

THE CENTER MAN

by

Karl Meade

I let one thing slip in an interview, the reporter caught it, led me on, and before I knew it, I'd laid myself open. Then everyone wanted to get me. And Ray, as the team's enforcer, took it as his job to protect me.

The first time he cut his knuckles in my defense was in New York. A November Saturday night, the Rangers-Maple Leafs classic. "They're going to kill you, Gil," Ray said, before the game, after my now-famous interview.

"It was the truth." I tried to act tough, but I was just an eighteen-year-old rookie, scared shitless.

Midway through the first period, Marcel "The Rat" Gurdjieff, with his greasy goatee, grinned at me across the face-off dot: centerman to centerman. The linesman dropped the puck, and Gurdjieff pretended to swat it out of midair and speared me in the gut. I dropped to my knees, gasping. Gurdjieff patted my back—"Welcome to the middle way, kid"—just as Ray dropped him with a right cross to the jaw.

After the game, Ray and I sat in our dressing room stalls beside each other, elbows on our knees, staring at the carpet of blue-white-red Rangers logos, as our coach ripped into us for

“playing like girls.” Ray had scored once but missed three perfect setups.

“Who taught you to pass like that?” Ray said, later.

I shrugged. “My dad, I guess.” But I didn’t say: “Before he died.” In training camp, during the skills competition, I’d won the passing accuracy by a mile. I was an awkward, ugly skater, but everyone I passed to scored goals by the bucketful. The puck came to me, the puck left me, and somebody scored. The coaches couldn’t quite figure me out, but they took a chance on me: the youngest, skinniest, pimpiest kid ever to make the team.

“My dad,” Ray said, “taught me how to take a punch.” He stuck his massive knuckle in his mouth, bit off a shred of hanging skin, and strode toward the showers.

* * *

It all started with my interview with Don McCain, that french-fry-cum-sportscaster wit from Moncton. He was doing his typical rookie-intro piece, “small-town boy makes big-time hockey”: how I’d grown up on Air Force bases across Canada; how I’d met my rugged right-winger Ray in training camp; how Ray had quipped that we’d both made the team with our hands, except his worked better *closed*. He’d raised his fist to McCain’s chin and grinned at the camera.

With me, McCain was all warmth and smiles, like he was lulling a baby. “Ray says you’re like a little brother to him,” McCain said. “A different cat. *Softer*.”

“Not softer,” I said, “just nuanced.” McCain virtually rolled his eyes at *nuanced*. “You know, like the saucer pass,” I added, quickly. “The art of war, on ice.”

I should’ve quoted Ken Dryden’s *The Game*, which had saved my life when I was a young teen lost between worlds: an altar boy who couldn’t believe anymore; an athlete who smoked pot and got straight A’s; a momma’s boy trying to become a man—but what kind of

man? How could you stay true to yourself and not get the shit kicked out of you for doing so? Here was Dryden, a *lawyer*, playing in the NHL, and not afraid to talk like one. I figured the league must be secretly full of guys like him—smart *and* true to themselves—and I'd dared to imagine I could be one of them.

I was thinking this as McCain's eyes lit up: "Tell me, Gil, where is the art in war?" But he wasn't just toying with me for the audience; deep down, every sportscaster dreams of hearing that perfect sport-as-metaphor-for-life truth, straight from the mouth of a bonehead athlete.

I heard the words come out of me, like a death sentence: "It's the middle way, Don. The Buddhist way."

I'd meant to say "the centerman's way," because a true centerman is the selfless one. The puck goes through him, not to him. He's the passer, the playmaker, the ghost. He can thread a ping-pong ball across a freeway, with two Mack-Truck defensemen bearing down at thirty miles per hour. If you give him a suicide pass, he returns a perfect saucer. He's the fixer, the healer, the feeder. You don't see him; you see his pass. For a true centerman, at the end of the game, you say: "Wow, were those wingers ever good."

Later I watched the interview with Ray. Not only had I said the *B* word, but also *non-aggression*, and, oddly, something I'd never said in my life: *a true warrior does not get angry*.

"Were you *drunk*?" Ray said.

"I don't know what happened." I'd been thinking of Dryden—clear, calm, courageous.

"Well, I'll tell you what's *going* to happen."

* * *

Suddenly the whole league was on a mission: let's see who can make Buddha-boy snap. I

learned The Code the hard way: what you say and do comes back to you. Slashes, elbows, butt-ends, fists—my face and body welted up like the moon in technicolor.

I never retaliated, but Ray went ballistic every time. His own Code of enforcement: don't touch my little centerman. He'd swoop in, stick dropped, gloves flying, his fists a wall of instant karma. He wasn't a big guy, more like a fire hydrant with knuckles. He didn't care how many punches he took; he just kept coming.

Like in Philly: Ray's hometown. When Mad-Dog Quarrington cross-checked me in the back of the neck, the crowd chanted *Ray-zor! Ray-zor!* until Ray pulled Mad-Dog's jersey over his head and jack-hammered him into the next week. After the game we met Ray's old high school buddies in a bar, and they told me Ray had been a model student.

I looked at Ray, his left eye closed, like Cyclops. "He hides it well," I said.

"Is that what you call wise speech, Buddha-boy?" He grinned at me with his fat lip stuck on a tooth.

Road-trip roomies, we snuck back into our hotel room past curfew and sat on our beds, watching the sports channel. I covered one eye, partly imitating Ray, and partly because I couldn't see straight after the six rounds of tequila shots he'd bought in the bar—trying to show his friends what a *lightweight* his centerman was.

"My dad taught me how to hold my liquor," I slurred, self-mocking.

Ray took a swig of minibar rum. "My dad taught me how not to."

Someone pounded on our door. I opened it to find our coach, seething. "Did you two miss curfew?"

I took it as a character test. "*Ye-es sir, we did.*"

“We were right here watching game tape!” Ray shouted.

“Wind sprints, 8 a.m., both of you,” coach said, and yanked the door shut.

I threw up in the bathroom, then lay on my bed, one foot on the floor for ballast, while Ray stared at the TV, shaking his head.

“It was the truth,” I said.

“Well, truth-boy, you’ll be puking again at about 8:05.”

I shrugged and said to the ceiling: “My father taught me how to take confession.”

Ray switched the channel. “My dad taught me how to lie.”

“I said *father*.”

Ray caught my tone and looked over at me. “Father as in *priest*?”

I focused on the Holiday Inn stucco—stippled, swirled.

“Jesus,” Ray said, finally. “Not you too.”

There was a long silence, during which I wished I hadn’t said anything, ever. Then I said:
“What do you mean, *not you too*?”

“My little brother.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“And my fucking dad didn’t believe him. Which nearly killed my brother.” Ray took a long swig and looked at me. “What did your dad do?”

“I never told him. He was on his deathbed, having another drink.” I breathed in the word for a minute: *cirrhosis*. “He didn’t believe in church, but he said it would do me good.”

“What about your mom?”

“That was the last thing Pema needed to deal with.”

Ray gestured at the thin paperbacks beside my suitcase. “You mean Pema is your *mom*? The one who gave you all those Buddha books?”

I imagined him sitting on a hotel toilet, thumbing my mom’s books with his grubby meat hooks.

Ray shrugged. “She wrote a dedication in the front of every one of them.”

Years ago, when I’d defended The Hockey Code to Pema, she’d surprised me by saying: “That’s the Buddhist way. Wise speech. Wise action.” I must’ve given her my hockey-player face, because she added: “*Karma*, honey. But with the courage to act on it.” Then she gave me a slim book called *The Middle Way* and launched me on my Buddha-quoting path of terror.

I strung Ray’s words out in my head: *Ded-i-ca-tion*. Four full syllables: you think you know a guy. Maybe he was a closet brainiac after all. Just like Pema was a closet warrior.

“I don’t know how she found out,” I said, “but Pema was the one who finally saved me from that asshole.” Then I rolled over and tried not to puke again.

* * *

Two nights later: Detroit. On the bench in the third period, Ray pointed at Portis LaBoeuf, who’d slashed me on the wrist in the second. “You reap what you sow.” I thought Ray meant me, until he jumped over the boards, dropped his gloves, and pummeled LaBoeuf like a rag doll.

Some people called Ray a bully, but he was no bully. He beat up the bullies. Without Ray I wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes in the league.

Still, later in our hotel room, I said: “You gotta let it go, Ray.” I splayed my diminutive “soft hands,” as reporters called them.

“You mean like how you let your *father* go?”

I stared back at him, stung.

“Here’s some advice,” he said. “If you’re going to give advice, it’s better if you live by it yourself.”

“It’ll pass,” I said. “Whatever can arise can pass.”

“You’re right.” He made a fist with his fire-hydrant knuckles, gashed from LaBoeuf’s forehead. “It’ll pass. Once they kill you.” Then he tapped his chest, once. “Or once *it* kills you.”

* * *

Three nights later: Boston, sudden-death overtime. If sudden death was what we lived for, slow death was what we lived. Our brains rattling around our skulls, fist by body check, period by game. And the biggest thing that determined whether you survived in one piece? How you conducted yourself on and off the ice. Karma.

For a “Father’s Day” publicity gig, the team flew in the players’ fathers, and my mom. Don McCain interviewed each of them, their ten seconds of fame, answering the question: why your son “made it?”

“Ray made it because we raised him tough as nails,” said Ray’s dad, predictably.

“I have no idea why Gil made it,” said my mom, predictably.

Afterward, Ray and I took his dad and my mom out to dinner at a sports bar. I could feel the tension brewing between Ray and his dad, who’d already had a few too many at the game. We were trying to keep a low profile—being the out-of-town victors—when a large, drunken man approached our table holding a program from the game: an autograph hunter.

As Ray got his pen out, the man looked at my mom and said, “You must be proud.”

“I am,” she said, and squeezed my forearm.

“Now I see why,” the man said, nodding toward me.

I later learned, as a coach, that the hardest thing to do in the middle of a game gone wrong—in the middle of war—was to see clearly what was actually happening, rather than what you wished was happening.

So when the man shook my mom’s hand and said, “Why he’s such a sissy,” it didn’t register at first.

“Sissy?” said Ray’s dad and stood up.

“Let it go, Dad,” Ray said.

And then the man said, squeezing my mom’s hand so hard that she flinched: “Because his father’s a fucking *mother*.”

Non-aggression is a challenging concept. There’s the theory, then the practice. Ray always argued that it doesn’t mean you stand by and watch someone get hurt; I always argued for wise action, wise speech—keep your head, speak the truth. I tried to let the man’s words go, even in my teenage state of son-with-mother, but when I saw her flinch, a primal rage rose in me.

Most of what I remember next is from the video posted later that night. I must’ve been “out on my feet,” as they say. I punched the man in the forehead, with my diminutive soft hands, but he hardly even blinked. He raised his left hand—still squeezing my mom’s right hand—and broke my nose. Ray’s dad raised his fist, while Ray lunged, one hand on my shoulder, the other swinging a beautiful haymaker arc—a truly elegant maneuver, like a ballet dancer at war—and punched his own dad clean in the jaw. Ray’s dad dropped to the floor, as Ray said something about his little brother. The other man dropped my mom’s hand. His friends, drunkenly thinking their friend had been attacked, jumped Ray. I defended Ray as best I could, blinded by my

broken nose and streaming eyes, as my mom watched calmly. This was all from the video, with the caption: “Buddhist hockey player starts bar brawl.”

* * *

I first watched the video on the news while sitting in a plastic chair beside Ray’s hospital bed, my right hand in a cast, my nose taped. My mom sat in the plastic chair next to me, reading. On the other side of the bed sat Ray’s dad, swollen-jawed, holding Ray’s bandaged hand, waiting for Ray to wake from surgery.

When the news clip ended, I said to my mom, “I know. I should’ve let it go.”

Ray opened his eyes and stared at me, sidelong, his jaw wired shut, his neck braced.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was trying to follow this stupid path, to do the right thing.”

Ray made a gurgling sound, something like “wise” carried in a chuckle.

I gestured my cast toward Ray and translated for my mom: “*Wise speech.*” I lolled my head, mocking myself, quoting what she’d said to me so many times: “*Is it true? Is it timely? Is it helpful?*” I gestured toward Ray again. “Apparently not.”

My mom squeezed my knee until I looked at her. She held my eye, and said, “Is it better than silence?”

THE END