"I suppose this means you can't go to your almighty hockey game," my mom announced in an inflection that she reserved for those rare moments when she was certain my dad couldn't disagree with her.

We'd been eating dinner before the phone rang and my dad and I were talking about the upcoming hockey game, the last one of the season, and reflecting on the exceptional season Bo Monseur, "lucky number seven" and veteran center for the hometown Strikers, was having that year and considering his prospects of scoring his 700th career goal in the final game. He would need to score a hat trick and he's done that plenty of times, I said, but it wouldn't be so easy, my dad pointed out, against the Memphis Knights with their monstrous defensemen, the biggest in the southern division, and goalie Brute Lindsay, who had allowed the fewest goals in the whole league, and who, my dad said he'd heard or read somewhere, had already been dubbed to go to the big leagues as soon as the minor league season was complete. I asked my dad why he figured Bo had never gone pro and my dad replied that most people thought Bo was just a little too small and slow for the pros, which I protested by saying that no one could handle a stick like Bo.

It was a joyous conversation, my dad's and mine, its richness deepened by my tacit awareness that when we talked about hockey, the Strikers, a past or upcoming game, it was a bond we alone shared, one that set us apart from my mom and older sister, Jennifer, who talked about such female things as cooking or clothes or makeup or school or church or boys.

Then the phone rang.

Mom and Jennifer both jumped to answer it. For the two of them, a phone call was a vital summons from distant horizons, from people and places beyond the limits of our home, an opportunity for conversations and relationships, assessments of upcoming events at church or school, and a chance to make sense of their lives and the world. For my dad, the telephone was a nuisance intent on shattering the peace and quiet which he sought, above all else, from home. He was constantly being pestered by the phone at work, he repeated often, and he didn't want to be bothered at home by it. Knowing my dad's dislike for both the phone and interruptions of his meal, my mom would end the conversation quickly with a quiet promise to return the call as soon as she could.

But she handed the phone to my dad. It's your mother, she whispered. He took the hand-smudged white receiver and positioned it on the side of his face with a look that signaled he knew what the call was about, and after he muttered a few "hmms," "When?" and "What time?" and finally, "We'll be there," he announced, "Dad died today," as he raised the phone to my mom, still standing, who took the receiver and returned it to its hook on the wall.

My mom said she was sorry about my grandfather dying and my dad said it had just been a matter of time.

For as long as I could remember, we had visited my grandfather in a rest home where all the patients sat in wheel chairs and smiled toothless smiles at me when we passed down the hall. My grandfather was always asleep when we went into this room and when we woke him his eyes would roll open and look around the room and, after focusing on one of us, he would ask, "Who are you?" My father, speaking loudly, would try to remind my grandfather that he was his son, his best and only child, and he'd point to my mom, Jennifer, and me, and say that we were his family. My grandfather would say, "Oh," like he suddenly remembered us, though his
expression remained blank.

After several moments in which no one said anything as we continued to eat, my mom asked about the funeral, and my dad said it was at eleven o'clock on Saturday, and that we would have to be at the Funeral Home on Friday night to greet visitors with the rest of the family. Sometime later in the meal, just as my mom was serving the dessert, she stopped and made her comment, "I suppose this means you can't go to your almighty hockey game."

It had become commonplace for my mom to refer to the "almighty" hockey game, even when she wasn't angry. I could remember vividly the first time she spoke of the "almighty" hockey game. It was on a Sunday morning in the previous season, a week or two after the big snow. In our southern city, snow was almost as rare as ice hockey, but when I awoke on that Saturday the sky was filled with thick gray clouds, and I was able to make frosty clouds with my breath when I went outside to get the morning paper. A little later small specks of white began to float slowly from the sky, and before long flakes as fat and white as dogwood blossoms filled the air. By the time the snow stopped in midafternoon, nearly six inches had fallen.

That afternoon, my dad listened to the radio to hear the long list of events and programs that had been cancelled, and when the word came that the Strikers' ice hockey game that night with New Haven would be played, all my mom needed to do was to look at my Dad's face to recognize that he intended to go to the game. She said that only a lunatic would risk life and limb of his son and himself to go out on such a night for a hockey game, that the only reason a person should go out in this weather was if someone was starving to death or having a heart attack, that even the police had said to go out only for extreme emergencies, which she was sure didn't include hockey games.

As usual, my dad said little when my mom was angry. He just pointed out that our Volkswagen could handle any kind of weather and that if we took our time, we'd be just fine.

We made it to the game and back -- there were about 200 other lunatics there -- and when we came home my mom seemed to have forgiven my dad, in fact seemed happy to see us both. It wasn't the last time my dad heard about that night, though. Several weeks later, I was awakened on a Sunday morning by the sound of my parents' voices coming from the bedroom. They were having their usual argument about going to church. My mom and Jennifer normally went while I stayed home with my dad. It's the only morning, my dad always protested when my mom talked about church, that he could just take it easy and not have to rush around to get ready to go somewhere, that since my mom didn't work on a public job -- though he knew taking care of the house and children was tough work -- she couldn't appreciate how much he needed just one day to rest, and isn't that what the Bible said that Sunday was for anyway?

That was when I heard her call the hockey game "almighty" for the first time.

If you can risk your life to go to an "almighty" hockey game in two feet of snow, she said, the least you can do is go to church, and make sure your son goes, so that maybe he won't grow up to be like all those trashy people at the hockey games.

My mom only went to one hockey game and ever since referred to the people whom she saw there as "trashy," her favorite word for people who didn't meet her approval. According to her, they were all foul-mouthed, yelped like hyenas, and were barbaric in the desire for fights to break out, and the worst of it all was that they drank beer -- BEER -- the whole night long.

As great as my mom's disdain for the trashy people sitting around us, it was nothing compared to her horror at the "display" put on by Muriel Morgan. At each home game, between the second and third periods, before the man on the ice cleaning machine began his routine, a long red rubber carpet was unrolled from the side of the rink to center ice where Muriel, wife of
the team owner, would come out to announce the most valuable player from the previous home game and present to him a twenty-five dollar gift certificate from her husband's jewelry store. People said that the only reason old man Morgan, a round short man with a shiny head, bought the team and gave away that gift certificate each game was so he could show off his much younger wife. Muriel always wore a long dress that, whatever the color, was sleeveless and shiny and clung tightly to her body and had a low v-neck so that the large diamond that hung from around her neck sparkled and glistened against her snow white skin. Her lips were fat and red, her hair dark and long and fell down over her nearly bare shoulders. Long shiny earrings dangled from her ears, both wrists were adorned by wide silver bracelets, and even her black, high heel shoes bore a shiny clasp. When the lucky player's name was announced, he skated slowly to center ice, where Muriel would give him the gift certificate along with a kiss on the cheek, which caused the crowd to erupt in joyous screams, and when the player skated away, smiling, the big red smudge on his cheek seemed more of a prize than the certificate in his hand.

The outcome of my parents' argument on that morning was that we never missed going to church on Sunday morning, at least during hockey season.

It wasn't the last time my mom spoke of the "almighty" hockey game. After we'd all been going to church for several weeks, my mom said she felt embarrassed about never being able to put any money in her offering envelope, that the preacher said everything belongs to God and He's just letting us use it, and that if we don't give a portion back it's like we're robbing God, to which my dad asked that if God owned everything why did he have to pay the mortgage company, and power company, and telephone company, and that as far as he could tell no one was ever put in jail for robbing God, but that they sure enough have been for not paying their bills. I could tell that my dad was satisfied with his own response, but my mom didn't back down. Of course, if you didn't have to go to the "almighty" hockey game every night, she said, we would have a little extra money for my offering envelope, to which my dad said he didn't go to the hockey game every night, that they didn't play every night.

My mom eventually did have her way with the church offering, but it wasn't by our saving money by missing hockey games. My dad quit smoking. I suppose he knew that he had to do something to make my mom happy about giving to the church, or perhaps he decided that there might be something to what the preacher said about robbing from God. In any event, one day he started walking around with a pencil in his mouth, and after about a week and two dozen gnawed pencils, my dad announced that he had stopped smoking forever and that he'd never smoke another cigarette for as long as he lived. And he didn't. Each week my mom put $8.29 in her church offering envelope, the exact amount my dad said he was able to save by quitting smoking.

Once my dad echoed my mom and spoke of the "almighty" hockey game. I guess it showed that he'd come to see going to the hockey game like my mother, as unnecessary and excessive, because he said it when he announced that we wouldn't be able to go the games in the upcoming season. It was about a month before the season was to begin when something in our 1960 red Volkswagen broke and the mechanic told my dad that it would cost as much to fix the car as to buy a new one, and since Jennifer and I were getting too big to ride in the back seat of the Volkswagen anyway, Dad bought a used Ford LTD, whose monthly payments, he said, would take every cent of extra money we might have, and so he guessed we just wouldn't go to the hockey games that year. To my amazement, my mom protested, saying that she hated for my
dad and me to give up something that we enjoyed so much, that surely we could save a few
dollars some other way, such as just giving the $8.29 to church every other week, to which my
dad said no it wouldn't be right to steal from the church just so that we could go to the
"almighty" hockey game.

After several weeks, I had resigned myself to a winter without ice hockey games -- every
time I felt sad about it, I would go and sprawl out in the back seat of our new car which
compared to the Volkswagen seemed as large as a hockey rink -- until I witnessed the only
indisputable and genuine miracle in my life. The day came for the "Meet the Strikers Night," an
annual event where the team would demonstrate their daily workouts, play a short scrimmage
game, and then sign the free team picture that they gave away to all who attended. It seemed
rather useless to go to meet the players when we wouldn't be able to go to the games, but my dad
said that maybe we would win that pair of season tickets they gave away each year. I couldn't
believe my dad's foolishness in thinking such a silly thought, for even I, after several years of
having my hopes dashed of winning those tickets, had learned how impossible it was to be so
lucky. The first several years we attended the "Meet the Strikers Night," I could think of nothing
but what it would be like to win those two season tickets and be able to sit in those two seats just
above the Strikers' bench instead of the general admission section far above the ice from which
the players were the size of toy soldiers.

My imagination didn't stop with my dad and me sitting in those two seats, but I
envisioned some special game, the final game of the championship playoff for example, and
things looked hopeless because the Strikers were down by three goals, and several of the players
were injured or thrown out for fighting, and the coach would look up and see me and he would
ask my dad if I could play and he'd say yes as long as they didn't let my mom know about it, and,
miraculously, I would be able not only to ice skate but to skate faster than anyone else, and like a
skating David facing a whole team of Goliaths falling all over themselves in their efforts to stop
me, I would score one, two, three, and then four goals and the Strikers would be champions,
thanks to me. In the ticker tape parade that would follow, Muriel Morgan and I would wave to
cheering crowds from the back seat of a red convertible Corvette.

Several years of watching somebody else win those tickets and enduring another lucky
pair filling those special seats night after night had cured me of such foolish fantasies. I
managed to keep my cynicism to myself as my dad printed his name on the entry form (the
contest was open only to people over eighteen) and dropped it in the big box from which Muriel
Morgan would draw the winning ticket. As we watched the scrimmage game, I couldn't help but
glance over at the two special seats, of trying to calculate the number of people in attendance,
and imagining what it would be like to hear my dad's name called out over the loud speaker.
Then, as Muriel began her slow walk to center ice, without being fully aware of what I was
doing, I started praying over and over again, "Please, please, please let her pull out my daddy's
name. Please!" Every Sunday the preacher told us that prayer works and you can get anything
you want if you just ask for it, and so I figured it was a good time to test it out. I continued to
pray for several seconds and until I heard the name booming over the loud speaker, "Jimmy
Jamison."

How I could have been so stupid, I wondered to myself, to think that something like a
prayer could help us win those season ticket. I looked at my dad and he laughed and said we
didn't win to which I wanted to say that he must think that I'm an idiot if he really felt it
necessary to tell me that, but I didn't say it since it would have been disrespectful.

I paid little attention when some man who looked official hurried to center ice on the red mat where Muriel and the announcer waited for Jimmy Jamison to claim his prize. The announcer held his hand over the microphone while the man explained something to him, the outstretched flattened palm of his right hand bouncing up and down as he spoke. The announcer looked at the winning ticket again, shook his head from side to side, said something, to which the man nodded in agreement. By now, everyone in the arena knew something was amiss and the entire arena became silent as the crowd waited for an explanation. Finally, the man with the microphone said that he'd received word that just a few minutes earlier Mr. Jamison had been called home by his wife who had to go to the hospital to have a baby, and since the ticket clearly stated "must be present to win," he would have to ask Mrs. Morgan to draw another name, to which someone yelled out from the other side, "What rotten luck! Lose the tickets AND have a kid all in one night!" which made everyone laugh, even Muriel.

Again I started praying, "Please, please, please call my daddy's name. If he wins those tickets I'll go to church every Sunday and really listen to the preacher instead of letting my mind wander to the hockey games and Muriel Morgan. Please. Please. And when the preacher invites people to be saved, I'll be the first one down the aisle. Please! Please!"

That's when the miracle occurred. When I stopped my praying for a moment, my eyelids still pressed shut, the word "winner" flashed in my mind, as loud and clear as if someone shouted in my ear, and the very next moment, a name came across the loud speaker, "Joseph Youngblood." My eyes flew open and I turned to my dad whose face flushed red and turned pale and then red again all in about three quarters of a second. In the next moment he was running down steps and jogging through the aisles with me in pursuit. I followed him down the steps to the press box where he announced to the highway patrolman guarding the gate to the ice, "I'm Joe Youngblood," to which the patrolman said, show me your license, which my dad did, and after inspecting it, waved my father down the rest of the steps to the ice and the long red mat. I followed. It seemed so weird looking at the crowd from the ice after having looked at the ice from the crowd so many times. A few people began to clap begrudgingly as the announcer said excitedly into the microphone, "I believe we have a winner," and then the applause mixed with a few hoot and yells grew louder as Muriel presented my dad with the two tickets and then kissed him on the cheek, which made him shake his head up down and say thank you about sixteen times through his wide smile. As he turned to leave, still saying thank you, Muriel saw me standing behind my father and when she took several steps in my direction, I froze in my tracks seemingly hypnotized by the diamond that hung on the end of her necklace. The crowd laughed and applauded even more loudly as she placed her hands behind my shoulders and pulled me to her in a hug, and for that brief moment when her arms were wrapped around me, her body pressed against mine, and my chin rested on her bare neck with her diamond earring in my face, I felt enshrouded in the sweetest aroma I ever smelled and was struck suddenly by the awareness that I was in the presence of some great mystery.

On the way home that night, I told my dad that I'd been praying that he would win and he admitted that he had too, at least after the first guy didn't claim them, and I told him that just before they announced his name I somehow knew that he was going to win, that the thought came into my mind as clear as day, which he didn't believe until I insisted several times. I told him that I had promised to get saved the next time we went to church, to which he just nodded.
Then I said that Muriel Morgan sure was pretty -- it was the first time in my life that I had called a woman "pretty" -- and he said he supposed so, and that when we told my mom about winning those tickets there wasn't any need to tell her the part about Muriel kissing him or hugging me, and I agreed.

So that season, the one in which Bo Monseur approached his 700th goal and whose last game it appeared we would miss, we sat in those special seats every game and felt like we were right in middle of the skating and shooting and checking, so close that we could hear the players shout encouragement to their teammates from the bench and occasionally be showered by a spray of ice from a player skidding to a stop on his skates. The players mostly ignored us, except for Bo Monseur, who made a point to nod in our direction the first time his line took the ice every game.

On Friday afternoon, wearing our best dress-up clothes, we made the two hour journey to the small town in the mountains where my mom and dad lived before they were married. In a large room at the funeral home my grandfather was laid out in a dark bronze casket wearing a navy blue suit, white shirt and tie, with his hands resting on his chest, his nose pointing upward and his eyes closed. Except for the suit, he looked much like he did when I went into his room at the "old folks" home, and so I halfway expected him to open his eyes, look at me, and ask, "Who are you?"

But he didn't.

After a long line of men and women hugged me and told me how sorry they were about my grandfather, that he was a good man, and, my, how much I had grown since they last saw me, we spent the night at my grandmother's house, and got up early the next morning and made preparations for the funeral. Shortly after ten o'clock my mom, dad, Jennifer and I rode with my grandmother in a long black car to church, where the preacher spoke softly about my grandfather's many years of blessedness, with a loving wife, a good family, and many friends, and the blessing we all had received from knowing my grandfather.

I never imagined what an ordeal a funeral was. By the time we completed the service itself, made the journey to the graveyard, joined my aunts, uncles, cousins and all their friends in gorging on the tables of food prepared by the ladies of the church, and, when everyone had finally left, swept the floors, reaching behind the sofas and chairs for every bit of errant food, it was nearly seven o'clock. After we had finished all the cleaning, we sat with my grandmother in the living room, and after a few minutes of reflection on what a good day it had been, my dad asked, "Mom, do you need anything from us or do you want us to stay with you tonight?" He seemed relieved when she said that she'd grown used to being at home by herself after my grandfather went to the rest home, and that she wouldn't mind being alone after the long day, though, of course, we were welcome to stay if we wished. My dad responded that we should probably get back since we didn't want to miss church the next day, to which she replied that she was so thankful that my dad was becoming such a faithful churchgoer since his own father had never wanted to go to church. That's when Jennifer blurted out in her most snide-feminine tone, "He just wants to get home so that he can go to," but my mom interrupted before she could say, "the 'almighty' hockey game." My mom agreed with my grandmother about my dad going to church, pointing out that my dad and I hadn't missed a Sunday since the two of us made our professions of faith.

Finally, by half past seven, we began the journey home. When we turned into our
driveway, my dad said, as if just thinking about it, though I knew he'd been calculating it in his mind for a long time, "Maybe we'll go to see the end of the hockey game," to which my mom said, her voice filled with incredulous disgust, "You just buried your father a few hours ago, and you're thinking of going to a hockey game?" My dad replied that he thought the game would help him get his mind off of his grief, and so, after leaving my mom and sister at home, we headed for the arena. As soon as we entered the large building, we looked for the scoreboard which revealed in a moment the whole sad story. The Knights were leading by a score of 6-0, which meant that not only were the Strikers losing, but that Bo was no closer to scoring his 700th career goal.

When we took our seats, Bo Monseur smiled and nodded at us just as he stepped onto the ice for a faceoff.

"He's having a horrible game," a fellow spectator informed us when my dad shouted, "Go Bo!"

The referee dropped the puck in the Strikers' zone, which Bo managed to slap back to the big, but slow, defenseman, Winfield who began the charge toward the Knights' goal. He flipped the puck into the air, and just as it dropped across the blue line, Bo made a burst through the two Knights defensemen who, ahead by six goals, had become overconfident. The goalie crouched forward in defensive position with his fat stick in front of the thick pads on his legs and his glove hand poised upright, but even the best goalie in the league was no match for Bo, who skated to his left and then glided back right in front of the goal, faked one then two shots, the second of which made the goalie lunge forward so that Bo had a clear shot into the upper right hand corner of the goal. Even before the red light flashed on, the entire crowd sprang to its feet and broke into cheers and shouts as all the Strikers swarmed around Bo to congratulate him. Less than one minute had elapsed in the final period and the score was 6-1, but more important, Bo had scored his 698th career goal.

Awakened from their complacency by Bo's score, the Knights' defensemen double teamed Bo each time he came into their end of the rink so that for the next eight minutes he was unable to get his stick on the puck. But then the Strikers had a power play when the Knights' biggest defensemen was called for high sticking, and as Bo's line came onto the ice, everyone stood in anticipation. Bo won the face off, slapping the puck behind him to McNaughton, but his pass to his right was intercepted by a Knight defender who sent the puck flying to the other end of the rink. Half the crowd sat down, but rose again as the Strikers regrouped on their end of the ice and began their attack on the Knights' goal. The roar of the crowd swelled with the Strikers' advance across the red line and as Bo sent the puck flying across the blue line with a pass leading his right winger Chesson perfectly into the Knights' zone. He raised his stick high behind and took a ferocious slap shot that deflected from the goalie's pads in front of the net where a mass of padded bodies, sticks, and skates converged trying to control the puck. One defensemen fell to the ice in an effort to smother the puck, but when it slipped away another tried in desperation to kick the puck with his skate. Chesson managed to get his stick on the puck enough to flip it from the group to Bo who, even as two Knights converged on him, managed to push the puck a foot toward the goal; the goalie lunged forward with his stick to slap the puck away but Bo, squeezing between the defenders, lobbed the puck slowly over the outstretched stick of the goalie and into the open net.

Strikers' sticks flew in a single motion into the air in celebration. "Bo made it look easy,"
I shouted to my dad over the noise of the crowd as we cheered, and he nodded in agreement.
The delighted crowd received an unexpected treat when Brute Lindsay, angrily kicking the puck
from the goal with his left skate, nearly lost his balance and had to grab the top of the goal to
keep from falling.

Without thinking I began to say, "That's number six hundred and ninety..." but my dad
with a look of horror on his face quickly put his hand over my mouth, saving me from doing the
unthinkable, of talking about the fact that Bo was closing in on his 700th goal, and thereby
ensuring his failure.

For the next eleven minutes, each time Bo's line skated onto the ice, every person in the
area was standing and shouting "Bo!  Bo!  Bo!"  Even though the Strikers were in last place in
the league, were ineligible for the playoffs, everyone was of a single thought that if Bo could
somehow score his 700th goal the entire dismal season would be redeemed.

Every time Bo put his stick on the puck, two or three Knights immediately converged on
him to force him to pass the puck away, and by the time the clock ticked to thirty seconds with
the Knights controlling the puck in the Strikers' zone, people began to sit down and gather their
belongings, disappointed at the apparent outcome.  With twenty seconds on the clock, Winfield
dug the puck out of a pile up against the boards and passed to Chesson, who desperately slapped
it forward against the side of the rink, so that it rebounded diagonally toward center ice.  Having
judged perfectly the angle of the ricochet Bo broke first from the crowd of players in the
Strikers' zone toward the puck which he pushed in front of him while his skates churned rapidly
against the ice, and as two Knights' defenders, just a few steps behind, rushed to catch him.  The
clock showed ten seconds as Bo crossed the blue line moving swiftly toward Brute Lindsay
crouching in preparation for the shot, which Bo never made since one of the defenders pursuing
him reached his stick forward into Bo's skates, sending him sprawling head first across the ice.
The collective anger of the crowd at the sight of Bo tumbling to the ice was quickly transformed
to joy as the referee raised his arm and blew his whistle to signal a penalty just as the buzzer
sounded to end the game.

"Penalty shot for Bo Monseur," a voice announced excitedly over the loud speakers,
causing the crowd to erupt in more joyous applause.  After several minutes, and as the
celebration subsided, the referee skated toward center ice, carefully placed the puck in the
center of the red dot.

"Bo Monseur will have one shot on the goal," the announcer explained, provoking
another round of applause from the spectators, all of whom were already stomping their feet like
a horde of zealous soldiers.  The cheers swelled to a crescendo, as Bo came on the ice, skated
toward the Strikers zone and around the perimeter of the rink, picking up speed as he circled the
Strikers' goal and began his charge toward the Knight's zone.  On the other end of the rink, Brute
Lindsay readied himself, striking his thick knee pads with his stick, crouching forward, his glove
hand poised in front of him.  The crowd quickly silenced as Bo reached center ice, took control
of the puck and charged toward his duel with Brute Lindsay.  As Bo crossed the blue line, the
Knights' goalie surprised the crowd, for instead of waiting in his box, apparently recognizing the
futility of a one-on-one duel, charged forward in an effort, apparently, to make Bo shoot
prematurely.  Unphased by the attacking goalie, a formidable assemblage of stick, pads, and
gloves, Bo didn't break his stride, but glided left, then right, tantalizing the goalie with the puck,
and when Brute was close enough to reach his stick toward the puck, Bo moved left
again, slipping the puck between Brute Lindsay's outstretched stick and skate, moved back to the right around his opponent, who had shifted his weight left, and then regained control of the puck, skated another ten feet and gently pushed the puck in the center of the goal, as Brute Lindsay, paralyzed in his helplessness, turned and watched. The goal judge, evidently astounded by the scene, delayed for a second flashing on the red light.

The roar of approval and joy, that burst from the crowd as if from a single wild animal at the moment Bo slipped by the goalie, rose to delirium when Bo easily pushed the puck into the open net. Bo's blue-jersied teammates began spilling over the boards onto the ice as soon as Bo skated around the goalie, so that as soon as he scored the goal, his teammates began to surround and smother him with hugs, patting his back and head. Brute Lindsay skated slowly toward the bench where his fellow Knights looked on. All around my dad and me, fans were jumping up and down in delight, hugging one another, whistling and shouting and screaming.

"Did you see that?" I shouted to my dad, as if he might have been looking at something else. He nodded yeah and shouted toward me as he continued to clap, "People will be talking about that goal for years to come." Everyone around us nodded heartily in agreement.

The celebration was subsiding when the announcer shouted into the loud speaker, "Striker goal, by 'lucky number 7,' Bo Monseur, his 700th career goal," which caused the crowd to erupt again in applause as if everyone were hearing the news for the first time.

As the Strikers began to leave the ice, the Knights filed from their bench, each skating up to Bo to shake his hand, pat him on the shoulder, which caused the roar of the crowd to swell once again. The last to congratulate Bo was Brute Lindsay, whose hand motions indicated that he was describing the moments just before Bo scored his final goal.

Even after all the players were gone, the cheers had silenced, and the maintenance crew was readying to disassemble the rink, many fans stood in their places, continuing to talk about Bo's accomplishment, especially the final goal. In the conversations around us, people speculated on why Brute Lindsay charged Bo the way he did, while one person described Bo's final goal as fate. Another individual said he betted that Bo would retire now, that he was nearly forty which was terribly old to be playing hockey. "Have you ever seen such stick handling in your life?" someone asked behind us, to which several voice replied, "Never. Never."

From somewhere in the distance another voice said that Bo was outside the locker room signing autographs. We grabbed our souvenir program, rushed down the concrete steps, and made our way to the Knights' locker room, where a group swarmed around Bo. We took our place on the perimeter of the crowd and moved forward a step or two as each fan received an autograph and left. When our turn finally came, my dad said, "Great game, Bo," and he said thanks without looking at my dad. At such a close distance to Bo, I could see a net of wrinkles that spread out from the corner of each eye, a touch of gray around the edges of his short hair, and a scar that slashed across his right eyebrow.

When someone from behind us asked if Bo was going to retire, he didn't look up as he signed our program, and said no, that playing hockey was all that he knew how to do, and that as long as the team wanted him, he would play.

When Bo looked up to return the signed program, his eyes met my father's for a moment when my dad said thank you. Bo shifted his eyes to next person, but then quickly turned them back to my dad and to me and then to my dad again.

"Where were you two tonight?" Bo asked my dad. His voice sounded almost accusing,
like a teacher admonishing a student for truency.

I looked up at my dad, whose face was filled with perplexity, as he seemed unsure if Bo was speaking to him or someone else and, if he was speaking to him, how to reply. I felt the stares of a dozen or so people suddenly turn our way.

"You didn't get here until the third period," Bo continued.

"Oh," my dad stammered, "Uh, I had to go to my father's funeral." My dad paused and then added, "He died," as if a person might have a funeral for some other reason than dying.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Bo answered. "I knew it had to be something serious for you to miss."

My dad nodded, his confusion still evident.

By now the group around us had become silent, all intrigued by the conversation.

"You see," Bo continued, "the first game of the season, I just happened to see you both looking down at the bench and so I nodded at you as I went on the ice. Do you remember?"

My dad and I both shook our heads yes in unison.

"Well, I went out and scored two goals and got two assists that night," Bo continued, "but the next game I played terrible. So from then on I nodded at you at the beginning of the game, and I've had a great season."

As Bo spoke, I could see a space where one of his upper jaw teeth was missing.

"When you weren't here at the beginning of the game," Bo continued, "I knew I wouldn't score my three goals, but when you arrived I knew I would."

As Bo finished the story I could feel the envy growing among those who stood around us as it became clear that my dad and I somehow helped Bo score his 700th goal.

"So, I'm glad you made it," Bo concluded. He reached out to shake my dad's hand and then mine.

We both said thank you, and Bo turned to the next person to sign another autograph. Never again have I felt the stares of awe and reverence from other people as on that night when my dad and I pressed through the crowd to make our exit.

Neither of us said a word as we walked to the parking lot, started the car, and then drove off. We were nearly home before I asked my dad if he believed that we actually did bring good luck to Bo, to which he replied, nah, not really, but that Bo had gotten in his mind that we did and that was all that really mattered.

My dad and my journeys to hockey games, as Bo Monseur's career, came to an abrupt end as that summer the news came that Old Man Morgan was dissolving the Strikers, that after declaring bankruptcy, he was unable to sell the team, which hadn't broke even for years. Most of the Strikers, we learned later, were picked up by other teams, except for Bo. It seemed that no one wanted an aged center, even one who had scored 700 goals. One Saturday my dad showed me a newspaper advertisement announcing that "the phenomenal hockey great Bo Monseur, the only man in the Southern Hockey League to score 700 career goals," had joined the sales team of Robertson's Tire and Auto Center. The small black and white photo of Bo wearing a tie made him look old and ordinary. When it came time to buy some tires for our car, my dad considered buying them from Bo, but when he asked me what I thought about it, I said it wouldn't seem right to see Bo anywhere but on the ice and wearing a hockey uniform.

More than thirty years passed before I went to another hockey game. I am not quite sure of the reasons -- perhaps because the incessant announcements of promotions and contests made
the game seem more about commercialism than sport, or because the raucous, beer-drinking people sitting around me seemed trashy and a bad influence on my daughters, or simply because no present experience could measure up to my memories of going to the games with my dad -- the game seemed long and unexciting. I left before the game was over and I haven't returned.

I go to church every Sunday though. Sunday after Sunday, my daughters and wife and I, the very image of middle-class respectability, sit in the same pew, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, but I often feel like a fraud because I wonder if what the preacher is preaching about life, death, eternal life, and God's goodness are really true. I speak often to him in private about my doubts, asking him many questions -- How can we be sure that Jesus's being raised from the dead really happened and was not just the wishful fantasies of disappointed disciples? If God is so good and so powerful why did six million Jews die in the Nazi death camps? And is it not plausible that our existence and our ability to think and talk about it are nothing but the products of a long evolutionary process that has no ultimate meaning other than what we decide to give to it? He listens carefully and says that having faith doesn't mean having all the answers and that I need to learn to walk by faith and not by sight, to which I respond that it seems like walking by faith means shutting your eyes to reality. Finally he throws up his hands, smiles, and says that my parents sure knew what they were doing when they named me "Thomas" since I was such a doubter, that if Jesus appeared that moment, I'd ask to touch his wounds. But then he adds in a serious tone that it seems that I want to have faith, which is a sure sign that faith will come to me sooner or later, as a gift from God.

Once I told him about going to the hockey games with my dad, my dad quitting smoking, and winning those two season tickets, how my mom often referred to the "almighty" hockey game, and when I finished, he proclaimed, "See, how God used your love of ice hockey. If it hadn't been for the almighty hockey game, your dad might have died long ago from lung cancer, and you and your dad wouldn't be going to church now, and both of your souls would still be lost. He laughed and said, "God sure is a sly old rascal."

I don't share the preacher's confidence about God having a role in the story, and I'm not sure that my soul's been saved. Yet, occasionally during the sermon, my mind wanders back to those evenings with my father when we cheered on the Strikers, and I remember the unquestioned thrill I felt when they scored, my disappointment when they lost, and most of all the sight of Bo Monseur skating around Brute Lindsay to push the puck into the goal for the 700th time. At those times, I think I get, for a fleeting moment, a glimpse into what the preacher means about faith. And whenever I recall it all, I never fail to think of the game as the "almighty" hockey game.