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## HEARTS AND HOCKEY CARDS

BY VÉRONIQUE DORAIS

*t*his story takes place before Joseph hired the Winter Carnival Duchess with pool blue eyes as his new secretary, and broke his engagement with his strawberry-blond high school sweetheart. Before the Duchess gave birth to his twin girls during the first and second period of the Stanley Cup finals between the Montreal Canadiens and Boston Bruins. Before he was sent to Cyprus for peacekeeping and added an extra layer of icing to his heart. Before he hit his youngest and realized his drinking had gotten out of hand and signed himself up for rehab. Before he was transferred to Belgium and worked as a civilian under the charge of General Richmond at NATO, who drowned three months after his retirement. Right before the death of Captain Laviolette and his eight companions who were shot down while on a reconnaissance to the Point of Entry Team Site at Lao Bao, near the Demilitarized Zone in Vietnam.

February 14, 1973. Sergeant Joseph Tremblay wakes up five minutes before his watch alarm goes off for his 4:00 a.m. jog. He gets out of bed and stretches his arms. He must shorten his jog today so that he can make it back by 5:00 a.m. to get hot water from the hotel tank for his bath. His mamasan has carefully placed two clean uniforms for him on a chair, two pairs of maple green socks, and two pairs of recently polished boots just underneath.

Wearing a white T-shirt and shorts, Joseph exits the Huong Giang Hotel, located on the south bank of the Perfume River. The stillness of the morning haunts him as he skips over house shambles and races across bridges that could fall to pieces behind him. Already at this early hour, a heavy and humid heat forces itself upon him. So different from the crisp snow of winters in Québec. He jogs past the MCCD Police and Security Section, where a white piece of cardboard hangs on a string, reading: "Canadian Military Power and Security Service." Major Darling is outside, watering the dying yellow flowers that surround the wood shack. Joseph nods and continues his jog. He has never noticed how tiny Major Darling looks without a uniform.

He jogs past the Redemptorist Orphanage that he visited upon his arrival in Vietnam. There, children are fed by the Canadian Supply Service and benefit from clean clothes and medical attention while they wait to see if, God willing, their parents are not dead, but prisoners across the river. Joseph remembers being six when he walked out of the Orphanage in Trois-Rivières, where he had been placed at the age of three because his father had left his mother and she had no money to raise him. He was so shocked by the light of the sun that a car hit him. It was Good Friday and the rest of his family was at church. Father Brian took him to the hospital where the doctors said that an angel was watching over him because all he had was a concussion. That evening he went home and met his brother Alain for the first time.

Joseph makes his way back to the hotel and pauses by one of the front pillars to stretch the muscles in his legs before he goes searching for the hot water tank to fill his bath. The water is slightly warm and he rejoices in how it cools off his skin and allots him the only 10 minutes of relaxation he can indulge in per day. He towels himself dry and notices his mamasan has left a fresh bowl of shaving cream by the sink, along with some toothpaste on his army green toothbrush. He shaves and brushes his teeth before getting dressed. As he slips into his khaki Bermuda shorts and white-collar dress shirt he watches the sun rise on the horizon outside his window. The sky is a pastiche of pinks, peaches and cream. It reminds him of his mother's favourite summer dress blending with her sun-kissed skin.

To think that just a few months ago, he had graduated from college and spent the summer working at the bowling alley, replacing pins for 10 cents an hour. He and the boys loved to race their red and blue Cameros down the main street at night, and park by the river to drink beer and smoke cigarettes.

One evening in late June, a cop car caught them racing and pulled them all over. Joseph thought they were going to get it bad. Jean eyed him through his thick-rimmed glasses, while Charles slowly inched back, ready to make a run for it. But the cop just laughed when he saw their faces and asked which one of them dared challenge him to a race. Mark, with the shinny black curls and brown bell-bottoms volunteered. He was the best racer in town. He beat the cop, who patted him on the shoulder and warned them to avoid racing on Tuesday nights when Officer Proulx was doing his rounds. Mark was now studying medicine at McGill University in Montreal. Jean was in France studying literature, and Charles had left for Alberta "pour tenter sa chance" with the new oil discoveries.

Joseph places his ranks on his shirt and his beret on his head and sits down on the bed to lace up his boots. His first job as a child was shining boots in the town square for 5 cents a pair. He managed to save up enough money to buy his brother, Alain, a pair of used skates for his birthday. They spent the entire night on

the fresh ice rink in the town park. Alain, who dreamed of being a professional hockey player, could skate around the pond dozens of times before Joseph could manage to make it around once. Joseph loved nothing more than watching Alain skate.

Joseph heads down the hall towards the little unventilated room he calls his office. He is the administrative officer for the First Contingent of MCCD Vietnam, the first truly unified operation mounted by the Canadian Armed Forces. From there, he deals with the paper work. He puts together the minutes for meetings and the agendas for the discussions between Poland, Hungary, Indonesia, Canada, America, and South and North Vietnam. Nothing happens without his knowing. Above his desk he keeps a copy of the notice handed out earlier that month by his mentor, Colonel Ringma1:

ALL STATEMENTS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED,  
ABOUT WHAT IS SURELY HAPPENING NOW  
OR ABOUT WHAT IS PROMISED TO HAPPEN  
IN THE FUTURE MUST, IN VIETNAM,  
BE CONSIDERED FALSE OR SUSPECT  
UNTIL CONFIRMED PERSONALLY, AND  
EVEN THEN, WHAT IS SEEN, HEARD  
OR TOUCHED MAY BE INCREDIBLE!

Apart from his administrative duties, Joseph is responsible for the War Diary, which he attempts to keep updated using antiquated typewriters, of which never more than one works at better than 50% mechanical efficiency.

Yet, today is a different day for Joseph. Today, he will supervise the first of many prisoner-of-war exchanges at Quang Tri, where 175 Provisional Revolutionary Government prisoners are to be returned north over the Thach Han River. Since Joseph's arrival,

he has constantly asked Colonel MacKinnon, if he could supervise the exchange. He is curious about the trading post, about riding in a jeep across minefields.

He walks towards the main headquarters to meet with the representative of the Canadian Ambassador, Charles Wood, who will accompany him through the day's duties. Joseph battles the sweltering atmosphere, but within five minutes, he is soaked with sweat. Mr. Wood waits for him outside building 102 with Colonel MacKinnon. He salutes them. "Colonel. Sir."

Colonel MacKinnon salutes back. "Sergeant Tremblay. This is Mr. Wood." The two men shake hands. "The Jeep is ready to go. You leave immediately." Joseph nods. "You're sure you want to do this?"

The question shocks Joseph, who thought the Colonel to be more professional than to ask such a question in front of the ambassador's representative. He is embarrassed, but nods again. "Yes, Sir."

"Good. Fill in your entry in the War Diary at the end of the day and report back to me in the morning." Colonel MacKinnon watches them disappear in a cloud of dust, unconvinced.

It is a rough ride to Quang Tri because bombs and mine shells have destroyed most of the streets. Three of the main bridges have been blown up and replaced by thin, temporary substitutes that shake vigorously as the jeep crosses. It reminds Joseph of thin ice in April. As boys, he and Alain had used the iced pond for as long as possible. Towards the end of each March, their mother began warning them to stop skating on the pond. "Why don't you use the rink in the park," she'd ask. She didn't understand that grass patches turned sweet breakaways into stumbling botch-ups. So they would secretly skate on the pond after school, telling their mother they had to stay after class for tutoring.

In the distance Joseph can see large hats on the heads of women tilling the fields. He wonders if any of them fear explosions. Maybe it has just become a part of their lives.

“How long have you been in ‘Nam, son?” asks Mr. Wood.

“Three weeks, Sir.”

“Do you blame the Americans for destroying the land and leaving us here to clean it up?” Joseph wonders if this is some sort of trick question.

“I believe we sold the Americans the arms and ammunition for this unparalleled destruction, did we not Sir?”

“Yes son. You’re quite right. We did.” Mr. Wood sighs. “I hear you keep the War Diary. What kind of stuff do you put in there?”

“Simply the details of the day. It is more of a journalistic record than a diary.”

“Ah. No crisis moment described in emotional detail then.” Joseph is disturbed with the conversation and keeps a firm hold on the handle of the jeep. The jeep hits a rock and the two of them steady themselves to avoid falling.

Joseph glances over at Mr. Wood. “I would think being in Vietnam is a crisis in itself, Sir.”

Mr. Wood smiles through his pale red moustache. “How old are you, son?” Joseph wishes he’d stop calling him son. “Twenty-one Sir. Today is my birthday.”

“Well happy birthday then. I bet you’ve got drinking plans for tonight. Too bad we’re supervising the trading of prisoners instead of women. They could help initiate you to manhood.” Mr. Wood snickers at his own joke and Joseph notices he is missing a tooth. He forces a smile in return. “There are some beautiful Vietnamese women here, always ready to help a soldier have a good time,” Mr. Wood continues. “You let me know if you want one.”

Before Joseph can answer, they pull up near the River Thach. The waterway separates North and South Vietnam. The prisoners are to be carried from one side to the other in rowboats. Mr. Wood and

Joseph stand on the deck and watch the first rowboat head slowly across the river. It being the first day of trade, they deal with the sick or wounded prisoners: those without arms and legs.

Joseph watches the first bunch travel across the river and is no longer curious. For the first time since his arrival in ‘Nam he feels the heat in his stomach. As he watches the prisoners go by one by one, he is constantly reminded by Mr. Wood that they are here to supervise; not to help.

For Joseph, this directive is almost impossible to carry out. As if they have a mind of their own, his arms yearn to carry a young boy who has lost a hand, or a woman with burnt feet. The majority of them suffer from horrifying burns and Joseph senses their pain as the red sun mercilessly beats down upon their wounds.

The man standing at the head of the first boat is six feet tall and Joseph is sure he is just over 200 pounds. He is prisoner number nine and he reminds Joseph of his favourite hockey player, Gordie Howe, or “Mister Hockey.” Both share the same broad forehead and large aquiline nose. Both are number nine. Back in Canada, Joseph has three different Gordie Howe collectors cards, but two of them are buried in his childhood backyard because they used to belong to his brother.

The man behind “Mister Hockey” has a wide forehead and reminds Joseph of Alain’s favourite player, Maurice Richard, or “Rocket Richard.” As he observes the boats coming to the dock one by one, he sees all his favourite players appear: Phil Esposito, Bobby Orr, Wayne Cashman, Ken Hodge, Johnny Bucyk, “Le Gros Bill” and Hap Holmes. Their white cotton shirts and shorts become hockey jerseys, pastiches of purples, blues, blacks, or a red “CH” in the center, and a blue maple leaf. The paddles become hockey sticks, and Joseph imagines himself a fan, anticipating the arrival of his favorite players by the sidelines, guarded by a bodyguard who won’t let him approach them.

Late in the afternoon, the last boat rows across the boiling river, leaving gentle waves in its wake. This time, however, the silence that had marked the proceedings is broken by two men shouting in Vietnamese. A rather tall and awkward man, obviously older and missing half an arm, is arguing with a younger, one-legged man. The younger man is clinging to the older man in order to not fall off the rowboat. No one wants to help him, thinks Joseph. We aren't allowed, but none of his people want to.

The rowboat hits a rock and the one-legged man falls into the river. Joseph's memory reverberates with the echo of cracking ice. The man cries for help, his arms splashing against the water, but the rowboat silently continues towards the shore.

Joseph hears Alain's bubbled cries rise out of the drowning Vietnamese man. Joe, help me, Joe! He can see his brother's arms beating the icy water after falling through the ice one March afternoon. Their mother thought they were being tutored. He remembers the juxtaposition of the silence when Alain slipped underwater and the ghostly horror of his cries when he managed to pull his head up for a second of air. When Joseph tried to get closer, more ice would break and he feared he would fall too. In his panic, he never thought to use a branch to pull Alain back to safety. Joseph begins to unlace his boots.

"Don't even think about it Sergeant," Mr. Wood warns in a deep, low voice. Joseph takes off his boots and pulls off his socks. "This is not your duty son." Joseph looks at him straight in the eye for the first time that day. His face is blank, a mask showing nothing, and his eyes are frozen over. Sweat is dripping from Joseph's dark black sideburns. He takes off his shirt and beret, then dives into the scorching river that smells of blood.

Joseph swims quickly towards the man who has begun to sink. He dives underwater and opens his eyes. At first everything is murky, but his eyes adjust and he sees the man a few inches in front of him, floating peacefully. For a moment Joseph contemplates leaving him

there because life for this man will never be easy. But he pulls him out of the water and drags him to the dock. Mr. Wood watches him, but does not help. Joseph attempts mouth to mouth, but it is futile. The man is dead. He stands up and watches the remaining prisoners make it across, the purple sky blending with their wounds, as though the land is apologizing for its inability to heal its people. Mr. Wood puts a hand on his shoulder. "I can tell you've only been here three weeks, son. Waste of energy." And he walks towards the jeep that would take them back to the camp.

The ride home is silent because Joseph can feel the tears in his voice, but there are none in his eyes. He is still wet and feels unbelievably refreshed. The sun is setting on the horizon and Joseph knows that tonight he has something to write in the War Diary. Tonight, he can write about the Vietnamese man drowning and describe his pleading eyes. He can also write about his lack of justification for disobeying orders in hopes of relieving past guilt, about the hockey heroes that skated on the ice of his heart and helped him make it through this day. He must write it down otherwise he will become one of those soldiers unable to deal with the reality of what he has done and seen.

But when Joseph gets to his hotel room and marches down the hall to his little office, he does the only logical thing to survive – the only thing he can do. He reads over Colonel Ringma's message on his wall and types his account of the day's events:

February 14, 1973. 7:00pm GMT.

Today I supervised the first prisoner-of-war exchanges at Quang Tri. I was accompanied by the Canadian ambassador's representative, Mr. Wood. Together we observed 175 Provisional Revolutionary Government prisoners return north over the Thach Han River. Apart from a minor incident involving a dispute between two of the prisoners leading to the death of one, things went smoothly. We made excellent timing and hope to be as successful in our trading procedure over the next few days.

Joseph signs the entry and goes to bed. He lies awake in the sweltering heat and reviews his entry. He has done the right thing. He has buried the truth deep where no one can see, touch or hurt it: in the trench of his heart with Alain's memory; behind a door he will never reopen.

This happened after two South Vietnamese fighter pilots defected to the Viet Cong and tried to bomb South Vietnamese President Diem's house. After Nixon ordered one dozen B-52's to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong for six consecutive days. After Joseph learned to sing, "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." After his father walked out on his mother and married a Cree woman. After Uncle Francis took him and Alain to see the Rocket Richard play in Montreal. After he got his first kiss from a strawberry blonde under the maple tree behind the school. After he failed to save his brother from the freezing vapors when he fell through the winter ice. After spending an Indian summer trading hockey cards. (Endnotes)

*1. This message was actually written by Colonel Ringma, and was taken from the MCCD Vietnam Souvenir Book.*