

CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE ROOM

Sport is our way of preparing young males to act as physical enforcers of a vigorously defended economic and gender order grounded in inequality and domination, it is not fun and games.

– Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men*

“You slimy fucking cunt! . . . You fucking well stay away from my goddamn friends! I didn’t give you permission to talk to them! I’m sick of you bunch of cocksuckers! You write lies about me and I’ll have lawyers crawling all over you. I don’t forget people who try to fuck me!”

– Alan Eagleson to Alison Griffiths

Hi Lorna,

Friday should be fine, but it’s important that I don’t let your expectations get away from the reality of these guys, and how they usually do interviews. I would say that you’ll probably only have 5-10 mins with each guy max in the dressing room after practice. Media access is for ½ hour after practices by NHL policies. In addition, they don’t last very long with interviews due to the high media demands they have every day.

Hopefully you’ll be able to get the information you need in this time frame.

Take care,

Chris

Early December 2003 and a 4-1 loss to Calgary. Naslund left the game with that groin. Things might go better for me today since it’s unlikely he’ll be practising.

My stomach has reached new levels of acid. I’m rattled. Why am I here? How did this happen? Yes: there is courage involved, I’m brave and willing to risk and those are admirable qualities, yes. New situations – mega-stressful ones – so I’m alive, right? And terrified. I’m afraid of humiliation, that I’ll

Cold-Cocked: On Hockey

embarrass myself and they won't let me back. I'm out of my element and might drown.

ON THE BUS into Vancouver, a nice balding Regina man, my age, asks about kids today. He's worried about the violence and our default setting of aggression. I question how or if things have changed in the last twenty years and characterize the young men I teach: funny, hard-working, determined, compassionate, obsessed with drugs and sex, sure – who isn't? – but also inspiring. He's glad. "I'm reminded of that song by Billy Joel," he croons, looking out at the frosted fields of the Fraser Valley, red-tailed hawks and winter-skinny coyotes checking the dormant rows, herons tall in the ditches. *We didn't start the fire, it's been burning all along.* It's early for shitty pop tunes, but sure, okay.

I've bought a tape recorder, soft-sided satchel, black jeans, ankle boots, notepads, books on sports writing, three days parking at Swartz Bay terminal, a return ticket on the PCL bus, two nights at the funky hotel. I almost bought lipstick. I didn't shave my legs, so it can't be about sex. But it is a first date. Yesterday, I tried to find shoes to make me look sexy while not hurting, in a skirt that hit an inch too far below my knees, in an orange sweater I made myself and love but which is not flattering, and again in the mirror trying on jeans that rode too high on my hips for this decade. I realized: I'm not lovely no more. I am a woman past prime who once could make a thirty-year-old stud-man itch. But not no more. Past a certain age, it's all country twang.

But today isn't about attraction or appeal. It's about a story, about men.

I have long held a fascination – maybe hero-worship – of women who work as foreign correspondents. Ann Medina, Anna Maria Tremonti, and these days Canadian journo-chicks like Kathleen Kenna off to scary places to track risky and complex stories we need to know, taking photos we have to see if it's going to work out for democracy. They risk life, but it's more than that, a mix of up-tempo smarts and the ability to look brainy in perma-press khakis and a blue Oxford shirt. Mary Tyler Moore, semi-ditz reporter, tossed her toque into the cold Minnesota air in the seventies because she was so tickled to be a reporter in a man's world and still have a cute apartment and date handsome guys with chin clefts. In Vancouver in the seventies, it seemed possible to be the flip-haired, A-lined Mary but not the trousered Margaret Bourke-White.

Each summer, say between the NHL Awards and the draft, or between the draft and when the Swedes fly back for camp pre-season, we should read *Net*

IN THE ROOM

Worth, by David Cruise and Alison Griffiths. The history of the business; why players' salaries now resemble social insurance numbers when they used to make less than car salesmen (in fact, some *were* car salesmen in the off-season to feed their kids); why the one-time player profile – under-educated and full of heart farm boys laced up for the love of the game – changed: *Net Worth* exposed the financial and psychological nihilism of icky Alan Eagleson and contributed to his eventual incarceration *vis-à-vis* the disappearing players' pension fund. Griffiths and Cruise were also critical of the “lazy, greedy, infatuated sports writers” who let the testochrats in hockey do whatever, as long as they got their smart beers with the boys and their not-for-print injury scoop. Griffiths endured the egomaniacal Alan Eagleson's foul mouth, his threats, the tomato juice he dumped down the front of her dress, and she still got her quotes. She took a quick boo at Bobby Hull's balls in hospital – “*Gawwwd!*” *moaned the Golden Jet as Alison introduced herself. “Will you look at these!” He yanked open his baggy sweatpants to reveal the swollen, empurpled orbs of his testicles – it would have been impolite not to look.* – and got on with her questions. Mary Tyler Moore meets Lucinda Williams: let's be her!

In 1990, a sports reporter for the *Boston Herald*, Lisa Olson, was in the locker room of the New England Patriots football team when a player cocked his cock at her and asked, no doubt rhetorically, “Do you want to take a bite out of this?” A team's a team, right? So others dangled and taunted. When Olson complained and the scene became public, the players accused her of being a “looker”; that is, a reporter who lets her eyes wander below the waist of athletes while worshipping in their cathedral, the locker room. A Miami Dolphins wide receiver elaborated and called her a “dick-watching bitch.” Even though women sports reporters had a constitutional right of access to interviews with players since a Federal Court ruling said so in 1978, the Olson incident caused a new debate about a female reporter's rights and the sanctity of *the room*.

For my first visit to a professional sport locker room, I read tons. Players – okay, mostly football players in the USA – routinely riff obscenities in the room when women reporters attend, apparently, and they throw jockstraps and dirty socks and wadded up tape at them, too. Reporters who want to keep their jobs, who want to be seen as professionals and not whiners, come to view this as teasing. I became versed – in a neurotic, pathetic sort of Mary-Tyler-Moore-maniac, self-doubting way – in some women reporters' self-imposed codes of conduct: looking – or the appearance of looking – is not

Cold-Cocked: On Hockey

allowed; stay out of the shower lane so you don't see players naked; carry a big notepad and look at it instead of their body; don't smile because that's flirting; wear pants. In other words, you're an intruder, so watch it and behave yourself. Peter Gzowski recalled the Oilers' locker room in New York in the early eighties; at least five women were writing about hockey regularly for the New York press. The room was full of them. See? There's one in the corner trying to hold eye contact with the heartthrob handsome – and nude – Donnie Murdoch.

I freaked myself out. The locker room did not seem welcoming for women; too many rules, for one. And it seemed governed by a culture that services old-school newspaper beat boys and sports-show gel-hairs and gives them whatever they need – post-game stats, pre-game predictions, insider yuck-yucks – to oil the machine of the team's public persona. But it gives them – or writers not part of the machine like me – little else.

I like the term *hypermasculinity* when applied to the culture of sport. Cultural critic Varda Burstyn uses the term to describe an ideology that proposes “an exaggerated ideal of manhood linked mythically and practically to the role of the warrior.” It's a playful, edgy way to suggest that in our appetite for games and their high-priced trappings and ideological simplifications, fans are caught up in something full of energy and also full of risk if they're female or care about females. Professional sport is a bullhorn that blasts, “men are stronger and more interesting than women, they're the ones worth watching, worth spending huge money on, worth emulating.” In sport, men dominate women in every way that matters to a species genetically coded to attack, have quick sex, multiply and then attack again. Olson wasn't welcome in the room because as a reporter, a professional with the power to criticize the men's game, she had the ways and means to invert the sports-power hierarchy and screw its sidekick, gender bias. And the only way to take that position away from her, since they weren't allowed to kick her out, was to make her presence in the room all about sex, to suggest she was there for one thing: to cock watch.

As if that's a bad thing. Sport – from its origins in Greece to the Williams sisters on the tennis court and Borje Salming's hot underwear video (I can't take my eyes off the skate cut on his still muscled back) – contains sex and also sets it free. According to Burstyn, “bodies are not merely collections of muscles, bones, and will; they are also animated by sexual drives.” Even though sexuality in sports – and everywhere else – has been distorted and devalued or over-played, sport “is a powerfully sexualized arena.” Burstyn assumes “that

IN THE ROOM

the force of Eros – driven biologically, experienced sensually and organized socially – is an in-built drive that is present and seeking expression, at both individual and social levels, within sport and its culture.” The erotic isn’t a shameful thing, even when it is a dimension of sport. It’s inevitable. “Any practice of intense physical engagement,” Burstyn points out, “will by definition have erotic elements or erotic effects, since the body is a sensual and sexual entity, not simply a collection of muscles and reflexes.”

When a woman enters a men’s locker room and that room is also her workplace, is it sensible, reasonable to insist that the erotics of the situation and setting be ignored? If I happen to be turned on by men’s wrists – I am – should I avoid looking at Dan Cloutier’s to keep up the mask of professionalism? What if Markus Naslund’s collar bone is showing? Do I look at that and let him see me look, or pretend not to? There’s that scar on his jaw. And his hair’s wet! Forgive me: I’m heating up. What a slut.

I CIRCUMNAVIGATED GM Place twice before asking a kind man at the jersey store where to find gate nine. Of course, it’s around the bend, under the overpass that crosses False Creek, at ground level, where the ice is, my dear. The ice on which they practise.

PR guys are known as *flakmen*. Chris Brumwell had said to ask for him at the security desk. A beefy dude makes a cellphone call, scoots back around in his rolling big-armed chair like Rod Steiger’s sheriff, and tells me, head up to Section 117.

“Section 117. Section 117.” I’m trying to make it mean something.

“Section 117. You’re going to the practice, girl!” he condescends. This feels like seventies television. I adjust the satchel on my shoulder, slap on the sticky-backed visitor badge, and enter the elevator. Suddenly, there’s a taller, thinner, more tanned uniform beside me smiling patiently and inserting a James Bond security card before punching in a top secret security code – or 117 – and backing out of the elevator. “Take care,” he says.

“There is nothing less empty than an empty stadium,” wrote Uruguayan philosopher, Eduardo Galeano, in his brilliant meditation on soccer. “There is nothing less mute than the stands bereft of people.” GM Place is an empty hall now, like a high school at summer break after the janitors have done their final tidy up; bright Vancouver light broadcasts through the big windows. A gal could curl up in the sun with a Daphne du Maurier mystery and a nice cup of tea, over there beneath the ten-foot Paul Bunyan poster of Todd Bertuzzi,

Cold-Cocked: On Hockey

snooze, and never have to force herself to find Section 117 which, it turns out, is behind the players' bench.

I sit ten rows back, watching practice, behind the real reporters and their confident slouching, their obvious ease and familiarity, their jeans and ill-fitting sport coats. They share inane comments and easy analysis about this sport ("Sydney Crosby in Pittsburgh? Gotta love the draft!") and all others; we are in the stands, where clichés are horked, chewed and regurgitated. Jim Hughson, play-by-play for hometown TV and future HNIC game-caller, is handsome and pleased; his confederate Dan Murphy is young and pleased: the TV sports guys have charisma, a little shine on their faces, longer legs or they exercise more than the, let's see, "lazy, greedy, infatuated" writers.

Jovo is showing off. A female has arrived: me. He is the class clown teenager, or a youthful Labrador retriever at play. Brad May is looking, too. No Naslund here, but Bert, Linden. They know I'm here but peer up wearing frowns, not desire, suspicious like dogs who've sniffed menace on the wind, territorial. Or it's all the stupid freak-out reading I've done. It's too dark up here for them to see.

Forwards are down there in pairs; one shoots, the other picks up rebounds and scores. The defence are doing power play stuff, passing and shooting from the point, trying to get it through. The rink is small and close and nothing seems very difficult. Say I was a beat-chick. I'd get bored with drills and mid-ice huddles with the coach I can't overhear, and I'd come to resent my editor for insisting I be here to watch every practice, jumbo coffee clutched and notepad parked. But today, it's like watching the poetry of horses running in a huge paddock: don't stop, don't slow down.

I was late, practice is over. The beat boys – I'm the only woman for miles, except a European's broad-backed mom on the bench – leap the railing down to the tunnel and stroll off to the room. I'm to wait for Brumwell to come and get me. It's a long wait and the rink is warm, or maybe that's the walking I've done. It's peaceful. Mattias Ohlund comes out the other tunnel to reach up for his little boy dangled from above, a dad coming off the morning shift.

Brumwell's dark head pops up out of that tunnel – he's tall and tidy and athlete-calm – and he beckons with a finger. I walk the steep stairs in new boots to where he is, hand him my bag, "hold this," and climb over the railing. "Careful," he says – he's what, thirty-two? – and I'm pissed off already. Can he not tell I have *two* quads now?

There's a security meeting for players at 12:30 (Kidnap prevention?

IN THE ROOM

Avoiding extortion? Groupie tips?) so I'll have to be quick. "I'm going to close this door in case anyone's naked," he says and I do a comic whimper and wish to take it back immediately; test failed. He walks like a basketball star, pumpy and pistoning. And then – presto – I'm in.

The lights are dim, the wood is clean and blonde like their wives, the carpet plush. My eyes adjust to the subtleties of the lighting and the deadened acoustics. It's more bank lobby than cinderblock sweat palace. I expected the brightness of concrete, the stink of wet skates. But I've seen the room a million times on ten o'clock sports, so why didn't I anticipate this? In my panic, I've reverted to cliché. "Stand right here," Brumwell says and places me on the carpet, near the team logo and I'm not sure if there's a penalty – instant banishment or a liniment shower – if the long square toe of my new boot touches the crest. They don't tell you anything here; there should be a handy checklist of rules and regulations for newcomers. Ohlund's kid shoots pucks at the wall and past my ankles.

I am the only woman in this room.

Ruutu is not totally but mostly naked – a chest like asthma – skinny on a bench behind a scrum of beat boys. Morrison, down bench, is thick with his own media brainsuckers. He's wearing hi-tech underpants and I can see his bare toes.

Linden stands over on the wall of fame, the line of honcho stalls – Naslund, Bertuzzi. He's pack leader, watching, making sure. But this isn't about me, right? This isn't about me. The dog metaphor's gone too far. But he knows I'm here, Linden, and appears wary. I'm surrounded by men in towels, tightly wrapped towels and bare chests and bare feet. These men have been in the shower – fuck, I *knew* this would happen – and I'm so trying to keep my head up, my eyes front. This is a huge test: will she or won't she. Am I making this up?

Fiction writers are trained, or predisposed, to look. We see everything and stockpile details – including the whitest scars in the most private places, the exact glint of light off a Swede's wet hair, the cubist angles of a man's feet when they've been crammed into skates since five years old – so that the story is true. Details make stories true. A Sedin in a towel. Cloutier over there, so narrow and tight I think it's Tom for a second. How tall *is* he? I'm afraid to look closer, trying to be cool, to break down my own self-consciousness, to push it away and observe everything. There is too much to observe. And there is no eye in team.