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Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.

—Robert Frost

SO THIS HOCKEY player moved into the apartment next door, and that's when all the trouble started.

Pam and I had been in this apartment over near Lake Waco since we got married four years ago. Chandler, our two-year-old, had one bedroom and we had the other. We all shared the kitchen, bathroom, living-room, and patio, although judging from the dispersion pattern of Chandler's toys, he shared the rest of the house with us only unwillingly, and his casual appropriation made my vasectomy look like a pretty good idea.

I took the news that we had a new neighbour with limited joy. Renters are a transient bunch, and in the last four years, we have seen a cross-section of Texans and had some kind of problem with almost all of them: we've had a couple of Hispanic girls who played Tejano music at all hours but were nice enough about turning it down if we banged on the walls; we've had a black family that numbered somewhere between two and twenty-two—judging by the shifting number sitting on the stairs when we came and went—who favoured Luther Vandross in the afternoon and wall-rattling rap late at night which they would not turn down even under threats of law enforcement; we've had a bunch of redneck boys who studied at the local technical college and who jammed the tiny parking lot with their big Ford pickup trucks and favoured middle-of-the-road country music played at medium volume; we've even had a lovely retired man and wife from Minnesota who came to Texas for the winter and left in May when, I guess, the heat got

to be too much for their Norwegian constitutions, and who never, to the best of our recollections, listened to music of any kind or made any sort of noise at all. I still miss them.

And then this hockey player. All I knew about hockey when he moved in was that it is a game where white men on skates try to knock the crap out of each other, but I also knew our town had just gotten a minor-league team and that this guy must play for it and that I would probably learn some things from his proximity, which did turn out to be what happened.

The first time I met him was a few days after he moved in. I was leaving for work around six in the a.m. and he was coming home for the evening. He raced into the parking lot in his red Miata, slammed on the brakes just short of the sidewalk, and vaulted out of the car like Speed Racer. He was built like a wrestler—burly, long arms, thick neck—and he had short dark hair and a devilish Fu Manchu. I nodded at him, climbed into my old Accord, and went off to the garage, which I own and run and where I spend from twelve to sixteen hours of every workday. I didn't always work so hard, but when we had Chandler I wanted to get us out of an apartment and into a house of our own, and I thought that maybe after another year or so we'd have saved enough to do just that.

"David, I saw the hockey player," Pam informed me that night when I got home. "He was at the pool." Although it was late September, our pool was still open and it was still plenty warm enough to swim, which Pam and Chandler did every afternoon.

"Did you now?" I said, kissing her on the cheek and lofting Chandler for his welcome-home hug. Pam has been celebrity-crazy as long as I've known her. She has an autograph collection that goes back to when she was a kid: David Lee Roth, Emilio Estevez, Christopher Reeve. When we ran into the weekend weatherman for the Waco ABC affiliate at the grocery store, Pam got all breathless and pulled me into the frozen vegetables to confirm his identity. So it didn't surprise me a bit to hear her getting all frozen-vegetablist about our new celebrity neighbour.

"I didn't talk to him," she said. Chandler was saying "Dadadadada" into my neck and it tickled, so I set him back down on the ground and he returned to the cars that must have been occupying him before I walked in.

“Why not?”

She pursed her lips and hesitated. “He was sort of—scary.”

“Scary,” I said. I stepped into the kitchen to make myself a sandwich. “He was probably partying all night. Three hours of sleep’d make anyone scary.” Pam and I had been partiers ourselves in our younger days, but now I had the garage and she had Chandler and our lives were settled and ordinary and maybe even what some people would call a little bit dull.

“I heard him talking to some college girls, though. He invited them to the game on Thursday.”

I spread mustard on a slice of bread. “That’s their first home game, right? Want to go?”

“Can you?”

I nodded, my mouth full of ham and cheese. When I could speak, I said, “I can close up early. Let’s call my mom and see if she wants to watch Chandler.”

Pam rolled her eyes, which was a proper reaction, I guess; my mom not only would not mind watching Chandler, she would gladly snap up the rights to him if he ever came on the market. I could hardly get him back from her when we went to visit. The eye roll also included the fact that my mom and Pam never got along too well; my mother always told me that there was something about Pam she didn’t trust. “Let’s take Chandler with us,” she said. “He’s old enough to do something like that. And he might like it.”

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll all go. It might even be fun.” I didn’t really imagine that it would be, but who knows? I’ve been surprised by more than a few things during my life, and I thought that maybe hockey would be one of them.

Owning a garage isn’t as glamorous as you might think. I mean, it’s true that I am my own boss, but unless you want to hire other workers and pay their FICA and Workman’s Comp and have the ten thousand other worries that go with being someone else’s boss, you have to work yourself like you’re more than one person. So I go in to the garage five—and sometimes six—days a week, and I’m hard at work before most people even have breakfast. But I like it. I understand engines and transmissions and transaxles; I find and replace a faulty part, and suddenly everything works.

That's a good feeling. And when I think I'm going to have to replace some poor guy's clutch and then I find out it only needs a new shifter bushing and I'm going to save him about four hundred bucks—well, that's a good feeling too. That's a guy who'll be happy to write me a cheque, happy to bring me his car again next time something goes wrong, happy to tell his friends that there's at least one honest man left in the world.

This hockey game was played in the Heart of Texas Fairgrounds Arena, which is a place where Pam and I have watched rodeo before. I didn't much like the feel of the place with the hockey crowd inside. There were families like us there, but mostly it seemed like men with bottomless beer cups and voices screamed hoarse. When we first got seated, Chandler spilled a little of his Coke onto the arm of the guy in front of us and he turned around and glared at us, this guy in his forties or fifties with a red fleshy face and deep-set piggy eyes.

"You oughta be more careful," he said, half-ready to rise out of his seat.

"He's only two years old," Pam said, and her pointing finger came up. "You oughta—"

"It was an accident," I said. "I'm sorry." And I nudged Pam with my foot to keep quiet. This was a place where the normal rules of civilized discourse had been suspended.

And then the team introductions started and Pam lost interest in the pig-man and flipped madly through the program to the team pictures. "That's him," she said, and she circled his picture with her pen. "Guy LeBlanc." She turned to me breathlessly. "He's from Canada."

"I didn't think he was from Denton," I said. I stretched out my hand to put on her back, but she shifted away from its weight, unwilling to be distracted.

And then our neighbour skated out onto the ice. The announcer pronounced his name French-style, like "Guy" rhymed with "tree," which gave Pam another little shiver of delight, and I have to say he did look pretty menacing, all padded and helmeted and a couple of inches taller, thanks to the skates.

Chandler was grabbing my arm with one hand and pointing out at the men on the ice with the other and saying something I couldn't understand until about the fifth repetition. "No," I said. "Not bats. Sticks. Hockey sticks. And they're on skates. Ice skates."

"This is fun," Pam said, clapping her hands together like the cheerleader she once was. "I hope they win."

"Me too." Neither of us had ever seen a hockey game before except for clips on SportsCenter. At first it didn't seem that interesting. The puck went up and down the ice and with it a mob of skaters. Whenever they got the chance, they would mash each other into the wall, which would set off the fans sitting closest to the action and get them pounding on the glass like they wanted out on the ice themselves. But every now and then, one man would break out of the pack and speed down the ice toward the opposite goal and the crowd would go wild and time seemed to stand still while he drew back his stick and slapped the puck forward, and once the skater breaking loose was our neighbour, Guy.

"He's really good," Pam said, when he scored a goal in the second period.

"He'd have to be," I said. "To afford that Miata."

Just then a fight broke out in the walkway beneath us. I didn't see how it started, but all of a sudden four guys were whaling away at each other and beer translated an amber arc as a cup sailed through the air and then one of them was down on the ground and another was punching him in the face, hard, not movie or TV punches but one real man beating another senseless and I could hear the crunch the blows made when they landed and some little girls in front of us were screaming and the guys around us were cheering and I got up thinking I ought to do something, maybe try and pull them apart, and then I saw Chandler was crying and covering his ears with his hands so he couldn't hear and my stomach tightened and I scooped him up and told Pam, "Come on. We're getting out of here."

"I don't want to go, David," she said without looking away from the ice for more than a moment. "Look, they're breaking it up." And some security guys and Waco police had arrived to put the combatants into head and wrist locks and escort them outside, there probably to continue what they'd started, or more likely, to the county jail.

But Chandler had his hands over his ears and his eyes squinched shut and was sobbing in my arms and I knew he was already on the exit ramp for Nightmare City and my stomach was in knots. "Come on," I said. "Pam, come on. We're going."

It just so happened that as we were walking out of the arena the crowd went into an enormous frenzy of booing. Two of the Waco players were being escorted to the penalty box. I didn't know their crime, and I didn't care. With the boos ringing in my ears, I opened the outside door and we stepped into the warm and humid night.

The weeks that followed that night are a mess, just a bunch of seemingly unrelated observations, incidents, and actions that only made sense later. I didn't know there was a pattern there; I was just trying to keep my head above water.

I had a spurt of new business at the garage that kept me there morning and night, and even coming home for lunch, I didn't see my family much at all for almost three weeks. I was getting by on less than four hours of sleep a night, which is not good for much besides operating on instinct, which is how I was repairing all these cars, I guess. It's certainly not good for figuring things out or for remembering things, although there are a few things I can remember from that time.

I remember that Pam went on a diet. She had been telling me for months she thought she was about twenty pounds too heavy, weight she'd never dropped after the baby, so she started drinking Slim-Fast, and then after awhile, she started going out running when I came home for lunch and could watch Chandler. She'd come back dripping with sweat but smiling like she'd won a marathon, and in that running bra and shorts and shining with sweat and with that satisfied smile on her face she looked so sexy that I used to try and take her in my arms, but she'd pull herself loose, take my plate in to the sink to rinse it off, and go change into her swimsuit so she and Chandler could go down to the pool.

Another thing I remember is that after a lull of a few days that might correspond to wiring up the stereo, the apartment next door showed its taste in music, thrash metal, which I had never thought of as particularly Canadian, but maybe it was a universal

language of some sort, a mother tongue of anger and anguish. When I came home for lunch, the bass would be vibrating through the wall and I could almost make out the words being wailed in Guy's apartment.

"I'll call the office and have them make him turn it down," I said the first time I came home to the roar from next-door.

"Oh, it's not so bad," she said, tying her running shoes. "Don't worry about it. Eat your lunch. I'll be back in a bit." And she smiled—like she kind of liked the music, even—and went on her way.

I remember one Sunday morning when the three of us were going to church and we met Guy on the stairs—we were going down and he was coming up. He had been out all night again, and had been either indulging—or bathing—in bourbon, which I didn't know they drank in Canada and figured must be a lately-learned vice. He didn't so much as look at me but smiled at Pam and—if I saw correctly—winked. Pam blushed and dropped her gaze to the stairs. As we walked out to the Accord, I thought I heard a low chuckling from his landing before the door closed behind him.

One last thing I remember from those days was that part of the time I was working on our own car, the VW that Pam drove. It was a real safe car, although she didn't like it much, said it wasn't sporty enough for her. So I put in some overtime replacing the old mushy suspension with some new heavy-duty springs and a new rear-strut assembly so it would corner like a sports car. I gave it back to her, but she didn't say anything about how it drove, didn't mention the work I'd done on it at all. That hurt my feelings at first. Then I figured that it was the least I could do for her, that it was my job to take care of her after all, and that I shouldn't expect her to make a big deal out of my working on her car. That was just what I was supposed to do.

I also remember that despite my misgivings, we went back to see some more hockey—without Chandler—and Pam really started to get into it. On nights when I couldn't get home, she took to going to the arena without me. She started learning rules and keeping track of statistics. She bought a T-shirt with the team logo on it and a cap and thought about buying a jacket before I cut off her discretionary clothing funds.

I suppose that by now even somebody operating on four hours of sleep could see that something unusual was going on, something that had to do in some way with hockey, this extreme enthusiasm that my wife had suddenly developed, and so something that probably had to do with Guy, our celebrity neighbour.

Now I began to suspect things, and the things I suspected were like glowing hot irons stuck into my heart. I knew that Pam and I hadn't made love in months, a lack I'd felt like a dull ache in my everyday life but hadn't translated into meaning before. Now I began to wonder if maybe Pam had overcome her own ache without my help.

I didn't want to think such thoughts, but things had started to become clear to me. I know the cliché—the clueless husband finds out when he walks in on his wife and her lover in the middle of the afternoon while he's supposed to be at work—but that's not what happened. I'm ashamed to say that it's not because I didn't make up excuses to come home in the middle of the afternoon. I did. It's just that I didn't catch her doing anything. On those occasions when I returned an hour or two after I'd left for a phone number I'd forgotten or a tool I'd left in a closet, she and Chandler were out at the pool, and the one time Guy was in evidence, he was sitting across the pool from her.

I didn't want to ask her anything. I thought that maybe I would rather die in ignorance than live in shame. But one night I got home just after she had gone to bed instead of after she'd been asleep for hours and I turned on the light on the night stand and sat on the edge of the bed and she opened her eyes and said, "David?"

"Pam," I said, "Are you happy? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is okay," she said. "Turn out the light."

So I didn't walk in on anything. I almost wish I had. It would have been better than being away at work, wrapped up in worrying about my wife, in imagining what might be happening at home while I was miles away, adjusting an idle or installing a master cylinder. I believe in a Hell where souls are tortured eternally, and I think I've had a tiny taste of how terrible it must be to be powerless and in anguish.

One day a bad transmission I was dropping out of a Jetta came crashing down on my chest. It was a stupid mistake, I hadn't meant to undo one of the bolts yet, and it left a huge bruise that went first black then blue then green and caused me torment just breathing in and out. I might have cracked some ribs even, but I didn't have time to get it checked out, and to be honest, I was embarrassed to. I couldn't tell any doctor why I had been so distracted, so I would just look like some shade-tree mechanic with a short attention span.

I tried to be more careful after that, because there are ways that you can get not only hurt but dead around cars. But I couldn't stop wondering, and I couldn't stop thinking, and I couldn't stop seeing them together in my head, her kisses raining down on his fiendish Fu Manchu, and I breathed deeply in and out until the pain brought tears to my eyes.

"There's more than one way to skin a cat," my dad used to say. He was talking about fixing cars; I don't think he ever skinned a cat in any fashion whatsoever. But he meant that there may be more than one way to get something done, more than one avenue to the solution, and not all of those ways require planning.

Sometimes finding the truth can be as simple as taking out the trash.

I'd forgotten to pick up trash bags, so the overflowing kitchen garbage, which usually would have been neatly bagged when it got full, needed to be taken out and dumped. While Pam was out on her lunch-time run, I left Chandler under the table with his cars for amusement and the booming thrash metal from Guy's living-room for accompaniment and went outside to do just that.

I opened up the top of the dumpster, saw that it too was packed, and shoved the can in to try and force some space. Our trash fell slowly into the slight depression I had made: banana peels, empty Slim-Fast cans, toilet paper, disposable diapers. I mashed it down and tilted the trashcan a little more: diapers, more diapers, a frozen pizza box.

A home pregnancy test.

I blinked. Trash shifting, I thought. Somebody else's stuff.

And then the box came tumbling out of the trashcan I was

holding, the happy couple on the front indisputably plummeting out of my trash like they had sometimes done back in the days when Pam and I were trying to make Chandler.

I dropped the trashcan at my feet. It hit with a thump and fell over. I caught a strong whiff of Chandler's soiled diapers, and I remember thinking, so this is what adultery smells like. It seemed like a funny thought to have at a time like this, the kind of random and disconnected thought that an exhausted man might have. I stood there for awhile, my chest shot through with pain, my nose full of rot, decay, and dirty diapers, and at last, because I couldn't help myself, I reached into the dumpster, uncovered the plastic pregnancy test, and turned it over to see what it said.

Then I went back up and got Chandler, carried him down to Pam's car, strapped him in the child-seat, and took off down the road to find my unfaithful jogging wife.

She was not to be found. We cruised the streets from our apartment out to the lake, and she was nowhere, not any of the places she had told me that she ran. I took Chandler by my mother's, told her I couldn't explain anything just then, and hurried back to the apartment. As I pulled up, there was a flash of motion behind Guy's front blinds, but when I ran up the stairs and pounded on his door there was no answer, just the steady thump, thump, thump of his music.

Few things on earth are as horrible as coming to realize how stupid you have been, and that afternoon, as I replaced the brake lines of a Mazda RX-7, I could only shake my head and imagine how they must have laughed at me through that one thin wall. While I lay on the floor playing cars with my son, they lay in bed playing doctor with each other, and that music screened their screams. At last, I couldn't think about it for another minute, my stupidity or her deceit, and taking an iron pry bar from the tool bench, I climbed into the Accord and drove back to the apartment, the solid heft of the tool a comforting weight on my thigh.

The Miata was gone. The VW was gone. So I drove up to the arena, where I found the Miata in the parking lot out in front of the ticket office. I went to a side entrance—the very entrance I had tried to pull my family to safety through that night—popped it open with the pry bar, and walked into the dark concourse. The rink was lighted, and I followed that dim light to the floor of the arena.

I opened the back of the penalty box and stepped through it and out onto the ice, slippery and cold beneath my work boots.

"Guy LeBlanc," I yelled, and it echoed through the empty arena like a challenge voiced on an empty world. "Guy LeBlanc."

I took a faulty step forward, then another, then my foot slid and I fell full-length onto the ice and the pry bar skated across the blueline without me and for a moment, only my senses existed: the pain of my chest against the hard ice; the chill creeping up into my hands and knees as I struggled to rise; my own voice still ricocheting around the rafters like an errant bullet in a granite canyon; my face wet and flushed and cold as death.

"They've left town," a voice said, a voice so near and so full of dignity that for a moment I mistook it for the voice of God.

"Why?" I said. Then I realized the voice was talking about the hockey team, raised my head, and saw that my God was a black janitor who stood next to me, balanced gingerly on his tennis shoes and looking down at me with his head tilted like he was viewing an interesting and newly discovered form of life.

"Say," he remembered, "you shouldn't be out on the ice. They'd raise hell with me if they found out."

"Sorry about that," I said. "I won't tell if you won't."

"That your pry bar?" he asked, extending his hand to help me up.

I nodded. "I was going to do some work on Guy LeBlanc's car." He pulled me slowly to my feet, where I moved stiffly to the wall, picked up the pry bar, and made my way off the ice.

I've called home five times since I got back to the shop and haven't gotten an answer, and even though I now know that the janitor was not the voice of God, I'm convinced that he spoke the truth. Now I can see that Guy is everything that I'm not and everything Pam might want, that she is gone for good, and I don't know what I'm going to do next.

There's a tiny part of me that remembers what I told the janitor, that thinks I should crawl under that sporty red Miata, clip the brake line, jam the accelerator so that the first time he gets up some good speed he won't be able to stop himself. That's the part

of me that thinks if I can just get this Guy to pile into a bridge abutment she'll come back to me.

But all of that is just crazy talk. The rest of me knows that it's not just Guy. It's Pam. It's Chandler. It's me. It's the life we led and the life she wanted and the absence and the distance and the loneliness. The rest of me knows that we're not what I thought we were, that everything I was working toward was just a dream I dreamed alone, for that is all dreams can ever be.

I have learned some things since the hockey player moved in next door, though, tiny pieces of knowledge I'm going to have to weave into a life for Chandler and me: I know that there are many things in this world that can't be fixed with a socket wrench; I know that my mother is going to have a field-day telling me how right she was; I know that one of us is going to have to move out of that apartment complex. And I know that I have learned enough about hockey to hate it with every fibre of my being, know that I will never again see even a snatch of a game without feeling my chest tighten like a vice grip has hold of me, without my arm stretching out to touch something that is no longer there, without feeling the ice stealing the very life out of me.