

One

Digger has always been a good sweater. He's only just stepped into the sauna and already he can feel the itch of sweat behind his ears, around his hairline, along his spine. It's a natural talent his teammates envy, especially at a time like this. Digger, Ben, and Fly lie sprawled in the sauna—cutting weight for the Olympic Trial matches this weekend, freshly flown to Toronto from Calgary this morning. All three are veterans to this routine. First, they unroll the plastics—pants and hooded jackets they crumpled into stinking balls the last time they cut weight. Eventually, they'll pull the clothes on in the sauna, but first they'll get a bit of a sweat going. They procrastinate at this stage, slumping naked, staring at the steaming rocks. Once dressed, they do a few jumping jacks in the sauna heat to get things rolling. When the sweat flows fast, that's when they really start moving, running at first, then riding the stationary bike that's plopped right in the middle of the sauna. No matter how dehydrated Digger is, no matter how shitty he feels, he can always find energy to sit on a bike and move his feet in circles.

Rarely, though, does Digger have to go as far as the bikes. Half an hour in the sauna and half an hour jogging; that's all it takes to get him within a kilo of weight. If he doesn't eat or drink after, the last bit comes off in his sleep. He wakes up ready to weigh in. After weigh-in, he just starts slow, which works for him because he's slow in the morning anyway. Drink a little water. Jog a slow circle around

the gym. Progress to Gatorade. Try some light food. A banana at first, never an orange. Acid kills an empty stomach. If he's got a couple hours, he can be back to weight by match time.

Others aren't good sweaters. One look at most of the guys on bikes and a healthy person would never peg them for strong athletes on the verge of competition. Lips white and parched, solidified gunk stuck to the corners of their mouths, breath reeking of shit, eyes dried red, bones nearly visible under grey skin.

But it'd be hard to get a good look at them. They won't meet anyone's eyes. Not because they know how bad they look, not because they're in any way embarrassed, but just because they can hardly hold up their heads. All that's ricocheting in their minds is *half more kilo, half more kilo, half more kilo*. But they're so dried out by this time that they can't imagine where that half kilo will come from, can't even imagine where a tenth of a kilo would come from.

Digger notices that Ben and Fly don't look too bad yet. All three slouch naked on the sauna bench, plastics piled next to them, waiting. Digger and Fly look pretty sucked already. "Ripped," most people would say. "Sucking weight" is what wrestlers call draining the body's water so it's just skin and muscle. Bodies lean, every muscle clear. Digger's wrestling at eighty-five kilos, Fly at sixty-nine. Ben is up at the ninety-two kilo class. Big Benny. Guys there are rarely as lean.

"Chicks dig the love handles," is how he responds when the guys rib him for being chubby. He flexes his right arm with the tattooed Celtic band circling his bicep. "They like their men a little bulky," he says.

"Digger, you bastard. You're sweating already," Fly says, glancing up.

Digger doesn't look back at him. He's looking at his own arms, running a credit card down the length of the right one, scraping off the first layer of sweat. Now more sweat will come faster. Some guys use window scrapers or butter knives. Digger uses a credit card—always gold (even if it's an expired one with his mom's name on it). He sets the card on the bench and breathes in the hot cedar air.

"You shoulda seen him at the Commonwealths," Ben says into

Digger's silence, ignoring the fact that Fly might not want to hear about the Commonwealths since he was the only one of the three not to qualify. Ben only has two kilos to cut and is chattier than Fly, who still has eight. He jumps into his story with a grinning flourish. "So we're in Kuala Lumpur and we only got a coupla hours 'til weigh-in. We're all *waaay* overweight because our moron of a team manager got us there with no time to suck. What kind of idiot books flights the same day as weigh-in?"

Everyone has heard this story—all of each other's stories—dozens of times. Digger only sweats in answer to Ben's question. Ben doesn't leave space for anyone to respond.

"All the other teams already cut weight the day before and are ready to show up at the scales rested and clean," says Ben. "Then there's us, jet-lagged and just getting into our plastics. So we're all suited up and Victor, coach from hell, is about to take us on a run. No one is saying a word—hating life. Miz-er-a-bull. I'm cool and dry as a bone and still have five kilos to cut, so I'm knowing my day will be pure misery."

Digger swats him on the head. Ben catches his meaning and shoots Fly an oops-sorry-buddy glance. Ben's five kilos that day will be nothing compared to Fly's eight today.

"Then we hear this *drip drip drip*. Somewhere close. We're all in our own zone, all so wrapped up in our own foulness that at first we don't even look. Then the drip gets annoying, louder and faster. We can't help looking around. I'm the first to realize: *Holy shit, it's Digger!* He hasn't done a damn thing and the bastard's sweatin' so hard it's pooling up and running down the inside of his plastics. It's literally *pouring* out his sleeve. Now we're all staring at him, so the prick holds out his arm, smiles and watches the liquid run out of his cuff. Not just a *drip*, but goddamn Niagara Falls." Ben throws a scoop of water on the steaming rocks for effect. "That guy can sweat a kilo a minute, I swear."

"Yep." Digger says. He wipes a hand across the back of his neck, then flashes his liquid-covered palm to his two dry-skinned friends. "I was born to be a wrestler."

Two

Sadie belongs to the water. Only here, her body performs as trained. Heat tickles her neck, mingles with the cold fluid enveloping her. She's near the end, should be exhausted, but today she feels she could swim forever, motoring full speed at the water's surface. Hot, cold, pleasure, pain. She has no time to consider these sensations. One thought pulses: *Go, go, go*. A syllable with every stroke. Her biceps and triceps, her shoulders and her back, her hamstrings and her quads—all pulse. Will they fail her? Can they finish? Something in her doubts this body. *Rest*. Surely she needs rest. Even on this good day, her muscles whisper at her: *Enough. No more*. She blocks these thoughts. She can die later, can rest when it's over. Today means everything. Her body buzzes with this knowledge. Only the next two minutes matter. One swimmer's head is at her waist, lane five, and another swimmer's head is at her feet, lane three. But today she will win. Today her body takes charge. Two lengths left and the others will try to pull ahead, but no matter how hard they pull, she will pull harder. She will win. In her last length, one word fills her: *Happening*. It's *happening*. She pulls harder, kicks harder, as if watching her pain from the outside. With throbbing in her throat, in her ears, in her temples, she stretches and slams her hand into the wall, feels the timing pad give with her force. Her face whips to the results board: Number 1. Sadie Jorgenson. YES. She lets herself fall beneath the water, rips off her plastic swim cap, and

feels the cold water run through her hair. YES. Such a short word with so much weight, taking up so much space. It fills her head, her lungs, her heart. YES. She is Victor Davis. She is Alex Baumann. She is Kornelia Ender. Kristin Otto. Mark Spitz. YES. Her legs pull together hard, boosting her torso out of the water, her arms above her head. Victorious.

Who gets up this early? It's cold. It's dark. It's five AM. Calgary winter, no less. "Masochists," she grunts, pounding the alarm. Sadie hauls herself out of her dry warm bed with its down duvet to pull on a damp swimsuit. Her eyes stay closed and grit scrapes the inside of her eyelids. Fatigue and nausea grip her gut. She squints her eyes open and grabs the suit hanging on her doorknob, peels it up over her body. This is an old routine, one she's been doing for fourteen years. Swimming: two times a day, six days a week, two hours per time. All adding up to a grand total that even she doesn't want to know. She should be used to it by now, but every day she hates getting out of bed just as much as she hated it the day before. Yet she keeps doing it, even on this February Monday, the week after she's won the eight-hundred-metre freestyle at the Olympic Trials. Only seven months until the Olympics, no time for a break. She reaches for her swim bag on the floor and slides out of the room without flicking on the lights. No celebration, or even rest, for her: the weekend's victory was a beginning rather than an ending.

She opens the fridge and shuts her eyes at the light assault. A pre-mixed smoothie in the blender container waits for her on the top shelf next to her father's six-pack of Guinness. Too early to be running the blender and waking her parents. Enough that they put up with a grown daughter in their house at all. Eating their food, running their hot water. *Only until the Olympics are over*, she tells herself, leaning against the counter and giving the plastic blender container a shake, sipping from it as she scans the contents of the fridge. The Guinness is a new habit. Her father had always been such a health food freak. Never booze in his fridge. She was the only

kid she knew who wasn't allowed white bread. Even now, ordering a sandwich in a restaurant, she'd cancel if the waitress couldn't offer a whole-wheat option. "White bread's the devil's work"—her dad's sentiment turned into her catchphrase. And white flour wasn't her dad's only hang-up. She'd endured a wide gamut of phases during her swimming career—the eight-raw-eggs-a-day phase, or the twelve-honey-bee-pollen-pills-with-every-meal phase. She's happy he no longer gets up to make her breakfast before practice.

Imagining this morning's practice, Sadie remembers an old saying: the only thing more boring than being a long-distance runner is being a long-distance swimmer. And it's true: at least a runner has scenery. All a swimmer has is the bottom of a pool. And Sadie has memorized every line, every crack, every drain, every single wad of gum on the bottom of the University of Calgary pool, the pool where she's spent the last eleven years training, where she's swum thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of lengths. Still, she can't say she finds it boring. She forces down the chunks of half-blended banana in big gulps.

"Only boring people get bored," her mother would say when Sadie was young and complained of long, tedious practices. Not that Sadie's mother approved of athletics in particular; she just had an appreciation of excellence—and a good work ethic—in general. *Only boring people get bored* became the refrain of Sadie's youth, dragging her through those endless, repetitive workouts. An active imagination didn't hurt either. While she swam for the varsity team, she did a degree in English Literature, and all those stories pulled her through the two-hour mindless pool sessions—staring at the bottom of the pool while memorizing her favourite Yeats poem or re-inventing Austen novels, imagining Elizabeth dumping Darcy's ass at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*. But the more advanced she got as a swimmer, the less she allowed herself to play these time-killing games. Her life had narrowed, focused, until it was just her body and the water immediately surrounding it. Every practice required her full concentration. To be the best, to win, she had to pay attention to the minute details of every second, of every stroke.

And what was the point, if it wasn't to win?

Hand entry, body position, stroke count—each movement counted towards the overall performance. The more attention she paid during practice, the more she could count on these movements coming naturally during a race.

The milk sits heavily in Sadie's stomach and she knows she'll be tasting the smoothie again during her flip turns. She quietly sets the empty blender container in the sink and fills it with water.

I, Sadie Jorgenson, am going to the 2000 Olympic Games. I am an Olympian, she tells herself as she pulls on her fuzzy boots in the dark hallway. Others on her team had worked just as hard, had suffered the same early mornings, and wouldn't be going.

She'd trained with Bogdan since he was just a kid who bragged that he never messed up a workout by getting out of the pool to go to the washroom—a habit that carried over to his varsity years when he nicknamed himself Big Chief Yellow Cloud. Sadie wondered if he got away with this brand of humour simply because swimming was a sport pretty much limited to upper-middle-class white kids. Before Sadie's race at the trials this weekend, Bogdan hovered around her, shooting instructions into her ear—*start out nice and steady, no intense effort; remember, second half of the race is what counts; don't be lulled into anyone else's race; if they want to go ahead at the start, just let 'em—they'll pay for it at the end . . .*

"Aye aye, Big Chief," she'd answered with a sharp salute but then pinched his cheek when he scowled.

"Just keep your arms relaxed," he'd concluded, wagging his arms at his sides.

She never got a chance to talk to him after her race but watched his fifteen-hundred metre in dismay. His pacing was off from the first fifty metres, his face quickly growing red, his stroke more and more awkward and laboured. It simply wasn't his meet. Who knew why? Maybe he missed his taper, maybe he had a bit of a bug, maybe he ate the wrong pre-race meal, maybe his stars just weren't aligned. End result—Sadie was going to the Olympics without him.

"I'm going to The Show! Disneyland, here I come!" she'd laughed

with her coach, Marcus, after the race, water still running down her back.

The Olympics weren't in Disneyland—they were in Sydney, Australia. Athletes mocked the parades and outfits of the Olympics, the intense media coverage, but at the same time craved the attention. Widespread recognition came only with Olympic gold. Every athlete's dream.

A dream that reeks of chlorine. If asked what reminded her of childhood, Sadie wouldn't answer baked bread, hopscotch, summer camp. Her childhood was scented with the heavy bleached fragrance of a swimming pool. Chlorine's toxic aroma so deeply soaked into her that it had become her natural perfume. In high school gym class, as soon as she broke a sweat, the pungent aroma of chlorine would swim around her.

"Ewww, something smells like a swimming pool."

"Just me," she'd admit, blushing under her chemically stripped hair. At least now it would be blonde for the Olympics, not green as it was for many of her school photos. Thank goodness for Bromine.

Twenty-six and swimming in the Olympics. She pulls a bright red toque down over her forehead, almost covering her eyes, and zips up her calf-length red parka, U of C Dinos blazed across the back. With a sigh, she steps into the dark, her boots crunching on the frozen snow, and heads to the swimming pool that is her life. Her high school alumni will see her on TV and wonder, "Isn't that the sleepy girl who always smelled like a swimming pool?"

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"SAYYY—DEEE—YOU'RE—HERE!" Marcus belts out as she makes her way onto the pool deck. This is his standard shtick for all the swimmers. Each deep, booming syllable assaults the silent air.

"MI—CHAAAEL—YOU'RE—HERE!"

"JO-HAAAN—YOU'RE—HERE!"

"BEZ—ZAAAD—YOU'RE—HERE!"

He says it as if every one of them isn't always here, isn't here every single practice, every single morning, every single afternoon. It's the

coach's job to be enthusiastic. Once they're in the water, it's: *Harder! Faster! Concentrate! Streamline! Kick! Think!*

But now, no one looks to the water, not until Marcus gives the direction at 6 AM exactly. Now, swimmers sprawl across the deck, heads resting on their gym bags, towels pulled across their faces, bags of ice on their shoulders. Sadie listens to the insistent ticking of the pace clock, the rumble of the heater kicking on, and wonders how long she has. She loves this limbo, lying on the warm pool tiles, still wrapped in the hazy protection of sleep, postponing the assault of the ice-cold pool water. The two hardest things: getting out of bed, getting in the pool.

Only the people who qualified this weekend have shown up for practice. Those who didn't win got the morning off. Sadie's body envies them as Marcus pronounces, "Start time." At the pool's edge, while pulling on a plastic cap that tears at her hair, she dips her toes in the water. Cold. She takes a deep breath and holds it while counting down—5-4-3-2-1—and forces herself to dive in against her will. She does the same thing after diving every time: swims half a length under water, exerting herself—moving her arms and legs quickly—to help fight the cold, then jumps up, breaking the surface with a splash. A quick breath, then three fast flip turns, feet over head, feet over head, feet over head. That's all the movement it takes to adjust to the water's temperature. Now she's awake and ready. A nice smooth front crawl back to the edge and it's time for her first set.

I might go on, naught else remained to do. So on I went, trips through her head as she imagines herself a late-twentieth-century incarnation of Browning's Childe Roland, the black line at the bottom of the pool her own darkening path.

Sadie does 4 x 800 metres on twelve minutes, a mild recovery workout after a weekend of exertion. Long strokes and smooth turns. With the lapse in intensity, Sadie returns to fictional worlds like she used to when she was just a varsity swimmer, not yet on the national team. But today it's not the world of Austen or Yeats. Today it is CBC Newsworld, and Steve Byron interviews her after

she pulls off a miraculous gold place finish in Sydney.

This has been a dream of mine ever since . . .

I want to thank . . .

I couldn't have done it without . . .

I just gave 110 per cent . . .

The clichéd speeches flow over her as she swims back and forth past the three wads of gum in her lane—two bright pink and one green, must be Clorets. As a Lit student, Sadie knew a cliché when she spoke one, but athletes' lives were governed by clichés. They not only talked in ready-made phrases but also wore them on their T-shirts, taped them to their walls. *The road to glory's paved with sweat. No pain, no gain. 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration. Just do it.* Why do you suffer? The pat answer—for her Olympic Dream—quickly forestalled further thought. The phrase echoed in Sadie's head, the words hollow from repetition. But she'd built her whole life—her very identity—on those two words: Olympic Dream. Now was not the time to question them. At moments, Sadie was aware that if she and her athlete friends were to delve deeper than the ready-made phrases, they might find it difficult to justify their quixotic lifestyle—a life where a twenty-six-year-old man can still get away with peeing in the pool and then announcing, "I Big Chief Yellow Cloud." Or worse yet, standing quietly close by your leg before whispering, "Does the water seem warmer than usual to you?"

Sadie expected a celebratory atmosphere at practice this morning, everyone puffed up with their new status as Olympians. Instead, it's quieter than usual, no sound but the echoing thud of a kickboard on the deck or the rhythmic splashing of water. For now, they're all quietly getting used to the idea of themselves as Olympians, immersed in relief at having made the first distance.

After practice, Sadie drives to her grandma's for breakfast, another of her traditions. In the tiny, glassed-in entranceway that reeks of lilacs and cigarette butts, she pushes 5-1-2, the code printed next to the name Eva Jorgenson.

“Hi Grandma, it’s me!”

“C’m up.” The door buzzes.

Sadie could’ve pressed any arrangement of numbers, said the same thing, and gotten the same response. The building is a twenty-storey seniors’ high-rise, all single apartments. Each unit with its own little kitchen, its own little bathroom, and its own little half-deaf inhabitant. Every morning, Eva hangs a piece of cardboard painted with a green circle on her doorknob, letting the caretaker know she’s awake and alive. Meals and homecare will be available when she needs them.

She’s still a kick-ass cook and will now be loading the table with scrambled eggs, raisin toast, sliced grapefruits, homemade cinnamon buns, fried hash browns, and Saskatoon berry jam. Sadie pushes open the apartment door without knocking, welcomes the smell of fresh baked bread.

“For my starving swimmer girl,” says Eva, setting a plate in front of Sadie, who’s shrugging off her Dinos parka. The loose hanging sleeve of Eva’s flowered satin housecoat drags through the ketchup on Sadie’s eggs, but neither pays any attention. Eva rarely dresses anymore and her housecoats get brighter and looser all the time. Two bobby pins at each temple hold her short, uncombed hair off her face.

“Thanks, Gran! Flashy dress.” Sadie sits down to the table, reaches for the butter, piles it thickly on one of the steaming cinnamon buns.

Eva is eighty-two now and breathes in shallow but loud gasps while she covers the six feet from her kitchen cupboard to the table, bringing Sadie a coffee with cream. She rests her hand on Sadie’s head, “This head of hair. It looks like it’s trying to escape from your head!”

Sadie brushes Eva’s hand away, tongues a chunk of cinnamon bun into her cheek. “I like my hair. It’s wanton and lascivious. Like Milton’s Eve’s. Responsible for the downfall of man!”

Eva shakes her head and moves to her own spot at the table, then leans on the back of her chair and sprays a long squirt of nitro under her tongue. “Enough of this stuff’ll turn me into a bomb.” She

makes this joke daily. A rattle of phlegm comes in place of a laugh. Eva claims to have already eaten but pulls a small box of chocolates, the weekly gift from Sadie, from her housecoat pocket. She unwraps a small globe of chocolate and sets it under her tongue, letting it melt. Sadie refuses to nag Eva about her diabetes. The family doctor once told Sadie that Eva needed to pay attention to her weight.

“She hardly eats,” Sadie had defended her.

“Sadie, you don’t get to be that size hardly eating.”

Sadie remembers thinking, *You don’t get to be your size by hardly eating either, doc.*

The chocolates were Eva and Sadie’s secret.

Neither speaks while Sadie devours her breakfast. She races to shovel food into her mouth. Eva claims to love the way Sadie eats: nothing wrong with a passion for food. She sits across from Sadie, chewing with her mouth open; Sadie can see chocolate making its way around her mouth. Finally, Sadie rises to take her plate to the sink, rinsing it under water though there’s not a speck of food left on it. On the microwave lies a white doily trimmed with canary yellow. Her grandmother has obviously ironed and starched it. Another flecked with green rests atop the fridge. One trimmed with red sits under the teakettle. When Sadie was younger, these doilies were dresses for her Barbie dolls and wedding veils for herself and her friends. They were camouflage when she’d spilled nail polish and marked up the perfect white dressers her parents gave her for her thirteenth birthday. Now she reaches over and fingers the stiff edge of the yellow one.

“You can have all of those once you’re ready to set up house for yourself.”

Sadie drops the doily. “Subtle, Grandma.”

Eva shifts her weight uncomfortably and puffs on her inhaler. “I hear congratulations are in order. Your mom tells me I’ll be seeing you swim on TV this summer?”

“Yes,” Sadie says. “I finally made the Olympics.” She flattens the doily and moves to the table. “What a relief.”

“Relief?” Eva makes a noise in the back of her throat. “Relief?”

Is that all it is? Hardly seems worth all the trouble. Just for relief. I thought it must make you happy.” She lifts the inhaler towards her mouth but then drops it on the coffee table at her side, fingers the neon pink flowers at her chest.

Happiness? Yes, once it was about that. Sadie almost says these words aloud, but Eva is still talking.

“If I want relief, alls I do is take an Ex-Lax.”

Three

Digger and Ben walk the echoing nighttime hallways of the hospital, the fluorescent lights stinging their dry eyes. Digger holds a big bottle of water and Ben, whose curly, damp hair sticks to his neck and forehead, a jug of blue Gatorade. They're both pale and look weak—every movement an effort—but both look better than Fly, stretched out in his hospital bed, a sheet pulled up to his shoulders.

Digger had just finished checking his weight—84.98 kilos with twenty minutes to spare—when his coach, Saul, snapped at him. “Your weight good, Digs?”

Digger nodded, leaning against a cool cement wall and wiping his face with a rough towel.

“Well, go help Fly. Fucker’s not gonna make it.” Saul dropped a coin in the vending machine, grabbed himself a Coke, and waddled off without looking for an answer. Digger heaved himself off the cool wall and went to find Fly propped on a bike in the sauna. Fly looked like shit and smelled worse. His upper body hung limp over the bike’s handlebars, arms and legs swathed in plastic. He didn’t lift his head when Digger popped his face into the sauna, though he did seem to pedal a little faster at the burst of cool air.

“Let’s turn this sucker up, Fly. Get your feet moving. Not making

weight isn't an option. Not at the Olympic Trials." Digger wrapped Fly's head in a dry towel and plastic hood, then cranked up the heat and stood outside the door, banging on the little window whenever Fly's feet slowed. In the end, Fly did make it, weighing in at exactly sixty-nine kilos.

Afterward, they walked by the vending machine on their way to the water fountain.

"Mmmm, a Coke." Fly forced the words out of his parched throat.

"Have some water first," Digger instructed, but he too felt his taste buds twinge at the thought of a cold, sweet Coke. Fly was already popping coins into the machine. "Well, at least have some water after. More water than Coke," Digger said over his shoulder on his way to the change room. The next he heard, Fly had been carted off in an ambulance.

Now Fly lies on his single bed, hospital bars up and intravenous tubes inserted in both his arms. Digger and Ben pause in the doorway before slinking to his bedside. Fly opens his eyes, but otherwise he seems unaware of his friends. Only his eyelids have moved. He says nothing.

"Look at that," Ben pushes out a loud bark of a laugh. "You're not dead after all. They's just trying to scare us."

The room is lit with a painful, unnatural white light that shows the salt dried to Fly's face, highlights the darkness around his eyes, makes him look old. He seems oblivious to Digger and Ben and stares blankly at the ceiling.

The reek of urine and antiseptic fills the air. Neither sits well with Digger's post-weigh-in stomach. Still, it's an improvement on Digger and Fly's rez room.

"See, that's how you got your name, buddy," Digger reaches as if to pat Fly's hair but at the last moment forms his hand into a fist and gives Fly a light bop in the middle of his forehead. Fly's stare remains fixed on the ceiling. "All you do is eat shit and bother people.

Dragging us out to a hospital to console your dehydrated ass. All 'cause you couldn't keep your lips off the Coca Cola."

Digger knows how good the icy sugar rush of a Coke tastes after cutting weight, all that sugar sending an instant energy buzz to a depleted body. Cold, fluid sugar pouring down a dried throat. But he also knows that when the body is that dehydrated, it needs water, a lot of water, before wrestling with sugar. Fly knew better too. Digger's not surprised that Fly went into seizure. Surprised, no. Worried, yes. Fly's chances of wrestling in tomorrow's trials are not good.

Ben slides open the medical supply drawer next to Fly's bed. "Hey hey, looky here, a little lube." He puts several packets into his breast shirt pocket. "Might just need this for the post-tourney festivities." He kneels and rifles through the drawer for toys, while Digger watches Fly's face for movement or colour or anything, but Fly lies, covered and still, his eyes dim and unfocused.

Ben is blowing up a white latex glove just as two male doctors enter the room. "Look! Balloons," he says, waving the latex glove over Fly's face. The doctors barely glance in Ben's direction but he lets his makeshift balloon deflate and stuffs the limp glove in the back pocket of his jeans.

"This party is finished," says the older doctor, studying Fly's IV bags, not even glancing towards Digger and Ben. He stands close enough that Digger can smell the sour coffee on his breath. Fly still hasn't moved, seems no more aware of the doctors' presence than he was of his friends'. Digger sees now that one doctor is much younger, possibly an intern, and follows the older, watching over his shoulder. Both step in line to Fly's bedside chart. Rebuked, Digger and Ben step back, and Ben points his head to the door.

"We gotta stay for a bit," whispers Digger. "We haven't gotten a single word out of Fly."

Ben follows him away from the doctors and they slip towards the curtains of the other bed across the room. They hear the raspy breath of another patient they hadn't realized was there. Machines hum and beep, a ventilator rasps, and Ben and Digger watch the doctors hover over Fly.

The older doctor's silver hair is shorn so short his scalp shows through. "He's dehydrated," he says to his intern. "Self-inflicted, if you can believe that. The sugar caused the seizure, but he was low enough on fluids that he likely would have landed here anyway. We end up with at least one wrestler in here a year. We gave him a bolus of normal saline solution and now have him on 200 cc's an hour with twenty milli-equivalents of potassium. He should be ready to go by morning." He writes something on his chart and then, as if Fly can't hear him, he adds, "More muscles than brains. We're wondering if it'll take a dead wrestler to smarten the rest of them up."

Neither doctor addresses Fly directly and he looks up at them, with his prominent cheekbones and salt-flaked skin. He doesn't seem to care whether or not they take his silence as agreement regarding his stupidity. When the two men leave, Digger and Ben shuffle back to Fly's bedside. Digger notes a single liquid streak on Fly's salt-caked cheek and wonders if it's a tear.

"Gotta go, buddy," Ben steps forward so his hip is pressed against the bar on Fly's right side, gives the sleeve of Fly's hospital gown a tug. As an afterthought, he pulls a packet of lube out of his breast pocket and tosses it on Fly's bed. "Just in case the nurses get friendly," he says.

Digger leans over the bed, lowering himself into the familiar sour smell of dehydration. "You'll be okay, buddy. Remember: you don't break through the wall unless you hit it first." He cringes at his own stupid cliché and puts a hand on each of Fly's shoulders, squeezes.

He steps away but Fly reaches for his arm, the first movement he's made since they arrived.

"I had to try," Fly whispers. "Only an idiot would miss going to the Olympics because he didn't make weight."

But it looks like Fly is going to miss it because he did make weight. Digger circles Fly's wrist with his thumb and forefinger, "You did your best."

Like that ever made a difference.

Four

Sadie drives the icy streets from her grandmother's back to the U of C, where she has a five-hour shift at the athletic cage. Five hours of tossing towels, assigning lockers, and checking shoe tags when all she wants to do is sleep. Her arms are so fatigued they ache when she turns the car's steering wheel, her triceps feel heavy and sluggish, and her whole body begs to be submerged in the dark, blank comfort of sleep. She knows she could sleep all day if she let herself—she probably even needs it—but her athletic carding cheque is not enough to get her through the month.

Rookie swimmers on the varsity team used to ask her what classes she was taking. "Classes," she'd laugh. "I finished those years ago. I'm in a full-time swimming class." Now that she's a relic of the university and a name in Canadian swimming, no one asks her why she's still here anymore. She just is.

Her little copper car sputters and belches as she pulls into her spot at the Phys Ed building.

"We made it yet again, Copper Bullet." She pats the dusty dashboard. As a 1985 model, Copper Bullet objects to the six o'clock, forty-below mornings even more than Sadie does. He's been puttering her to and from the pool ever since she was sixteen, and considering her current financial situation, she doesn't imagine replacing him anytime soon. Because she still sleeps in her childhood bedroom at her parents' house, Copper Bullet is the closest thing she has to her own place.

She drags her heavy aching body out of the warm car—the heater

is the one thing in Copper Bullet that still functions perfectly—and pushes the driver's seat forward. It creaks in protest and Sadie pats the car's frosted hood.

"Ah, Copper Bullet, I feel your pain."

She reaches into the back seat for her gym bag. There's another practice this afternoon, so she won't have much time after her shift. She'll hang her stuff to dry out while she's working, and maybe she'll be able to sneak in a quick nap on a locker-room bench or a gym mat. Or maybe not: she'd better get in a weight workout too. She digs around in the back seat for a cleanish T-shirt and pair of shorts, then grabs her shoes, a copy of Joseph Gold's *Read For Your Life*, and a pillow. Who's kidding whom, she thinks; she'll probably use the book as a pillow. Ever since finishing her degree, she's been carrying around ambitious books like this one but rarely cracks a spine.

She slams Copper's door. "Transportation. Gym locker. Library. Roommate." She scrapes "my champion" into the frost on the old car's back window and heads for the Phys Ed building.

After the excitement of the qualifiers this weekend, it's almost painful to be back in this routine: *swim, eat, work, eat, sleep, eat, weights, eat, swim, eat, sleep*. No fanfare, no celebration, no change, just more of the same. But she knows she'd better find a way to mute the pain and rise above the boredom, because she's got seven more months, seven months in which she not only has to do "more of the same," but has to find a way to do it faster.

"Hey, Sade. It's been slow today, should be an easy shift," says Russ, a varsity basketball player, handing her the keys and giving up his stool at the cage window. He looms over her and stares down at her wild hair. "Saw you in the paper this morning. Nice work! Off to Australia!" He swings a white towel over his shoulder, headed for a post-shift workout.

"Thanks, Russ."

"Thanks? How about a little enthusiasm? How about a big fat YEE-HAW!!"

Sadie smiles. "Oh, I'm thrilled to death, trust me. I definitely am. I'm just tired."

“Hmm, Sadie tired? That’s something new.” He pushes her shoulder affectionately and lopes towards the exit as the first sweaty customer approaches the cage. “New as sweat,” she hears him finish as he rounds the corner.

The cage smells like sweaty towels, but she only notices when she throws another towel on the dirty clothes pile and a stinking whoof of air billows up to her face. She sits on the stool and folds her arms on the cool metal counter, props her chin on them, and tries to focus on reading Gold’s introduction: “This book is for everyone who likes to read and everyone who wants to like to read. It is a book about the value of reading fiction, about the importance of story to your personal life, your coping skills, your mental health and your relations with other people. Reading is too important to . . .” Already, she can feel heavy sleep, shadowy dream figures pulling at her.

But a thud shakes her metal pillow.

“Don’t work too hard, Sades.”

It’s Russ again—looking for a ball to shoot hoops. He bends over, leaning his long torso through the cage widow, pointing to his favourite ball hidden in the corner behind the floor hockey sticks.

Sadie pulls herself from the stool and bends down for the ball, not ready for the dizzying rush of blood to her head. She grabs the side of the counter to steady herself and holds her other hand across her eyes. “Man, I have to wake up.” She shakes her head and gives her cheek a slap.

“I don’t know why you do this lame job if you’re so tired, Ms. Carded Athlete. What d’you need this for?”

Uncarded athletes always hassled Sadie for being carded, thought her life so much more glamorous and lucrative compared to theirs.

“Do you know how much I make off carding, Russ? Less than I’d make on welfare. How’m I gonna live off that? Not when I’m this hungry! Food alone demolishes my monthly carding cheque in less than two weeks.”

Russ’s eyes latch onto her midriff as if to find evidence of this gargantuan appetite. She notices him looking and blushes.

“You swimmers are a weird bunch, spending three-quarters of

your time underwater. Always tired and hungry. I swear you're all in some kinda gilled cult," Russ palms the ball appreciatively, "flopping around like beached pickerel all the time."

He practices his jump shot on the concrete wall above the cage window, exaggerating the neat follow-through of his shooting hand. Sadie notes the long muscles in his arms and down his sides, not as long as a swimmer's muscles but not as bulky as a wrestler's, a good middle size. She turns to work, grabs a basketful of hot towels from the dryer.

"Is it drugs or just sleep deprivation? Brainwashing? Too much chlorine?" Russ asks, smiling, not breaking the rhythm of his shots. "I bet it's an underwater sex thing. A twisted underwater sex cult." He grabs the ball with both hands, his huge palms swallowing it whole. "Can I join? You must need some guys in your sex cult, 'cause those swimmer guys are a bunch of homos."

Sadie throws a clean, warm towel over his head and laughs. "Go play your games somewhere else, Russ."

She walks to the back of the cage and starts to fold the clean towels, snapping them loudly to keep herself awake. She remembers a CBC documentary on narcolepsy. A woman being interviewed said she felt as if she were a puppet and every so often, without warning, the puppeteer simply let go of her strings. No matter where she was, she had to fall to the floor and sleep. *Narcolepsy?* thinks Sadie as she contemplates curling up for a nap in the cupboard of clean towels. *I feel like that every day.*

Five

Digger and Ben leave the University of Toronto hospital and slog through the slush back to the dorm. They're staying on campus because the trial matches were supposed to be held at the university gym. *Were supposed to be* is key—supposed to be, until CBC said they'd only televise if the wrestlers came to them. Now they're supposed to bus to downtown Toronto tomorrow to wrestle in a cramped studio at the CBC headquarters, just so CBC can pre-tape the matches and plug them into some dead TV spot on a Sunday afternoon three or four weeks from now.

That's what Digger gets for picking a low-profile sport. Maybe Digger should have stuck with hockey like his dad always said. As if he had a choice. As if people freely chose their sports, picked what their bodies would excel at. Maybe if he'd been born in Iran, or India, or Turkey—one of the countries that appreciates wrestling, that packs stadiums with sweaty, screaming fans—then he'd be a national hero instead of just another unknown amateur athlete.

But no, he's in Canada where he was born, wrestling because that's the particular sport his body type and temperament are suited to.

Earlier, when they'd left the weigh-in, it was a typical February in Toronto, grey and wet, the clouds hanging low to the ground, a ceiling too close to his head. Digger craves the Calgary sun, his hometown's open blue skies. Now as he and Ben leave the hospital, it's already dark.

Ben doesn't say a word all the way back to the dorm and neither does Digger. They wind their way through the people and the litter. Both hunker over, slouched as if carrying the sky's darkness. Their feet drag along the wet pavement.

Digger would like to be able to say they're both thinking of Fly, of their buddy's bad luck. But they're not. They're both thinking of tomorrow, of themselves.

They arrive at the residence high-rise, twenty-five floors of concrete, more greyness. In the elevator, Digger pushes 7 for the floor he and Fly have been assigned. Ben hesitates instead of pushing 9, where he's been put with one of the trainers.

"Want company or feel like bunking alone tonight?" He still hasn't raised his head, but studies the elevator's worn carpet. His drooping posture reminds Digger of the end-of-season sunflowers he's seen in his mom's garden.

"Sure. You take Fly's bed. I need someone to whip at crib anyway."

Fly's not going to be back tonight; that much is for sure, and nerves will keep both Ben and Digger from getting an early night's sleep before tomorrow's 9:00 AM warm-up anyway.

Ben looks at Digger and lifts the right side of his mouth in a half smile, swings his gym bag over his shoulder and follows.

The room is close and dank, a square of cement-block walls with a single bed on either side. Digger and Fly's sweat-soaked clothes lie in crumpled wet balls between the two beds. Digger swipes his hand across one bed, knocking a gym bag, a pair of wrestling shoes, and some magazines to the floor.

"All yours."

"Thanks, buddy."

Ben flops down on the bed, knowing from experience not to throw himself into it too hard. These beds have only the slightest spring. They've slept in enough Eastern Block dormitories not to count on spring.

"Not exactly the Four Seasons," Ben sighs, leaning his head back on a thin foam pillow, grayed with age.

Digger organizes his stuff for tomorrow: red singlet, blue singlet, favourite shoes, team sweats, towel—and throws the sweaty stuff (his and Fly’s) in a green garbage bag brought just for this purpose. By the time he’s collected all the damp gear, the bag’s three-quarters full. He ties a tight knot in the top and throws it in the closet, closes the doors.

“Clean!” He waves a hand towards a chest of drawers, inviting Ben to unpack the workout bag he’s dropped on the floor, but Ben stays prone on the bed.

“The countdown’s on, Big Benny. Tomorrow this time, we’ll know. One way or another, it’s over.” *For good* remains unspoken, but they both know: if they don’t come out on top tomorrow, it’s over *for good*. Digger’s thirty-one and Ben is twenty-nine. Digger’s had two knee surgeries, a broken ankle, and has pinched nerves in his neck that give him stingers almost every practice. Ben has a dislocating shoulder, a bum elbow, and a bad lower back. Their bodies have withstood too much abuse already. For now, neither thinks of what happens after, what comes next, but both know that tomorrow is their last chance to put the right ending on this story.

They don’t even pretend they’re going to play cards. The crib board stays tucked in the side pocket of Digger’s gym bag. Ben lies on his back on one of the single beds, tossing a blue foam stress ball from one hand to the other. He stares intently at the ceiling, as if the key to victory is written there. Digger lies on the other bed, six feet from Ben, on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, ignoring a knot tightening between his neck and shoulder. He’s grabbed a pad of paper and pen, planning to make some notes for an inspirational speech to give at next week’s provincial champs to the kids’ team he coaches, something to distract him from the weight of tomorrow’s matches.

But all he’s done is doodle Olympic symbols, five interlinked rings with the year 2000 sketched underneath. He presses his pen hard into the page, going over and over each ring, tracing and retracing the year 2000. His fingers cramp and the deep blue ink seeps through to the page below. This is an old ritual, but one he hasn’t done since he was sixteen. Digger Olympic-doodled his way

through most of elementary and high school. The logo covered his pencil cases, his notebooks, his binders. But back then it was the five rings, 1992, and GOLD in sure block caps. 1992 came and went, and so did 1996. So today he carves 2000 and tries to make the numbers look just as sure. He leaves off the GOLD though. *Maybe, he thinks, that was my problem in the past: looking too far ahead of myself. This weekend, I'll just worry about getting there.*

There's a rap on the door and their coach, Saul, pushes it open a crack, sticks his silver speckled head through. He was a strong, square middleweight when he wrestled, but he now has a medicine-ball-sized gut and his legs look too short to carry the load.

"Everything alright, guys? Feeling ready?"

He doesn't smile and his eyes are intent under furry black eyebrows. He taps a pen on the clipboard in his hand, then pushes it at the bridge of little round glasses perched on his broken nose and hooked on his cauliflower ears, physical signs of his past life as a wrestler.

"Yeah, we're good," Digger's voice cracks into the silence.

"Ben?"

"Yep. Good," he clenches the stress ball in his right hand.

"Kay then. It's nine o'clock. Get a good sleep. We'll be up at seven—get you around and moving before warm-up, get some good food in you. Tonight, relax and sleep. We've done the work. Tomorrow's just a matter of showing up at the mat." He looks at Ben, who appears about to squish the stress ball into his right fist. "But I mean *really* show up there, show up at your best. You guys have looked great at practice, looked fantastic all month. Let's see *that* Digs and Ben on the mat tomorrow."

He looks from Digger's eyes to Ben's, waits, but neither speaks.

"All right then," he gives the door two firm slaps with his palm. "Get some rest."

The door clicks shut and Digger closes his doodles, takes a deep breath.

"We're good to go, Benny. This is the fun part, bud, the place where we show our stuff." As he says these words, the knot in his traps loosens and he begins to believe. He runs through a list of his

attributes: *I'm strong. I'm fit. I'm a smart wrestler. I'm an experienced wrestler. I'm a technical wrestler. And as a twelve-year veteran of the national team, I have more experience than anyone in Canada. Why would anyone beat me?* Those thoughts make him want to run the rez stairs. He swings to his feet and punch boxes Ben, who's sitting on the side of his bed, pulling his gear out of his bag, laying it out to dry for tomorrow.

Jab. Kick. Jab

"Wanna go, guy, wanna go?! Want some of this?"

Ben laughs.

"Save it for tomorrow, Digger," he throws the stress ball at Digger and gets up to strip down for bed.

He's right. An adrenalin rush is not what Digger needs now. He needs sleep. He picks up a bottle of water from the floor, takes a long deep drink.

Ben smiles at him, sticks his arm out, and they clap hands in a side five. Each takes his turn to run down the hallway to the rez washroom to pee and brush his teeth. Digger goes first and is tucked into bed waiting for Ben to flick the light switch off. Lights off, they both sink into their pillows and the only noise is water running in the pipes above, no tossing and turning, no talking, no snoring, not even any loud breathing. Still, it would be asking too much to expect either of them to sleep. Either way, Digger thinks, after September's Olympics, it will be time for a lot of Peter Pans to grow up.

Not this Peter Pan, he assures himself, lifting a hand into the streetlight shining through the window, making a shadow rabbit hop across the wall above the little room's doorframe. A shadow dog from Ben's side of the room jumps up to chase it.