or whatever, it always seems like the cheaper seats get jipped. The expensive seats get everything shot or thrown their way, but there's always some barrier blocking the cheap seats.

"Like take these boards, right? We'll never get one thrown to us because the boards are too tall. I mean look at them, they're—"

During the course of my rant, back turned to the ice, Fang had skated over to our corner of the rink. As I turn, he releases the Frisbee, over the "too tall" boards, off the arena wall behind me and right into my hands.

I'm blown away.

"Can you believe that!! I mean, I was just talking about that and it drops right into my hands.

"I know!" Jasmine says, "You should give it to one of the kids."

"Oh, no, no. You don't understand. This isn't a Frisbee. This is a plastic anecdote right here. If I had just caught this under normal circumstances, absolutely; no problem. But this Frisbee has a story behind it. There's no way I'm giving it up."

Fang soon runs out of disks and out comes the Zamboni, the most eccentric maintenance tool in all of sport. Zamboni is actually a genericized trademark, like Kleenex or Frisbee. The proper (and boring) term is ice resurfacer. It's a fairly simple machine in principle. A sharp blade shaves the ice, one hundred and fifty degree water melts and smooths the ice and a

cloth mop trails behind it all, leaving the surface sleek and smooth. This Zamboni is electric powered, its cord suspended above it on a track system that allows it to reach every part of the ice. There's something very Zen about watching a good Zamboni driver work, moving about the rink with flawless efficiency, never hitting the same spot twice. Of course tonight's driver needed to pull off the ice and resituate himself to get the job done, but I won't hold it against him. The end product is always the same: an immaculately smooth sheet of ice, in stark contrast to the pitted and roughed up surface of only ten minutes before. Watching it done well is like seeing the before and after on one of those home redecorating programs, yet infinitely more satisfying.

"Hey," Waltrip says to me, "What do you think would happen if I threw this soda over the boards?"

"Uh...I don't know."

"I mean, they just finished cleaning the ice. Do you think it'd ruin the ice? Would the ice cubes fuse onto the other ice?"

"Maybe."

"Do you think they'd throw me out? I've never been thrown out of a sporting event before."

I can tell this is heading into dangerous territory.

"Maybe. I don't really know. It's a pretty small place, they'd probably find you."

"Well then I'll do it. Should I do it?" He asks me, 48 oz. Dr. Pepper primed to fly.

Now in life, there are friends whose bluffs you can call and not much will happen. The two of you will just laugh it off and talk about how funny that would have been to do such and such. Then there are friends whose hands you never call down, not unless you want to end up on the side of the Interstate out thirteen dollars without seeing a single minute of hockey. The problem is, Waltrip and I haven't been friends very long. I have a pretty good handle on how he'll react to situations sober, but drunk on Irish whiskey at a place he'd rather leave is a whole new card game. Is he just screwing with me? Will saying no make things worse? Has he already made up his mind?

"I don't know. Those boards are pretty high. You might miss and hit those little kids in front of us."

"Oh. That's true. That's very true."

Thank God for families of four.

With the Zamboni's work done, the players are ready to take the rink. Laredo comes out first, drawing some boos but mostly indifference. Their away jerseys are white with blue and gold trim, with a nifty logo that's a hybrid of the state outline and a buck, the buck's head taking the place of the panhandle. They skate around for about thirty seconds before the home team takes the ice.

"Wa wa wawawa Austin Ice Bats!"

The Ice Bats take the ice to modest cheers and applause. They sport blue jerseys with gray sleeves and yellow trim, and one of the most unattractive team logos I've ever seen. At its center is a screeching bat holding a hockey stick in its feet. Whether it's a giant bat holding a normal-

sized hockey stick or a regular bat holding a bat-sized hockey stick is unclear. It would be a reasonable logo if it was just the bat, but the problem is the artist clearly didn't know when to stop. The team name borders the bottom and the city name the top, with a crescent moon in the background and several stars scattered where a normal moon would block stars out, just like the Tunisian flag. There's a puck suspended below the hockey stick for no discernible reason, two bats in the background to give the illusion of more bats to come, and just because we have to squeeze the Texas pride in, the head bat dons red, white and blue, Texas flag-themed gloves.

This period the Bats offense will be driving for the far end of the ice, giving us some time to scrutinize Ice Bats goalie Tony Quesada. He intentionally scuffs up the crease with his skates, undoing the Zamboni's work for the sake of traction. Jasmine marvels at how large the goalie pads are, especially Quesada's butt pad, which looks like a couch cushion duct-taped to his ass. But the clincher is Quesada's helmet. Unlike other pieces of hockey equipment, goalie helmets are a statement, specifically designed to cater to the personality of its wearer. Most have a design that features a team logo as its centerpiece. Others are based on nicknames, like NHL goalie Curtis Joseph, whose nickname "Cujo" is the inspiration for his ferocious dog mask.

"Look, look at his mask," Jasmine says to me as Quesada skates by. Decorating Quesada's mask, one along alongside either temple, are two lounging blonde beauties, big breasted and cutoff-jeaned – like mud flaps on a big rig. It strikes me immediately as the missing link between hockey and the South.

The puck is dropped at center ice and play is underway. It's pretty clear from the get go that the Ice Bats are the inferior team, struggling to clear the puck from their own end and failing to create any offensive push. The Bucks hold a commanding fifteen-point lead over the Ice Bats in the standings with half a season to go and are defending CHL champions. In contrast, the Ice Bats are just one game above .500 with 35 points, struggling to stay in the race for the final playoff spot. As I mentioned earlier, I'm an Islanders fan, so I'm comfortable rooting for an inferior team. My many years of suffering have at least granted the gift of knowledge, and I quickly assume the role of translator for Jasmine, unraveling the intricacies of offsides, icing, and the two-line pass.

A hasty shot by one of the Ice Bats sails way over the net, caroming off the back boards and out of the zone, right to a waiting Laredo Buck. There's nothing but open ice between him and Quesada. He sprints down the ice on the break away for an almost certain goal. As he crosses the blue line, Quesada leaves the crease to challenge. The Buck dekes and Quesada sprawls out on the ice, jabbing his stick out with his right arm and knocking the puck loose. He pounces on the puck and stops play for a face-off.

The crowd goes wild, with one fan in particular above the rest. Waltrip is screaming like a crazed banshee, loud enough to distort my hearing. The little kids in front of us shoot their heads around to see what's going on. They find a face that is completely and utterly affectless: No curl of the mouth, no raised eyebrows, no glint of excitement. Just one soulless, piercing shriek that lasts well after everyone else has given up cheering.



“So you getting into it, man?” I ask, unable to prevent myself from laughing.

“Actually, I was just thinking that I’m in the middle of a really good book and I could be home, right now, reading it.”

Instinctively I look above mid-ice for a replay of the save, only to remember there’s no JumboTron here, just a small scoreboard in the far corner of the rink. They set up for the face-off in the Ice Bats zone, right circle, up close to where we’re standing.

“Look at that patch,” Jasmine says, pointing out the coaster-sized U.S. Army patch on the shoulder of the Ice Bat taking the face-off. Looking around, I see it’s common to all the Ice Bat uniforms.

“Why do you think they have that?” she wonders aloud.

“I think it’s because the Army knows their audience,” I reply as the action starts up again. The puck gets slapped into our corner and two players chase after it. The Buck gets there first and fires it to center. A cycling teammate fires a one-timer and is stonewalled by Quesada, who smothers the rebound.

The crowd lets Quesada hear their appreciation, Waltrip most of all, all the while looking around the arena like he’s waiting on a bus. His eyes fall on the scoreboard.

“Holy Crap! We still have thirty more minutes of this crap left?!”

The family of four’s father turns around to glare at Waltrip.

“Hey,” I nudge Waltrip, “That guy over there just glared at you. Maybe you should rein it in a little.”

“I’m just cheering.”

“I know. I think maybe cause you said 'crap' and there are little kids around, I’m not sure. I just wanted you to know.”

“Okay. Alright. Thanks for looking out for that. I really appreciate it.”

“Yea, no problem.”

“Hey, look at that kid up there,” Jasmine says, pointing to the bleachers across the way. There, up in the last row stands a boy dressed completely in camo fatigues. His thick, red hair is shoulder length and tucked behind his ears, with most of it hidden under a camo baseball cap. He stands alone, leaning back with one black-booted foot against the wall and his arms folded over his chest.

I turn to Jasmine. “*That* is why the Ice Bats have Army patches on their shoulders.”

Music blares through the muffled speakers as the players wait for the face off. The words are indecipherable, but the tune is clearly *Unbelievable* by 90’s rock gods EMF. Judging from the music selection so far, it seems as though someone’s holding up a mic to a CD player with *Jock Jams* on repeat.

Action continues as the Bats finally manage to hold the puck in the Bucks zone for more than ten seconds. From where we’re standing, the whole right third of the far ice is obscured from view.

“So how much money do you think these guys make?” Jasmine asks me as we try craning our necks for a better view.

“Not hardly anything. I mean, enough to live, sure, but they probably have jobs in the off season. Thirty thousand a year maybe?”

It turns out thirty thousand is a little generous. The Central Hockey League is equivalent to baseball's double "A" leagues – that is, it's a third tier hockey league. NHL contracts can total in the millions and AHL (American Hockey League) contracts, the Triple "A" of hockey, average about sixty thousand a year. Each CHL team has a salary cap of eighty-five hundred a week. Divide that by eighteen players and that's \$472.22 a week – for five months out of the year. The teams provide room and board, but all told salaries end up being a shade under ninety-five hundred dollars a season. Chances for advancement to the NHL are virtually non-existent, and even AHL aspirations can be a stretch. It's hardly waxing poetic to say these men are motivated purely by love of the game.<sup>2</sup>

With just about two and a half minutes left to go in the period, the Ice Bats get called for a penalty. They've already survived several this period thanks to Quesada, but goalie play can only go so far. Sure enough, twelve seconds into the power play Laredo draws first blood in the game, scoring off a sloppy rebound. You can tell the crowd was hoping Quesada's magic would hold out just a little bit longer.

I look over to Waltrip, who's been conspicuously quiet these past few minutes.

"Hey, what's the matter, man? Why so quiet?"

"Oh, I just don't want to make an ass of myself."

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[http://www.coloradoan.com/news/coloradoanpublishing/Eagles2004/010605\\_committed.html](http://www.coloradoan.com/news/coloradoanpublishing/Eagles2004/010605_committed.html) and [http://www.pjstar.com/sports/ssections/icetime/2005/RIV\\_B7NBU3M7.082.shtml](http://www.pjstar.com/sports/ssections/icetime/2005/RIV_B7NBU3M7.082.shtml)

"You weren't making an ass of myself. I just wanted to let you know that guy was glaring at you. Cheer on, it's more fun that way for everybody."

"I didn't even know 'crap' was considered a curse..."

The period closes out uneventfully as the entertainment for intermission two prepares to take the ice. Starting at the Zamboni door and snaking its way back to where we're standing is a line of about twenty or so twelve-year old girls, all wearing hockey helmets and carrying broomball sticks. For the uninformed, broomball involves running on ice with sneakers and using a stick similar to a long ice scraper to knock a ball into the net. As my ears are starting to acclimate to the P.A system, I make out that the girls are a local soccer team. Why that qualifies them to play broomball in between periods at an Ice Bats game I'm not sure, but I suspect Pee Wee hockey leagues in the area are few and far between.

The hockey goals are moved in between the blue lines, setting up a playing field for the girls width-wise in the center of the ice. But with twenty girls in that confined space, play degenerates to little more than a game of foosball. It doesn't help that the girls seem scared to death of being 'that girl' that that fell in front of an arena full of people. I watch as two girls go after a ball in one of the few pockets of open ice, both walking with the concentration of a sobriety test.

It doesn't take long for my interest in the game to wane. What overtakes it is the sudden realization that my feet are freezing. They're still wet from the nasty weather and being right near the ice is not helping at all.

We all seem to hit on this problem at the same time, and I decide to walk the arena a bit to see if I can find a better standing spot.

I go back to where we entered and take the other available path: a set of stairs leading up to the stands. At the top is an aisle that runs the length of the bleachers. This was where we had spotted the camouflage boy, though sadly there's no sign of him now. I walk the aisle and stop at mid ice. The broomball game has moved on to a shootout with the score tied 0-0. Looking around, I realize how divorced we are from the crowd standing over in the corner. The game seems to be a popular place for parents with kids six to ten years old. There's also a lot of teenagers around, though God forbid they'd show up here with their parents. Two teens strike me in particular – a couple out on a date. They sit in the back row, the boy with his arm slung around the girl. They're beautiful kids. Not in the stereotypical, captain of the football team and head cheerleader sort of way, though there's no doubt they're card carrying members of the high school elite. It's their skin that does it; both of them. They have completely unblemished, smooth skin, a shade pale from winter, with perfectly groomed, frizzless black hair to set it all off.

Jack and Diane are the first names that come to mind, followed by their Long Island counterparts Brenda and Eddie. I marvel at their fresh-faced perfection. And suddenly these kids, completely oblivious to their voyeur, have become a symbol for this whole evening. It seems like only here – in an “arena” that seats less than 2,000, where little girls playing broomball and mascots slingshotting pucks at fake deer can legitimately pass as entertainment, where grown men forsake money, security and notoriety

for the simple love of a game – only here can such a couple exist, feeding off this innocent, small town saline solution. They'd asphyxiate in the outside world, collapsing in the parking lot to flop and flounder like two desperate halibut. I spend a minute appreciating them for what they are before releasing them back to the wild.

The time allotted for the broomball game expires with the score still 0-0. They herd the girls off and Fang comes out on his ATV for a few minutes of sliding and spinning. Seeing no better standing positions available, I make my way back to the group.

My mind returns to the couple as I walk. What is it about small town feel that appeals to me? Innocence, I suppose, but innocence is too generalized to hit it right on. A baby is innocent, but certainly not small town. What's more, this isn't a small town at all; it's the Austin Metropolitan area, with a population just under one and a half million. Yet small town is the only word that comes to mind to describe all this. I know there's something deeper to it, but I can't quite place it yet.

“It's not really any better over there,” I say when I get back. “We might as well stay here.”

“I wonder how much it is for cab fair back home,” Waltrip wonders aloud.

“We should do this again as a house trip,” Jasmine says. “We could buy tickets in advance this time.”

“Definitely,” I say. “And you know, I noticed they didn't pat us down when we came in. We could probably bring some flasks in next time. I bet half the crowd has flasks right now.”

We're considering the merits of this idea when "Boko" the Bobcat pokes his head into our circle. Boko had visited us earlier, shaking his butt in front of Jasmine so that she would touch his tail and acting like shivers ran up his spine every time she tugged it. What is that mischievous cat up to this time?

Boko comes up to me and grabs at the Frisbee. My Frisbee. My plastic anecdote.

"What are you doing?" I ask, not letting go of the Frisbee. Boko pulls harder, causing me to lurch forward. I hold my ground. He pulls harder still and I can feel the tensions distorting the Frisbee. I look to Boko's face for some indication of what's going on but of course that's no help – it's still an idiot disguised in a cat costume. Finally I let it go, mostly because I don't want to be that guy that gets in a fight with the mascot.

He steps five or six paces away, near to where the bleachers start up, and turns around to face me.

"Okay, great. Now throw it back."

Boko shakes his head.

"No, I want it back. Yea. C'mon, throw it."

Boko dangles the Frisbee over his head then pretends to hold his pants open as he dips the Frisbee below his waist.

"No, no. I'd still want the Frisbee. You don't quite understand. You see, there's a story involved."

Boko looks at the Frisbee and notes that it's signed in Sharpie by one of the Ice Bats. He gives me the A-OK sign.

"Yea, it *is* signed. It's great. Can I have it back now?"

Boko swats his hand at me to show disgust, then walks back over and hands me the Frisbee.

"Yea thanks...what the hell was that?" I say after he's gone.

"I think he wanted to give it to one of the kids," Jasmine says.

"Since when is interrupting a conversation and stealing a Frisbee acceptable behavior for a mascot? I don't care who he wants to give it to, it's not his Frisbee to give. There's a story behind this Frisbee!"

The whole encounter deprived me of the Zamboni's beautiful ballet; by this point players are already skating about the ice awaiting the face-off.

The puck is dropped and controlled by the Bats. The first two minutes are spent almost entirely on Laredo's end, the end closer to us. Austin looks like a different team, keeping the puck in the zone, passing crisply and manufacturing quality shots on goal. You can tell they're quality shots when the crowd collectively gasps with every save.

The play also seems chippier to me than before. Both teams dole out checks with a pain first, puck second mentality. The players are exchanging words during nearly every stoppage of play. You can tell they want to fight, but the game still hangs in the balance.

A tripping penalty sends a Laredo player off for two minutes, ratcheting up Austin's pressure further. They don't score, but there's a resulting sense that it's only a matter of time. In the sixth minute, Henry Kuster of the Ice Bats shoots a pass to John McNabb at the left circle. McNabb dekes a defender and it's just him and the goalie. From five feet out, he wrists a shot from a near impossible fifteen degree angle. The puck

somehow finds a way over the keeper's right shoulder and sticks the top shelf, or as Buffalo Sabres announcer Rick Jenneret might say, "Where Momma hides the cookies." The net barely moves.

The arena goes crazy. Jasmine and I double high five, screaming like mad. The P.A. plays "We Will Rock You" for the tenth time that night. Waltrip just stands there with a face that's priceless. No anger or happiness, just the expression of someone who has witnessed a small miracle against their favor they can't possibly fight. The prospect of overtime veils his face.

With the drop of the puck at center ice, the intensity is taken to a new level. The arena hums with energy, revitalized with hope and united in common desire. The smack talk stops, too. No one wants to be the player that puts their team on the penalty kill. The checking remains merciless.

Without saying anything to anyone, Waltrip walks off to the lobby.

"Where'd he go to?" I ask Jasmine.

"Not sure."

"I think he's mad there might be overtime. I know he said he was cold; do you think he's coming back?"

"I don't know."

The Ice Bats are still dominating the period. Laredo hasn't had the puck in Austin's end for more than ten seconds at a time. On one rush, a Laredo player goes into the far left corner to dig out a puck shot around the boards. Ice Bats Right Winger John Ronan is locked on. He slashes the Laredo player from behind with his stick and the Buck crumbles to the ice.

Laredo trainers in special ice shoes run out to treat their injured player. There's some movement of limbs, but otherwise the player is completely laid out.

"Oh my God," Jasmine says, concern on her face. "Is he okay?"

"I'm sure he's fine," I respond. Of course, fine is relative. To someone who follows sports as much as myself, a concussion is "fine." So long as I see a leg moving, I can easily detach myself from the suffering out on the field, ice, or court. The only time I get really concerned is if it's a player from my team down on the floor, because that affects my team's chances of winning. Disgusting to a non-sports fan I'm sure, and while I'm not proud of my aloofness, I'm not ashamed of it, either. Injuries in sports are a fact of life, and any sporting event you see on TV reflects and reinforces that. So I'll wince when I see an injury happen. And I'll worry through a commercial break if it's one of my own. And when the player limps off or is driven off in one of those injury carts, I'll applaud him if I'm at the game and maybe even a little in my living room.

But I'll never care about his pain. And I'll never think about his fear. And my interest in his health can be measured with terms like "2-4 weeks." Because that's the system: I can only care about you in three-hour increments.

The Laredo player manages to get his feet under him and skates to the bench with the assistance of the trainers. The crowd gives him his due. The family of four takes this opportunity to leave for the night, apparently unwilling to put off the thrill of the car ride home any longer. Waltrip

returns. We commandeer the vacant seats and settle in for what promises to be some exciting final minutes of hockey.

Play resumes with the Ice Bats controlling the puck. An Austin turnover leads to a two-on-two Laredo rush. The Laredo right-winger takes a slap shot from thirty feet out, using the defender as a screen. The shot flies right past Quesada, and just that quick the Bucks take a 2-1 lead with seven minutes to play.

I spike my Frisbee on the ground in disgust. Jasmine smirks at me. I have no trouble getting emotionally involved in sports, even if I've never rooted for a team previously. I pace behind the seats, muttering about potential ways we can get back in this game.

"You know what I noticed." Waltrip mentions over his shoulder as I pass behind him.

"What's that?"

"There's no one out there in the lobby right now. No ushers or anything. Anyone could walk in right now without a problem."

And there it is. That's what makes this place so special. That's what gives it its "small town" feel. It's completely unregulated, unincorporate, and unprocessed – and it's wonderful.

The NHL sells a product. The thing about products is they require an even-keel to function – serious money depends on it. Sneaking in food and drink harms the product. Sneaking into games late damages the value of the product. Drunken T-Rex cashiers harm the product; exceptional, initiative-taking P.R. reps do not improve tee-shirt sales or beer consumption.

As an "even-keel" goes into the system, so it comes out of the system. The steep ticket prices necessitated by costly overhead fill the arenas with fans from very specific socioeconomic backgrounds, leaving your typical angsty teen in fatigues and black boots out in the cold. The high price of sponsorship rights also has a homogenizing effect. Say goodbye to your friendly, neighborhood ATV dealer. In the NHL, sport is secondary – a means to an end.

The CHL sells an experience. Sure, it tries to be a product, but it's naturally inferior. Here, not only is "even-keel" irrelevant, it hinders. People don't come here for a homogenized experience. People come because they can sneak in a flask and drink with friends. They come because it's cheap fun on a Friday night. They come for the people watching and the laughable entertainment and the crappy P.A. playing the same seven songs and the right to laugh and make fun of it all because for at least three hours in your life not everything is florescent tube lighting and pre-packaged, beige-tinted banality.

And they come for sport. Sport unspoiled by consumerism. Something pure, like a small town that doesn't exist. In the CHL, sport is *sport*.

The puck drops with 6:58 to play in the game. There's still time, but not much. The momentum has shifted back in Laredo's favor at the most inopportune of times. With six minutes left to play, Austin takes a double minor. My Frisbee goes flying.

"What's that mean?" Jasmine asks.

“That’s a double minor. That’s four minutes we’ll be down a man with six minutes to play. We’re done.”

The Bats don’t share my view. You can tell they want a point off the division leaders in the worst way, this the first game after the All-Star Break. This game could set the tone for the rest of the season. For the first two minutes, they actually keep the puck in Laredo's zone more than the Bucks keep it in theirs. With a little less than four minutes to go, the ref’s arm goes up: #4 Laredo, two minutes for tripping.

“Alright,” I say, mostly to myself. “Four on four, than five on five. At least it’s doable.”

With four on four the action’s quick, and neither team can seem to get anything established. No one’s complaining about the cold anymore. Rushing back and forth in a state of urgency with two less players on the ice, fifty-six minutes into a hockey game is where team conditioning really shows. The Bats crash the net. The ref’s hand goes up: #18 Laredo, two minutes interference.

A Laredo player goes ballistic at the call. He gets up in the ref’s face and starts chewing him out. The ref’s body is there, but his eyes are somewhere far away. Some Bucks take their teammate aside before he makes the situation worse.

“Oh man. So there’s 2:06 left. That means six seconds of four on three, eight seconds of five on three, five on four until six seconds left in the game and then six on four once we pull the goalie.”

“What? What? I don’t...what?” Jasmine responds.

“Never mind. This is good. We have a shot.”

The Bats set up in Laredo’s zone, drawing closer and closer to the net, reigning in the three Buck players like henchmen encircle heroes in cheesy B Westerns. Laredo clears the zone and now it’s five on four. An Ice Bat sits with the puck behind his own net, surveying the ice and letting his team set up. The crowd knows this is it, and lets their team hear it. They work the puck into Laredo territory. As soon as they get there, Quesada sprints to the bench so they can have the six on four advantage. My heart sinks as a Laredo player flings the puck around the boards and all the way down the ice.

“Come on, Ice Bats, set it up!!”

There’s a tangle at center ice along the left boards. The seconds tick away. A Laredo player shoots on the net wide and the Bats are forced to start over.

With thirty seconds left, they break through Laredo’s blue line. Passes rim the perimeter, trying to find some lapse in the coverage. A sloppy pass sends the puck into open space, along the right boards two feet from the blue line. There’s a mad dash for the puck – getting it out of the zone effectively ends the game. Two players reach it at the same time, the puck deadlocked between them as they each parry the other’s stick swipes. The Buck lowers his shoulder and muscles himself six inches, enough room to feebly hit the puck three feet to a neighboring teammate. The teammate fires a cross-ice pass to a streaking Buck who flips the puck in the empty net from fifty feet out. 3-1 Laredo with 2.5 seconds remaining.

The crowd deflates. People start making their way towards the exit in the hopes of beating traffic. I just sigh and hang my head.

The ref drops the puck at mid-ice and immediately gloves are thrown. It's the only thing missing from our evening. All that pent up hostility from when the game was on the line wants out. The ref and linesman converge on the area, putting themselves between the players in question. After twenty seconds or so, the crowd breaks up and the players leave the ice. Some fans boo. They wanted their team to win something. I can't say I blame them.

We leave out a side exit. Even with the loss, we talk about how much fun the game was and how we should do it again soon. Excitement gone, my feet again turn cold and clammy, and an idling car with the heat turned up sounds like the greatest thing in the world.

The three of us get in the car and spend a couple of seconds in silence decompressing. Not a bad way to spend a Friday night. Waltrip is the first to speak up.

“Well thanks a lot for forcing me to go, guys. I had a great time.”