

3: They Live By Night

Seasons in sport see no end. Capitalist designs force infinite viewing. Satellite and cable television governs time. Ratings and ticket sales desire the world. Networks thrive on patriotism within their ranks to seek monopolies that see them pillage the consumer. Product pushers. Commercial breaks. Billboards and souvenir stalls. Super teams can't resist the financial mega status. Now, even amateur teams are obliged. Manufactured ice holds fast. Nature's caps crack and fracture, disappearing forever. North Pole Sports presents - one day on the all year round hockey rink. Draw back. Pull back. Slap shot. Icicles laid out flat. Bivouacked raindrops. Sticks scrape, cut, and crack. Coaches scream on deaf ears. Hand ballet commands reap rewards. Drums chase the chaotic beat, fans willing their heroes forth. In pursuit of the last lantern before it disappears amongst the trees, before time's up. The goal-minder holds firm. His shield shivered in many pieces. He stands a moment, as a man who is pierced in the midst of a cry by an arrow through the heart. Sinews frozen. The arena. Fellow combatants cleave one another as tension mounts. He casts his sword, his stick, up into the light and sings as he catches it. Clapsed hands. The clock wears away. Personalities smoulder. Bodies reek. The light of the glass torches shimmer like sun in the spray of a fountain. The enemy. Draw back. Smack. Like a dream hurtling toward the never world. This way. That way. Which way? Hand down. No noise. Check to find the fly under the paper cup. Yes. Caught.

Jimmy Stiles is lost in the moment, as ever a humble spectator to the grind. The street is his game. Courts are free. Basketball's a joy and a gamble. Make some green by shooting a hoop. The stick. The pads. The hassle. Here he just gets to watch one Chipper Jones. A friend. The kind of friend you'd take a kicking for and with. Dive in. Wade in. Jaw crack. Smack. Break.

An unwanted neighbour invades Jimmy's concentration, "They hide in the stars. The ocean. Pressure isn't too much. Deep isn't deep enough. Resting. Trenches. Space. Space. A distant galaxy... Near. Far. Been here already. Anti-matter. Matter. Solar winds. Armies. They won. We were defeated. We're weak. You're weak. I know. I know. Them. There. Here. Everywhere."

Curtis Strange. He gets around, a believer in the extra-terrestrial, a UFO searcher. Man of the street. Homeless.

Curtis was brought up in Kansas, Missouri. Lost his sense of equilibrium in Kansas, Missouri, the centre of the UFO belt. Took to freight train hopping to journey to Banff. The aliens won the war against the USA and Canada. Now, they're based in Alberta. Did you not know that? How naive. Anyway, Curtis is a strange fish. Not a romantic. Not a dreamer. A lunatic most might call him. Harmless. Intelligent. OK. Comes to the hockey a lot. Hey, so do half the criminal population of America. He receives his tickets for being an accidental hero. He could have taken a new life, a job. He chose to just be able to come to the hockey regularly. Hockey fascinates him. Ice transfixes him. The sky at night sustains him. It's forever peace and enchantment. Look when you get the chance. Watch the stars become more and more on a clear night. Sometimes there's barely enough space for black and the stars seem to fall, like holes in the heavens. Perhaps there are aliens somewhere. Hopefully there are, otherwise we're one breath in an

eternal mansion. Believe in such and you're deluded. Claim to have been carried away and you'll be institutionalised.

Astrophysicists, cosmologists, alienologists, fanatics, lunatics, Trekkies, and the Arthur C. Clarkes, K. Dicks and Spielbergs of this rock. People are strange. Curtis was born to be nothing but.

Jimmy blows out his cheeks in frustration. "Just fuck off will you."

Curtis strokes his brow. Not just yet. "Snaggletooth, Mako, Tiger, Hammerhead." Curtis has a fascination with sharks. Might account for the scar that peeks out of his collar, or perhaps not.

"Leave me the fuck alone."

"Spacemen." Curtis points at the rink.

"Ice hockey players. I come to watch them. My friend is one."

"A Spaceman?"

"An ice hockey player. Please, leave me alone will you."

Curtis Gets up and scuttles off up the steps and away.

Jimmy stands and glances around. "Fucking open house lunatic asylum."

Chipper grates, carves and scars the ice. Spaghetti charts and spent tracks. Short. Long. Turn. Twist. Pass. Slide. The boards. Crash. Bang. Puck away. Reflex shot. Butt grounded. Buzzer. Buzzer. Line breached. A score. The end.

Home time. The bar. The bed. The family. Reality check. Love. Dreams. Dread. Fights. Inebriation. Lonesome dove. Peace and a bullet to end all. Anxiety. Hope. Enemies march in the cerebral wastelands. Virtual audiences for fixed periods of visceral

combat. Loyal nobodies. Points. Averages. Scores. Trophies. Success. College final. Goodnight.

Outside, the luminescence of the moon attempts to serenade the spent day towards its demise. The armies of listless street lamps pollute that glow. The stadium rises from the city like an inland Alcatraz. Silhouetted gigantean. Still. Quiet. Haunting.

A rickety bicycle towing a cumbersome and cluttered makeshift trailer makes its way across the empty parking lot, from the island to the city. No-man's land. Swim with the sharks. Bottles. Rags. Bags. Wires. Silent radios. Vinyl sensations. Thousand mile track shoes and old boots. Hang. Rattle. Dangle. Pedal hard. Pedal slow. Curtis is strange.

Jimmy is drunk. Very drunk. He carefully, almost meticulously places his glass on the table. He almost instantaneously picks it up again and tries to drain any and every last drop of beer out of it. He puts it back down.

Both he and Chipper are silent for a moment. Orientation preparation. Conversation pendulum.

Jimmy grins and shakes his finger at Chipper.

"What do you want to know?" Chipper slurs out with his cheeky grin and baby face masking the offensiveness of his drunken stupor.

"Why don't superheroes go to therapy? I mean if you or I had a split personality we'd be fucking schizo. Psycho. Looney. Crazy. On the fucking edge, and waiting to jump. Good or bad it's not fucking right," Jimmy hails.

"Because they're superheroes. Higher beings."

"Fucking higher beings. They come from fucked up families and have fucked up lives. Whether it's earth or Krypton. Whether they're vampires or spiders. Experimental accidents. We love them in fantasy we box them in reality."

"What?" Chipper's concentration is waning.

"We box them. Who's to say half the fucking loons we have jammed up in asylums around the globe aren't our heroes, the nemeses to the super villains." He motions to Chipper's glass. "Do you mind?"

"Help yourself man."

Jimmy takes a swig. "Where was I?"

"I'm not sure," Chipper chuckles to himself. "Super villains maybe?"

"Yeah, super villains. Super villains escape, roam, kill, rape, mutilate. We hear about them when it's too late. Who's to say some poor fuck that we bang up in a super tight cell because they have an imaginary friend called Joe isn't some mean, lean justice machine. Joe is the man."

Chipper is lost. "Who's Joe?"

"Didn't you ever have an imaginary friend?"

"No."

"Exactly. Not everybody has them."

"So you're saying that you're a superhero?"

"No. But people have imaginary friends right. Especially kids."

"So?"

"You say you've got such a friend you get smacked in the head. You're a fucking loon. Other kids think you're a planet hopper. Fucking ma and pa stuff you with

medication. Rich kids, not making an example of you, have weekly assignments with some shrink. It's fucked."

"That's just the way it is man."

Jimmy maintains his onslaught, "No. What if that imaginary friend is your ulterior personality? What if that is a super-heroic tendency? It's cut off too early. It can't grow. Never blooms. We destroy our superheroes before they exist."

"Dude. I...I...do you think about this a lot?"

"I don't think I'm some hero if that's what you mean. Shit. I had an imaginary friend so I had someone to talk to when my father clubbed the fuck out of my mother. Any voice would have done. I just think maybe the people, the writers, and the cartoonists who give us all these great beings are more than they seem. Perhaps those very creations are their imaginary friends. They could have been those people. They could have existed. But since they weren't allowed to develop, and they have to develop they can't just be, they can only be pulp fiction now."

Chipper pauses, "Fuck. My heroes are on the rink."

"Not fucking heroes. They're great at what you want to do. That doesn't make them a hero. It makes you envious. It's something you could or might have had. It's feasible. To be a hero, a superhero, you have something that isn't feasible, isn't normal. You got to be abnormal, out of this world. That's different."

Chipper walks up the steps to his parents' home. Mansion. Suburban castle. Comfort zone. Easy living. Society check. He's an all-star hero to mom and dad, the symbol of their success and wealth. An icon. A totem. They live their life for stature. Once they're done with theirs they can live through him. He is their retirement plan.

Jimmy has a different route. Reality check. He walks through Crap Town. Hookers. Dealers. Squealers. Tramps. Drunks. Cops. Slobs. Pimps. Chimps. Upturned trash cans. Bust up cars. Shut down trade. Fear. Poverty. Addiction. Only the scents of the opium flower can tempt escape. Hollywood counter-image. Graffiti. Gang code. Cat fights in the street. Dog fights in the street. Death on the street. The street. Urban circuits. Chequered flags and pit-stops. Crashes and smashes. There will be those that end their race tonight.

Jimmy's gaze follows a night prowler in a white silk shirt and a black bandana on the opposite side of the road, Lucifer in God's colours. Up ahead is a tight pink skirt with black market gold jewellery. Dirty ho or just wrong place wrong time. Lucifer locks on.

On course for a collision with pink dress are fat man and sidekick. Lucifer strides. She walks. Fat man approaches. Fat man walks with a walking stick, carries a toilet seat and wears a white Stetson. Sidekick wears the same but also guards a busted nose. Lone Ranger and Tonto. Crusoe and Friday. Kicking the dirt on the trottoir in Urbania.

Jimmy walks and watches. Every-step alleyways. Lucifer can kill, will kill, can rape, will rape. Blood on the pink dress. 'La Bamba' screams out in Jimmy's mind. Sing it Richie V. Speed it up ho. Lucifer opens stride. She knows no chase. He gains. She stops. No. Bang.

Jimmy crashes into Orchid. "Sorry." She looks at him. He looks at her. Something pretty, a diamond in the rough. He keeps going. Distraction prediction. Where is pink dress? This way. That way. Lucifer has her. She's dead. Torn. Ripped. Bled. Cut and fucked. Or not. Not. Pink dress ambles out of an alleyway under fat man's arm. An exchange, the toilet seat for her?

The alleyway. Lucifer wears the toilet seat. Bleeds on it. Death's harness. Limp and broken. His gun is still in his grip and a bullet in Tonto's head. Quick but not fast enough. Victory comes at a price. The race is over.

Pink dress has her superhero or just her pimp. Her pimp.

Jimmy walks.