

# GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

The tavern air smelled of cigarette smoke and compacted humanity. I didn't recognize anybody in the collage of faces.

"Bill!" I said, trying to keep my voice at a low pitch. He couldn't hear me.

"Bill!" I said again. I kept my jaws rigid and forced his name out.

My call was lost amidst the clamor of boozy conversation and clinking glasses. My friend surveyed the bar and motioned me to a vacant table. I followed, sticking my hands in my pockets and attempting a disinterested yawn.

I sat down and hunched forward. My finger found a cigarette burn in the red terrycloth table covering. Tammy Wynette was howling away on the jukebox, beseeching all women to stand by their men.

men were wearing lumberjack shirts with down-filled vests and baseball caps that had MACK TRUCK, STELCO and CATERPILLAR patches on them. Most of the women had on community league jackets with name tags sewn onto the right sleeve below the shoulder. Some of them were sporting lacquered hair-styles.

Our waiter returned and unloaded six tall glasses of yellowish fluid. I averted my face as he continued to scrutinize me. Finally, he took our money and left. I sat back, exhausted.

By now the fight was over. The bouncers had evicted the combatants and someone had rearranged the chairs and cleared their table. The beer tasted awful.

I sealed my nasal passage, forced the first

He took a swig of beer, held it in his mouth for an instant and swallowed.

"I skate like hell after him. He drops it for me about twenty feet in front of the net!"

"Well," he snickered, "I put everything I had into the shot. Then all hell breaks loose! The next thing I know the red light's flashin' and everyone is jumping all over me! Their goalie is looking all over the place! He never even saw it go in!"

"Jesus," he sighed.

More beer arrived. Bill finished another glass and then rose to relieve himself. I marvelled at his sober air as he manoeuvred around tables, chairs and people. I got up to follow, vainly imitating his poise. He stopped for an instant to look down at his untied running shoe and then walked straight into the women's can.

I was too far behind. The damage was done by the time I rescued him.

## I SEALED MY NASAL PASSAGE, FORCED THE FIRST GLASSFUL DOWN AND BEGAN ON THE SECOND.

A fight was starting a few tables away from us. Two Indians were grappling with each other. They had knocked over their chairs and were about to start swinging.

I couldn't seem to catch my breath. I sat and smiled stupidly. We were still minors.

Bill straightened his left leg carefully. He played hockey five nights a week and bursitis was beginning to claim his knees. He sat back and grinned. He loved this place.

The waiter spotted and moved toward us. Bill held up six fingers, indicating that we required a half-dozen draught beer. The waiter stared at me for a moment and moved on.

People seemed to be enjoying themselves, quaffing beer after the day's work. A lot of the

glassful down and began on the second. As I attacked the third glass, I noticed Bill holding both his hands up to the waiter.

"Drink up, drink up!" he said.

I shrugged and drained the third glass. It didn't seem to taste nearly as bad as the preceding two. The waiter cleared our empty glasses and replaced them with full ones.

Bill loved to talk. I leaned forward on my arms and listened as he became absorbed in his forte.

"So there I was . . ." he began.

"Two minutes to go in the game last night. The score's tied. The crowd's roarin'. I'm circling with the puck in our zone. I spot Krawchuk breaking free on the left side and feed it to him."

It was twenty degrees below zero and clear. For his wedding, it would have been ideal winter weather. The church was crowded. Someone told me later that more than 400 people were there.

I was sitting up at the front with the other pall-bearers, so the only time I got a really good look at all the long faces was after the service, when we wheeled the coffin up the aisle.

I recognized most of them: businessmen, students, the odd football player, a couple of media people, girlfriends, teammates, high school teachers, parents. Everybody was there.

I sat in the front seat of the limousine on

the way to the cemetery, watching the hearse up ahead and squirming in a suit that was too small for me. Police escorts were stopping traffic.

The driver handed me the funeral register. I signed carefully. I wanted people to be able to read my name afterwards.

My sunglasses dug into the bridge of my nose when I got out of the limousine. The pain in my throat meant a cold was coming.

The corpse jarred from side to side when we lugged the casket to the graveside. My back was hurting like hell.

I listened to the minister's mail-order benediction. My toes were freezing. They should have had me do it. I had known him better than anyone.

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