

BLUE FLAG, RED FLAG

A blue flag means the ice is hard enough to skate on. A red flag means it isn't. You don't really know how they go about deciding which flag to put up, since the ice almost always looks the same. Fifteen years ago, a boy died because someone was too lazy to take down the blue flag and put up the red one, but everybody's forgotten about that. New people have moved in. Of course, when one of their kids dies the newspapers will resurrect the story of the earlier tragedy. Upon further digging, they'll discover that the flag-man, in both cases, was one and the same. Universal outrage will grip the town. Not knowing what to do, the mayor will fire the man and forbid skating altogether. But the unbearable beauty of the lake will tempt people out onto it, night after night, until the need for flags becomes obvious once more. Unsure of how deep public sentiment really goes, the mayor will quietly rehire the same man, assuring one and all that close supervision will be the watchword from now on.

ANOTHER MAN'S MOCCASINS

Even if my son had a bedwetting problem, I don't think I could send him to one of those bedwetting camps, or to one of those combination bedwetting and overweight camps in Vermont, where the brochures show fat kids riding skinny white horses and huffing up nature trails. How desperate does a parent have to be to do that? And what if the treatment doesn't work? What if the kid comes back and still wets his bed, still weighs two hundred and fifty pounds? Do you send him to military school even though you know they'll try to beat it out of him? I've met parents who've gone through this sort of thing. Sometimes with more than one child! They need sympathy, so they blurt out their problems to anybody. Seeing your shocked expression, they hold up their hands to ward off your predictable protests. The funny thing is, when you hear them explain the actions they took in the context of the time, you realize you would have done the same thing. Say this out loud — "I would have done the same thing" — and they'll be your friends for life.