

Bear Town

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Late one evening toward the end of March, a teenager picked up a double-barreled shotgun, walked into the forest, put the gun to someone else's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

This is the story of how we got there.

2

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

It's a Friday in early March in Beartown and nothing has happened yet. Everyone is waiting. Tomorrow, the Beartown Ice Hockey Club's junior team is playing in the semifinal of the biggest youth tournament in the country. How important can something like that be? In most places, not so important, of course. But Beartown isn't most places.

Bang. Bang. Bang-bang-bang.

The town wakes early, like it does every day; small towns need a head start if they're going to have any chance in the world. The rows of cars in the parking lot outside the factory are already covered with snow; people are standing in silent lines with their eyes half-open and their minds half-closed, waiting for their electronic punch cards to verify their existence to the clocking-in machine. They stamp the slush off their boots with autopilot eyes and answering-machine

voices while they wait for their drug of choice—caffeine or nicotine or sugar—to kick in and render their bodies at least tolerably functional until the first break.



Out on the road the commuters set off for bigger towns beyond the forest; their gloves slam against heating vents and their curses are the sort you only think of uttering when you're drunk, dying, or sitting in a far-too-cold Peugeot far too early in the morning.

If they keep quiet they can hear it in the distance: *Bang-bang-bang. Bang. Bang.*

Maya wakes up and stays in bed, playing her guitar. The walls of her room are covered in a mixture of pencil drawings and tickets she's saved from concerts she's been to in cities far from here. Nowhere near as many as she would have liked, but considerably more than her parents actually consented to. She loves everything about her guitar—its weight against her body, the way the wood responds when her fingertips tap it, the strings that cut hard against her skin. The simple notes, the gentle riffs—it's all a wonderful game to her. She's fifteen years old and has already fallen in love many times, but her guitar will always be her first love. It's helped her to put up with living in this town, to deal with being the daughter of the general manager of an ice hockey team in the forest.

She hates hockey but understands her father's love for it; the sport is just a different instrument from hers. Her mom sometimes whispers in her daughter's

ear: "Never trust people who don't have something in their lives that they love beyond all reason." Her mom loves a man who loves a place that loves a game. This is a hockey town, and there are plenty of things you can say about those, but at least they're predictable. You know what to expect if you live here. Day after day after day.

Bang.

Beartown isn't close to anything. Even on a map the place looks unnatural. "As if a drunk giant tried to piss his name in the snow," some might say. "As if nature and man were fighting a tug-of-war for space," more high-minded souls might suggest. Either way, the town is losing. It has been a very long time since it won at anything. More jobs disappear each year, and with them the people, and the forest devours one or two more abandoned houses each season. Back in the days when there were still things to boast about, the city council erected a sign beside the road at the entrance to the town with the sort of slogan that was popular at the time: "Beartown—Leaves You Wanting More!" The wind and snow took a few years to wipe out the word "More." Sometimes the entire community feels like a philosophical experiment: If a town falls in the forest but no one hears it, does it matter at all?

To answer that question you need to walk a few hundred yards down toward the lake. The building you see there doesn't look like much, but it's an ice rink, built by factory workers four generations ago, men who worked six days a week and needed something to look forward to on the seventh. All the love this town

could thaw out was passed down and still seems to end up devoted to the game: ice and boards, red and blue lines, sticks and pucks and every ounce of determination and power in young bodies hurtling at full speed into the corners in the hunt for those pucks. The stands are packed every weekend, year after year, even though the team's achievements have collapsed in line with the town's economy. And perhaps that's why—because everyone hopes that when the team's fortunes improve again, the rest of the town will get pulled up with it.

Which is why places like this always have to pin their hopes for the future on young people. They're the only ones who don't remember that things actually used to be better. That can be a blessing. So they've coached their junior team with the same values their forebears used to construct their community: work hard, take the knocks, don't complain, keep your mouth shut, and show the bastards in the big cities where we're from. There's not much worthy of note around here. But anyone who's been here knows that it's a hockey town.

Bang.

Amat will soon turn sixteen. His room is so tiny that if it had been in a larger apartment in a well-to-do neighborhood in a big city, it would barely have registered as a closet. The walls are completely covered with posters of NHL players, with two exceptions. One is a photograph of himself aged seven, wearing gloves that are too big for him and with his helmet halfway down his forehead, the smallest of all the boys on the ice. The other is a sheet of white paper

on which his mother has written parts of a prayer. When Amat was born, she lay with him on her chest in a narrow bed in a little hospital on the other side of the planet, no one but them in the whole world. A nurse had whispered the prayer in his mother's ear back then—it is said to have been written on the wall above Mother Teresa's bed—and the nurse hoped it would give the solitary woman strength and hope. Almost sixteen years later, the scrap of paper is still hanging on her son's wall, the words mixed up, but she wrote them down as well as she could remember them:

*If you
are honest, people may deceive you. Be
honest anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may
accuse you of selfishness. Be kind
anyway.*

*All the
good you do today will be forgotten by
others tomorrow.*

Do good anyway.

Amat sleeps with his skates by his bed every night. "Must have been one hell of a birth for your poor mother, you being born with those on," the caretaker at the rink often jokes. He's offered to let the boy keep them in a locker in the team's storeroom, but Amat likes carrying them there and back. Wants to keep them close.

Amat has never been as tall as the other players, has never been as muscular as them, has never shot as hard. But no one in the town can catch him. No one on any team he's encountered so far has been as fast as him. He can't explain it; he assumes it's a bit like when people look at

a violin and some of them just see a load of wood and screws where others see music. Skates have never felt odd to him. On the contrary, when he sticks his feet in a pair of normal shoes he feels like a sailor stepping ashore.

The final lines his mother wrote on the sheet of paper on his wall read as follows:

*What
you create, others can destroy. Create
anyway. Because in
the end, it is between you and God.
It was never between you
and anyone else
anyway.*

Immediately below that, written in red crayon in the determined handwriting of a primary school student, it says:

*They
say I'm too little to play. Become good player
any way!*

Bang.

Once upon a time, Beartown Ice Hockey's A-team—one step above the juniors—was second-best in the top division in the country. That was more than two decades and three divisions ago, but tomorrow Beartown will be playing against the best once more. So how important can a junior game be? How much can a town care about the semifinal a bunch of teenagers are playing in a minor-league tournament? Not so much, of course. If it weren't this particular dot on the map.

A couple of hundred yards south of the road sign lies "the Heights," a small cluster of expensive houses with views across the lake. The people who live in them own supermarkets, run factories, or

commute to better jobs in bigger towns where their colleagues at staff parties wonder, wide-eyed: "Beartown? How can you possibly live that far out in the forest?" They reply something about hunting and fishing, proximity to nature, but these days almost everyone is asking themselves if it is actually possible. Living here any longer. Asking themselves if there's anything left, apart from property values that seem to fall as rapidly as the temperature.

Then they wake up to the sound of a *bang*. And they smile.'

3

For more than ten years now the neighbors have grown accustomed to the noises from the Erdahl family's garden: *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Then a brief pause while Kevin collects the pucks. Then *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. He was two and a half years old the first time he put a pair of skates on, three when he got his first stick. When he was four he was better than the five-year-olds, and when he was five he was better than the seven-year-olds. During the winter following his seventh birthday he got such a bad case of frostbite that if you stand close enough to him you can still see the tiny white marks on his cheekbones. He had played his first proper game that afternoon, and in the final seconds missed a shot on an open goal. The Beartown youngsters won 12–0, and Kevin scored all the goals, but he was inconsolable. Late that evening his parents discovered that he wasn't in his bed, and by midnight half the town was out searching for him in the forest. Hide-and-seek isn't a game in Beartown—a young child doesn't have to stray far to be

swallowed up by the darkness, and a small body doesn't take long to freeze to death in thirty degrees below zero. It wasn't until dawn that someone realized the boy wasn't among the trees but down on the frozen lake. He had dragged a net and five pucks down there, as well as all the flashlights he could find and had spent hour after hour firing shots from the same angle from which he had missed the final shot of the match. He sobbed uncontrollably as they carried him home. The white marks never faded. He was seven years old, and everyone already knew that he had the bear inside him. That sort of thing can't be ignored.

His parents paid to have a small rink of his own constructed in the garden. He shoveled it himself every morning, and each summer the neighbors would exhume puck-graveyards in their flowerbeds. Remnants of vulcanized rubber will be found in the soil around there for generations to come.

Year after year they have heard the boy's body grow—the banging becoming harder and harder, faster and faster. He's seventeen now, and the town hasn't seen a player with anything close to his talent since the team was in the top division, before he was born. He's got the build, the hands, the head, and the heart. But above all he's got the vision: what he sees on the ice seems to happen more slowly than what everyone else sees. You can teach a lot about hockey, but not that. You're either born with that way of seeing or you aren't.

"Kevin? He's the real deal," Peter Andersson, general manager of the club, always says, and he ought to know: the last person in Beartown who was as good

as this was Peter himself, and he made it all the way to Canada and the NHL, matching up against the best in the world.

Kevin knows what it takes; everyone's been telling him ever since he first stood on a pair of skates. It's going to demand nothing less than his all. So every morning, while his classmates are still fast asleep under their warm comforters, he goes running in the forest, and then he stands here, *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Collects the pucks. *Bang- bang-bang-bang-bang*. Collects the pucks. Practices with the junior team every afternoon, and with the A-team every evening, then the gym, then another run in the forest, and one final hour out here under the glare of the floodlights specially erected on the roof of the house.

This sport demands only one thing from you. Your all.

Kevin has had every sort of offer to move to the big teams, to attend hockey school in a bigger town, but he keeps turning them down. He's a Beartown man, his dad's a Beartown man, and that may not mean a thing anywhere else, but it means something here.

So how important can the semifinal of a junior tournament be? Being the best junior team around would remind the rest of the country of this place's existence again. And then the politicians might decide to spend the money to establish a hockey school here instead of over in Hed, so that the most talented kids in this part of the country would want to move to Beartown instead of the big cities. So that an A-team full of homegrown players could make it to the highest division again, attract the biggest

sponsors once more, get the council to build a new rink and bigger roads leading to it, maybe even the conference center and shopping mall they've been talking about for years. So that new businesses could appear and create more jobs so that the townspeople might start thinking about renovating their homes instead of selling them. It would only be important to the town's economy. To its pride. To its survival.

It's only so important that a seventeen-year-old in a private garden has been standing here since he got frostbite on his cheeks one night ten years ago, firing puck after puck after puck with the weight of an entire community on his shoulders.

It means everything. That's all.

On the other side of Beartown from the Heights, north of the road signs, is the Hollow. In between, the center of Beartown consists of row houses and small homes in a gently declining scale of middle- classness, but here in the Hollow there are nothing but blocks of rental apartments, built as far away from the Heights as possible. At first the names of these neighborhoods were nothing but unimaginative geographic descriptions: the Hollow is lower than the rest of the town, where the ground slopes away toward an old gravel pit. The Heights are on the hillside overlooking the lake. But after the residents' finances divided along similar lines, the names came to signify differences in class as much as in districts. Even children can see that the farther away you live from the Hollow, the better things will be for you.

Fatima lives in a two-room apartment

almost at the end of the Hollow. She drags her son out of bed with gentle force; he grabs his skates and soon they're alone on the bus, not speaking. Amat has perfected a system of moving his body without his head actually having to wake up. Fatima affectionately calls him "The Mummy." When they first reach the rink, she changes into her cleaner's uniform and he tries to help her pick up the garbage in the stands until she shouts at him and drives him off and he goes to find the caretaker. The boy is worried about his mom's back, and she worries that other children will see him with her and tease him. As long as Amat can remember, the two of them have been alone in the world. When he was little he used to collect empty beer cans from the stands at the end of the month to get the deposit back on them. Sometimes he still does.

He helps the caretaker every morning, unlocking doors and checking lights, sorting out the pucks and driving the zamboni, getting the rink ready for the day. First to show up will be the figure skaters, in the most antisocial time-slots. Then all the hockey teams, one after the other in order of rank. The best times are reserved for the juniors and the A-team. The junior team is now so good it's almost at the top of the hierarchy.

Amat isn't on the junior team yet, he's only fifteen, but maybe next season. If he does everything that's demanded of him. One day he'll take his mom away from here, he's sure of that. One day he'll stop adding and subtracting income and expenditures in his head all the time. There's an obvious difference between the children who live in homes where the money can run out and the ones who

don't. How old you are when you realize that also makes a difference.

Amat knows his options are limited, so his plan is simple: from here to the junior team, then the A-team, then professional. When his first wages reach his account he'll grab that cleaning cart from his mother and never let her see it again. He'll allow her aching fingers to rest and give her aching back a break. He doesn't want possessions. He just wants to lie in bed one single night without having to count.

The caretaker taps Amat on the shoulder when his chores are done and passes him his skates. Amat puts them on, grabs his stick, and goes out onto the empty ice. That's the deal: the caretaker gets help with the heavy lifting and tricky swing-doors that his rheumatism makes difficult and—as long as Amat floods the ice again after he practices— he can have the rink to himself for an hour before the figure skaters arrive. Those are the best sixty minutes of his day, every day.

He puts in his earphones, cranks the volume as loud as it will go, then sets off with speed. Across the ice, so hard into the boards at the other end that his helmet smacks the glass. Full speed back again. Again. Again. Again.

Fatima looks up briefly from her cart, allows herself a few moments in which to watch her son out there. The caretaker catches her eye, and she mouths the word "Thanks." The caretaker merely nods and conceals a smile. Fatima remembers how odd she thought it when the club's coaches first told her that Amat had exceptional talent. She only understood snippets of the language back then, and the fact that Amat could skate when he could barely walk was a divine mystery to

her. Many years have passed since then, and she still hasn't gotten used to the cold in Beartown, but she has learned to love the town for what it is. And she will never find anything in her life more unfathomable than the fact that the boy she gave birth to in a place that has never seen snow was born to play a sport on ice.

In one of the smaller houses in the center of town, Peter Andersson, general manager of Beartown Ice Hockey, gets out of the shower, red-eyed and breathless. He's hardly slept, and the water hasn't managed to rinse his nerves away. He's been sick twice. He hears Kira bustle past the bathroom out in the hall, on her way to wake the children, and he knows exactly what she's going to say: "For heaven's sake, Peter, you're over forty years old. When the GM is more nervous about a junior game than the players, maybe it's time to take a tranquilizer, have a drink, and just calm down a bit!" The Andersson family has lived here for more than a decade now, since they moved back home from Canada, but he still hasn't managed to get his wife to understand what hockey means in Beartown. "Seriously? You don't think all you grown men are getting a bit too excited?" Kira has been asking all season. "The juniors are seventeen years old, practically still children!"

He kept quiet at first. But late one night he told her the truth: "I know it's only a game, Kira. I know. But we're a town in the middle of the forest. We've got no tourism, no mine, no high-tech industry. We've got darkness, cold, and unemployment. If we can make this town excited again, about anything at all, that

has to be a good thing. I know you're not from round here, love, and this isn't your town, but look around: the jobs are going, the council's cutting back. The people who live here are tough, we've got the bear in us, but we've taken blow after blow for a long time now. This town needs to win at something. We need to feel, just once, that we're best. I know it's a game. But that's not all it is. Not always."

Kira kissed his forehead hard when he said that, and held him tight, whispering softly in his ear: "You're an idiot." Which, of course, he knows.

He leaves the bathroom and knocks on his fifteen-year-old daughter's door until he hears her guitar answer. She loves her guitar, not sports. Some days that makes him feel sad, but on plenty more days he's happy for her.

Maya is still lying in bed, and plays louder when the knocking starts and she hears her parents outside the door. A mom with two university degrees who can quote the entire criminal code, but who could never say what icing or offside meant even if she was on trial. A dad who in return could explain every hockey strategy in great detail, but can't watch a television show with more than three characters without exclaiming every five minutes: "What's happening now? Who's that? What do you mean, be quiet? Now I missed what they said . . . can we rewind?"

Maya can't help both laughing and sighing when she thinks of that. You never want to get away from home as much as you do when you're fifteen years old. It's like her mom usually says when the cold and darkness have worn away at her patience and she's had three or four

glasses of wine: "You can't live in this town, Maya, you can only survive it."

Neither of them has any idea just how true that is.