

The Substitute

By Thomas Donahue

1.

The year 2015

Best was an insult. Too many people attached that word to various people, places, and things: best value, best available athlete, best getaway location, best hotel, best sub shop, best book store, best actor, best boutique, best ice cream parlour, best automobile dealership... and even best friend. Patrick Lofgren knew that calling Eddy Tavares his childhood best friend minimized his value. No, he refused to juxtapose Eddy with a 2015 four door sedan on Route 1 in Norwood.

No thank you, Auto Mile.

Eddy Tavares was his most special friend.

The word *special* fit. Eddy was nearby—always—when Patrick’s needs were not linked inexorably to the medicinal world, yet rather the simple, affordable, no-agenda-driven presence of someone who loved him. That was Eddy.

Locating Eddy was not a problem; after all, today’s world introduces an updated iPhone 6 on a Tuesday that will be collecting dust at a rummage sale by Friday. It took Patrick only ten minutes to locate Eddy’s whereabouts. He lived in Weymouth, Massachusetts, not even fifteen miles from where they both grew up on the rocky slopes of Boston’s South Shore. The difficulty of the discovery was learning

about Eddy's current predicament. That made the trip non-negotiable. Eddy meant the world to Patrick in 1980, and, years later, he still meant the world to him in 2015. Patrick's *true blue* best friend, his wife Emma, not only agreed to fly out with him, but also made all the reservations. Emma was more than a loving spouse; she was a perceptive friend. Eddy and Patrick had not seen each other in over two decades yet Emma's understanding of life was poignant. Her direct words to Patrick: "You must go see Eddy. He made you."

Patrick didn't quite know how to handle that assessment. Perhaps he wasn't supposed to handle it, or comment on it, or even analyze it. No, Emma knew Patrick the best (better than himself, at times) and in fact she was right. So, nerves should not have been a factor—yet they were. Perhaps it was the fear of how Eddy would look; worse, a separate thought occurred which made him feel shame. Patrick knew he shouldn't dwell but couldn't control the machinations or impulses of his mind.

Perhaps seeing Eddy would remind him of his youth...and that notion frightened him. But fear was okay, it's a natural part of life, especially when battling deadly diseases—like Patrick then, and like Eddy now. Yet, all these years later (over thirty), Patrick can distinctly recall that it was Eddy Tavares who allowed him believe in himself. Moreover, Eddy Tavares was the reason why Patrick was still alive. At the crux of that relationship was a shared love, something they treasured more than anything at all, and something that helped Patrick escape woeful thoughts of standing on death's doorstep.

It was ice hockey.

2.

The year 1980

“Patrick, who’s your favorite hockey player?” Bobo asked?

“Bruins or not a Bruin?” Patrick answered.

“Not a Bruin.”

“Gimme a sec.”

Bobo Tavares negotiated the Ford Gran Torino effortlessly down Route 123 in the west end of Cold Brook, Massachusetts. In late March the snow was melted but it was still icy cold. The heater worked well. Bobo asked the question each week, and usually seven-year-old Patrick Lofgren gave a different answer. Patrick was the biggest fan of Bobo’s son, Eddy, and also the unofficial leader of Cold Brook Lobstermen Hockey Nation. Eddy was the starting goaltender for the Cold Brook Peewee B team, the very team that was now facing nearby Marshfield in the South Shore League championship. Patrick wore a Bruins cap to cover his bald head. The last two years of his young life had been difficult. He spent a decent portion of his time at Children’s Hospital, battling a disease that the Red Sox fight each year by way of the Jimmy Fund. Ice hockey, particularly Cold Brook Lobstermen hockey with Eddy Tavares in the net, was Patrick’s escape. The Tavares family lived next door to the Lofgrens—and they were very much family.

Patrick considered Bobo's question. "Okay, I'm not gonna say Dave Silk 'cause I've been saying him since they won the gold medal last month so I'm gonna say... Mike Bossy."

"Good choice," Eddy said. "What about Bruins?"

"Does Bobby Orr count?" Patrick asked.

"Nope, gotta be a current player," Eddy said.

Patrick weighed the matter. There were plenty of viable options: Brad Park, Wayne Cashman, Terry O'Reilly (of course), Nifty Rick Middleton, Jean Ratelle, and definitely the rookie sensation that grew up in Montreal. He wore number 7 and didn't speak English all that well. Yes, it must be Raymond Bourque who was his favorite.

"Bobby Schmautz," Patrick said.

Bobo and Eddy Tavares gasped. "Schmautz?" they repeated, simultaneously.

Patrick smiled. "Yep. He's the only one I know who shoots the puck harder than Slapshot McGee!" John "Slapshot" McGee was a neighborhood kid who skated for the Cold Brook Bantam A team.

"You know your hockey, Patrick. Now then, you got any advice for Eddy? It's the championship game so we'll take any pointers." Bobo smiled into the rearview mirror. Patrick gleamed, then looked at Eddy.

"Keep your skates tight to the post."

Eddy smiled. “You got that, buddy.”

Nerves were a factor—not for the goalies but rather the forwards from both Marshfield and Cold Brook. The score was deadlocked at 0-0 in the third period. Each team registered thirteen shots; Cold Brook hit a post and Marshfield hit the crossbar. That was it—nothing else was noteworthy. Typically the nerves factor vanished after the first few shifts, yet it was obvious that no player wanted to make a mistake and cost his team the championship.

The crowd was enormous. More than two hundred family members and friends packed Pilgrim Arena in Hingham. The bleachers were jammed, some parents watched in the corners with their faces pressed to the Plexiglas, and the youngsters hung to the railing on the upstairs balcony while chomping popcorn purchased from the snack bar.

There were mostly cheers, but one Cold Brook mother lived up to the hockey parent stereotype when the rink quieted: “Ref... number eight’s killing our kids out there! Blow your damn whistle! Whaddya from Marshfield or something?”

With twenty-five seconds remaining in regulation a Cold Brook forward intercepted a pass in the neutral zone as he entered the ice on a line change. It was a clean play. Marshfield was on the attack and skating quickly toward the Cold Brook blue line. The Cold Brook forward glided past the imbalanced lone Marshfield defenseman who seemingly tripped on an imaginary banana peel. He had help—the

other two Cold Brook forwards carried their momentum at full speed and rushed ahead. One of the Cold Brook defenseman also skated hard toward the net. It was an incredible rarity in hockey—for all intents and purposes it was a four on none. The Cold Brook forwards fanned out. The puck carrier was in the middle. He stick handled back and forth. The defenseman trailed. The puck carrier faked a pass then dropped it back to his trailer defenseman. He was fifteen feet away from the goal. He received the perfect pass and readied to shoot. The Marshfield goalie committed to the shot as he squared his shoulders.

But it wasn't a shot. The defenseman passed it to the forward who was near the crease to the left of the goalie. It was a wide open net. The Cold Brook forward received the pass cleanly, then fired a would-be game winner.

Clang!

The sound of rubber on metal echoed. The puck hit the post and ricocheted directly out of the Marshfield zone. The crowd gasped. Patrick Lofgren squeezed Bobo Tavares' arm in the stands as he watched three Marshfield players descend on a lone Cold Brook defenseman and goaltender Eddy Tavares. The Cold Brook forwards hurried back. The clock ticked—seven seconds remained.

The Marshfield puck carrier, the aforementioned aggressive number eight, was now in the slot, fifteen feet from the goal. He opted not to pass. Instead he pulled back his righty stick to unload a slapshot. As his stick neared the puck he fooled everyone by controlling the puck and accelerating toward the goal. He deked left, then deked right. Eddy Tavares readied for the shot. The defenseman reached out to

poke away the puck. He didn't succeed; in fact, he fell to the ice. Number eight then coolly skated past Eddy and swiftly circled the net.

The clock ticked: three seconds.

Eddy recovered and slid laterally to his right. His right skate stopped abruptly three inches from the post as the Marshfield player made his wraparound shot attempt.

One point five seconds remained.

The sound of wood on metal now reverberated throughout Pilgrim Arena as the Marshfield player's Koho stick slammed the post. The little puck squeezed between Eddy Tavares' skate and the goal post. The siren cried. It was game over, and the Marshfield team was now the champs of the South Shore League Peewee B Division.

Patrick's face pressed against the fogged Plexiglas. Eddy Tavares was shell-shocked. He played a great game, but failed to heed Patrick's portentous advice: keep your skate tight to the post. Sweat dripped from Eddy's mask. His teammates surrounded him and patted him on the helmet. "You played a great game, Eddy," the team captain said.

Yet Eddy sulked. The car ride home was quiet. Bobo tried to lighten the mood with NHL talk about the 1960s and how Bobby Hull and Rocket Richard were the best non-Bobby Orr players he'd ever seen. "I'll never make the Peewee A team next year after tonight," he said.

It was a foolish statement; even Eddy knew it. He looked shamefully at Patrick, a young kid who was fighting cancer, then thought: *who am I to complain about a hockey game?* Patrick scooted next to Eddy and put his arm around him. “You were awesome!”

Before long they were back in Cold Brook. Bobo walked Patrick to his front door. The young boy was exhausted. Under normal circumstances going to a skating rink was out of the question during a chemo session week. But this had been Eddy’s championship game and the exception was made. A tired Patrick hugged Bobo then slipped into his home for the night.

Maria Tavares loved her son unconditionally. She did not go to the game because of nerves. Instead she prepared a homemade marinara sauce with pasta and handmade meatballs. It was Eddy’s favorite. At the dinner table, while eating his big plate of food and drinking a glass of milk, Eddy managed to escape from the loss.

The telephone rang.

Bobo answered on the fourth ring. It was supper time; customarily people didn’t call at this hour. Bobo asked several questions to whomever he was speaking with. The replies were short. It was a hockey matter of some sort. Bobo placed down the receiver and sat down at the table. He looked at Maria, then Eddy.

“The A team has a goalie problem,” he said. “They want you to fill in. The game is in ninety minutes. Same place—Pilgrim Arena.”

Eddy was confused. Was this a joke? “Dad, the A team got eliminated in the second round,” he said.

Bobo smiled. “I know,” he said.

“Then what are you talking about?” Eddy asked.

Bobo relished the moment. “The Pee wee A team got eliminated... but the Bantam A’s are playing in ninety minutes. What do you say?”

Eddy stopped breathing for a moment. He simply could not process the request. He just lost the Pee wee B championship. He was incredulous. “The Bantam A’s want me to play in the championships? Why me?”

Clearly it was a reasonable question. Bobo knew there wasn’t much time. “Eddy, their starting goalie has had the flu all week. He’s a last minute no-play and no one else can be found.”

Eddy stared at his father. Emotions swirled. Bobo cracked a smile. Suddenly Eddy’s face lit up. “Let’s go!”

Six minutes later Eddy was standing over Patrick Lofgren as he lay on the living room couch. A re-run of Creature Double Feature was playing on Channel 56. The piercing screams of Rodan echoed about the Lofgren living room. Patrick was pale. The comforter was pulled up to his neck. Eddy Tavares was not without common sense; he fully understood that Patrick could not—under any circumstances—return to a chilled skating rink. “Any words of advice?” Eddy asked.

“Keep your skates tight to the post,” Patrick said with a smile. His voice was weak.

Eddy laughed. He put up his hand and received a feeble high five. “See you after the game, buddy.”

“One more thing,” Patrick said.

“What’s that?” Eddy answered.

“I get to keep your game jersey when you win.”

Eddy gave Patrick a wink: *you got that, little buddy.*

Confidence was markedly absent inside the Cold Brook Bantam A locker room. Players dressed quietly and engaged only in small talk. The coaches fiddled with clipboards. The notion of playing in the championship game without starting goalie Mikey St. Laurent was unthinkable. Worse yet, they were opposing their archrival Hingham with future NHL player Chickie O’Shea (and his annoying swagger) at the helm.

The team was comprised completely of second year bantams; eleven were ninth graders and three were eighth graders. All knew Eddy Tavares. All acknowledged him upon arrival. They liked Eddy, but... but he was a sixth grader playing on the Pee wee B team. Their fate didn’t bode well. Eddy sensed the discomfort level. He balked internally as he finished putting on his equipment.

What am I doing here?

The door swung open quickly and crashed into the thirty gallon barrel which was filled with broken sticks, McDonalds to-go bags, and hockey tape. The barrel fell. Everyone looked. Slapshot McGee was beaming from ear to ear. His shoulder length blond hair swung freely, his blue eyes were opened wide, and his face was littered with stubble because he failed to shave. Slapshot had just turned fifteen years old but he had the build of a college player, the toughness of an IHL player, and the slapshot of an NHL player. He was revered throughout the region. Slapshot rocked his shoulders side to side. He was completely dressed but still wore his Cold Brook High School jersey. They defeated Duxbury (Slapshot had a goal, 2 assists, and 2 penalties) and his father broke a few driving laws to make it to Pilgrim Arena on time.

Slapshot leaned back and looked to the ceiling. His diaphragm filled with air, then he yelled. "Let's do it!"

The locker room erupted. All players sat up. The coaches smiled. Slapshot McGee was the undeniable leader of not only the Bantam A team, but Cold Brook Lobstermen Nation. He evoked passion, fury, and the contagious feeling of confidence to everyone around him. Slapshot was a true wildcard whose unquestioned skill was countered only by occasional dumb penalties and a reckless slapshot (to wit the nickname) which caused destruction.

Yet he was calculating. Slapshot made his way around the horseshoe shaped locker room and greeted each player. He had grown up with all these kids. All would play varsity for Cold Brook High School with him at some point. He exchanged high

fives one player at a time. As planned, he ended with the goaltender—Eddy Tavares. Slapshot squatted so he was face-to-face with the goaltender. “We’re winning today,” he said calmly.

Eddy’s greatest fears dissipated instantly; instead, a light switch of energy that was Slapshot McGee allowed him to truly believe.

Maybe I can do this?

“Bobo here?” Slapshot asked.

Bobo Tavares was a well-known (and vastly popular) figure in Cold Brook. He was a firefighter and lobsterman. Bobo was a hockey guy on top of that; he knew all the great players and they knew him. “Yes, he is,” Eddy said.

Slapshot nodded. “Then win this one for Bobo!” he yelled as the two players exchanged high fives.

Roars from the stands set the tempo during the pre-game skate. The South Shore League was rife with talent. Ten kids on the ice would play college hockey in future years; two would play in the NHL. Each team finished their goalie warm-up shots then performed a last minute loosen-up-the legs routine of skating counter-clockwise from behind their goal to center ice. Players exchanged menacing glances as they whisked past each. Eddy watched intently as he stretched out in goal. He knew it was no coincidence that the two future NHL stars timed their center ice arrival perfectly.

Chickie O'Shea and Slapshot McGee had been hockey rivals for ten years. Yet, stars attract stars, and for the past three summers they skated on the same summer select team. Chickie and Slapshot respected each other—but battled for supremacy each time the puck was dropped. This afternoon would be no different.

The first period was action packed. Nerves were no factor. Cold Brook controlled the puck most of the fifteen minutes. Hingham registered seven shots on net, but none of them really tested Eddy Tavares. The Cold Brook forwards, following the specific instructions of their head coach, were quick to make body contact on Chickie O'Shea in the neutral zone, the exact space where he so often created separation. Eddy made appropriate cover-ups and avoided lazy rebound shots. Cold Brook was on its game. Their passing was crisp, and it was rewarded during the period's one power play. Cold Brook made four clean passes inside the Hingham zone which culminated in a blistering fifty foot shot by Slapshot McGee. The puck was eight inches off the ice before deflecting off a Hingham stick and making a beeline to the top shelf. Goal!

It was Cold Brook, 1-0, after the first period.

Bobo Tavares was sweating. Between the first and second period he ran to the payphone and updated Maria. Bobo was stunned when Maria said, "I know the score. I'm listening on the radio."

Bobo returned to the rink. He never noticed local radio WATD was on site for full coverage of the game. It was being broadcast live! Maria also had told Bobo that

Patrick Lofgren was on the couch and listening to the game on a battery-operated transistor radio. Yes, the game was big!

The second period would tell a different story. Chickie O'Shea reminded all in attendance why he was the top-rated bantam in Massachusetts. Acceleration is a principle of physics; yet, watching Chickie O'Shea demonstrate that principle in the open ice put meaning to the term. Chickie was rounding his net, with speed, when he caught a perfect pass from his defenseman. Cold Brook was on a line change. Chickie darted down the left side of the ice and weaved between two Cold Brook defenders who skated backwards yet couldn't maximize their momentum.

Eddy Tavares inched out as Chickie now approached the net—with speed. Popcorn fell unknowingly out of Bobo's mouth as he watched Chickie O'Shea descend upon his son. The left-handed O'Shea deked right, then left, then—with his skates moving the whole time—deked right again. Eddy could not make the adjustment; Chickie back-handed the puck easily into the net. O'Shea circled the net and stopped momentarily in front of Eddy. He stared down the young netminder. "Welcome to bantams," he hissed before skating away quickly.

The game was tied, 1-1.

Eddy looked to the stands; his eyes found his father. Bobo did not disappoint. He slowly but loudly clapped. "You can do this, Cold Brook!" he screamed. The words invigorated Eddy. His father yelled not for him, but rather Cold Brook.

Hockey was a team sport—and now Eddy was pumped.

Organized chaos best described the third period of the South Shore League Bantam A championship. The puck seemed to be on constant flow—zero icings and zero penalties were called during the first ten minutes. Each team registered ten shots. Yet the score was still deadlocked at 1-1. Body checks were being delivered by both teams at a staggering rate. On one shift, two Hingham players each flattened one Cold Brook player. The following shift, an erratic-yet-still-in control Slapshot McGee flattened four different Hingham players. Again, all the checks were clean. Dirty play was not in the cards.

Hingham seemingly caught its big break with two minutes remaining. McGee fired a slapshot from the point but it was blocked cleanly by a Hingham winger. The puck bounced off the winger's shin pad and pushed toward center ice. Chickie O'Shea forecast the play and had already made his break. It was easy pickings as O'Shea developed speed, controlled the puck and moved toward Eddy Tavares with the open ice equivalency of a designated penalty shot.

Patrick Lofgren's face was laden with sweat. He long ago abandoned Creature Double Feature and listened to the static-filled radio describe this scene. Chickie O'Shea just had a clean breakaway on Eddy and ripped a snapshot that was en route to the top shelf. But it would not be. Eddy Tavares anticipated the shot and snatched the missile from the air! Save, Eddy Tavares! Patrick cheered from his couch as the announcers yelled in disbelief.

Chickie O'Shea was stunned. He skated up to Eddy. "Hey kid, didn't they tell you that you're just a substitute."

Slapshot McGee appeared seemingly from nowhere. The whistle had already been blown but McGee would have none of Chickie O'Shea's shenanigans. He checked O'Shea—hard enough to get his attention yet with enough restraint not to draw a penalty. Players from both sides convened at the net. Bobo and Cold Brook Lobsterman Nation hollered from the stands. Whistles were blown. Eddy and Chickie engaged in a staring content. Then, the unexpected happened. Eddy smiled and winked at Chickie. It was a tacit yet calculating message: *Back off, Creep*. The referee and linesman separated everyone. After a one minute delay the game resumed with ninety seconds on the clock with the game still tied at 1-1.

Slapshot McGee approached Eddy before the puck drop. Eye contact was imperative. Eddy waited for Slapshot to speak. It was short; it was to the point. "You gotta believe, Eddy." For the second time in one afternoon, Slapshot McGee made Eddy Tavares smile, and, more importantly, reminded him that the improbable was possible. Miles away, Patrick Lofgren was rocking back and forth on his couch. The drama was almost too much for him.

The puck dropped to Eddy's left and quickly squirted into the corner. A quick Hingham winger retrieved it and skated toward the top of the circle; then, in a flash, the Hingham winger surprised everyone when he spun and fired a low snapshot to the short side. The puck traveled perfectly and was intent on being a game winner. Eddy

Tavares' skate, snug against the post, derailed this attempt at winning the game. The puck again squirted into the corner.

This time Cold Brook won the important puck battle. The clock ticked: thirty seconds remained. A Cold Brook defenseman skated three strides before making his breakout pass. It connected cleanly to a winger on the far side. The Hingham forwards descended upon him. The Cold Brook player was past center ice. He fired the puck into the zone. There would be no icing call.

A scrum for the puck behind the Hingham net moved to the corner right of the net, then back behind the net, then back to the right corner. The puck seemed to have a mind of its own; no player could gain control. The clock ticked: ten seconds remained. No one can recall, even all these years later, how the puck sprang free.

It just happened.

The puck skidded back to the point. The clock was the enemy now. Action was needed quickly, and no person on the ice was better suited than John "Slapshot" McGee. The small black disk was virtually delivered onto the waiting stick of Cold Brook's star player.

Patrick Lofgren hung onto the radio announcer's words: ".... And Slapshot McGee uncorks a wicked shot from the point! It hits the goalie in the mask! Oh my God! The goalie—McClellan—has fallen down and the puck ricocheted in the air! The puck lands and Oh my God the puck rolled into the net! Goal Cold Brook! Goal Slapshot McGee! The Cold Brook Lobstermen are gonna win the championship! There

is one second on the clock, but wait! The Hingham coach signals the officials to wave off the one second. This game is over! The crowd at Pilgrim is going berserk. The Cold Brook players, led by Slapshot McGee, have swarmed Eddy Tavares! Eddy is a first year peewee who just won the Bantam A Title! Wow. Now the Cold Brook players have hoisted Eddy Tavares onto their shoulders and are skating him around the rink, waving to their fans! What a finish!”

3.

The year 2015

Patrick halted at the threshold of Room 722 North. Emma literally crashed into him. What caused the screeching of the proverbial human brakes was the droning voice of some extremely intelligent physician (you must be a genius to be a doctor at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston). “The onus is on you, now, Mr. Tavares, not only to re-examine your lifestyle but to effect immediate change.” The words, on paper, made sense; but the drab delivery made it sound as if it was spit from a computer. The doctor continued a monosyllabic lecture.

Emma squeezed Patrick’s elbow. “I think it’s best if you see him alone.” He stared at Emma. He didn’t speak but gave her the *‘Didn’t we just travel across the country specifically for this moment?’* “Really,” she said. “I’ll go down to the Au Bon Pain. Call me after you’re acquainted and I’ll come up.” Patrick waffled. Then, per usual, he knew that his wife was correct. This was a big moment. It had to be just the two of them. For now.

Emma slid away. Patrick watched her from behind; he could watch her from any angle. He could watch her forever. When Patrick faced the room, Dr. Drone scurried past him and didn’t make eye contact. Patrick took one step forward and stopped. Again. From his vantage point he could see the usual hospital window with cream colored dividers. Fake plants were on the on the sills as well as scattered

sections of the Boston Globe. Patrick knew that stepping into the room would be revisiting his childhood. It would be his personal Twilight Zone. It was a tough moment; he hadn't physically seen Eddy Tavares since the late 1980s.

There was no excuse for that fact. Moving to California and beginning a new life—and his own family—should not have stopped Patrick from keeping ties with Eddy. He had traveled to Cold Brook multiple times, yet his parents were the only ones he saw regularly. He attended one Cold Brook High School reunion when he was twenty-eight, but those were his contemporaries; Eddy was a little bit older. From a manhood perspective, Patrick had not been true to Eddy—and he should have. There was no acceptable excuse.

Was it fear? Was it that 80s decade of antiseptic hospital smells and lingering doubts of death that pervaded him? Maybe, maybe not. Either way, he was here now. Patrick closed his eyes. Why be frightened now? It's ridiculous. He regained his senses, lifted his head, opened his eyes, and stepped back into the 1980s. Patrick Lofgren entered room 722 North.

A man who looked like Eddy Tavares' much older brother lay quietly on a hospital bed. His once coppery skin seemed faded by disease. He wore light blue hospital pajamas. Machines with flashing lights, occasional beeps, and an abundance of wiring surrounded him. An intravenous line fed into his left elbow joint. Another man, this one resembling Bobo Tavares' older brother, snored softly on a visitor's chair next to Eddy.

A notion occurred. Neither Eddy nor Bob had older brothers. The television was on but was at commercial. Some eccentric guy wanted viewers to buy an automobile on route 1 in Norwood. Patrick winced. He took a plane; he was all set.

Eddy Tavares looked at Patrick.

No reaction.

Patrick was shocked. Then he inventoried himself. He was dressed in a shirt and tie with a long, black tweed coat. Eyeglasses, a new twist, masqueraded his face. How about the hairline? Damn, Patrick actually laughed. He was completely bald on top and shaved the sides and back of his head with a 1" electric blade. As far as Eddy Tavares was concerned, the new guy in the room was a life insurance salesman trying to score a buck from the guy who was now standing at death's doorstep. Patrick looked at Eddy—more silence. Eddy's eyes squinted; he took a deeper, more curious look at his visitor. Doctor? No, he wasn't a doctor. Bobo was oblivious; he continued to snore.

Eddy's face came to life. His eyes widened and his smile lit up the room. Instantaneously it was 1980. Again. He took a sip of water from a medicine glass. Slowly. He looked at his old friend. "Who's your favorite hockey player, Patrick?" he asked.

Patrick was a little kid. Again. "Bruin or not a Bruin?"

"Not a Bruin," Eddy said.

The answer was easy. Patrick Lofgren's childhood was filled with turbulent moments. He should be dead, less for the valiant efforts of Boston doctors and nurses. Cancer fought him and he fought it back. But he didn't do it alone. In his darkest moments, Patrick clung to his parents and all the others he cherished most. Patrick reached into the shopping bag which was glued to his right hand. Fingers whisked past the dime store novels and California tee shirts.

He extracted something given to him decades earlier. It was a gift—a gift which was given on the words of a promise. Patrick lifted the neatly pressed Bantam A team jersey from the bag. He looked to his childhood inspiration, the kid who he told to keep his skates tight to the post. That same kid was now a man walking on the precipice of death. Now, it was Eddy Tavares who needed someone to provide a little wind behind his sail.

Bobo snored louder. Eddy smiled wider. Patrick tossed the jersey. As it floated through the dry hospital room air, his words released effortlessly. “My favorite hockey player is Eddy Tavares... the best goalie ever to suit up for the Cold Brook Lobstermen.”