

Chapter 6

Belly Flop

The signs of spring in 1978 appeared like freckles on pale skin. Tentative at first, soon Star Jeans, puffy down coats and cowl necked sweaters were giving way to cutoffs, Members Only jackets and tube tops. The field across from the school also became a hive of activity where the soccer and track teams practiced.

Walking home after school one afternoon, I stopped to watch a knot of runners round the far turn of the track. The mixed group of runners entered the straightaway and the boys began to separate from the girls with the exception of one runner -- a lithe, pony-tailed runner who matched their pace stride for stride. Running with purpose, her slender legs kicked high, driven by the stroke of her arms.

The pace picked up as the group entered the final turn and three boys in the lead broke out in front, turning on the speed and jockeying for position heading into the final 100 yards. Right behind, Ponytail continued to match their stride looking comfortable. She wore a coy expression, as if she were suppressing a smile. As they passed where I

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stood, she made her move. In an instant she kicked into a higher gear, pouring on the acceleration and passing the third place boy in a couple of strides. She kept accelerating, her hair flying straight behind her like a flag in a stiff wind. Fragments of red cinder flew from her spikes as she swallowed another runner. With fifty yards to go, Ponytail and the lead runner were locked in synch -- each stride, each swing of the arm, each breath matched between them as if driven from the same mind. The distance between them held so perfectly their motion became fixed. Appearing as if they would finish locked in formation, at the last moment she broke the grip between them and made her final move. She arched her back as if compressing a spring and exploded in a burst of speed, thrusting her chin and throwing back her arms, striking a perfect Spirit of Ecstasy pose while crossing the finish line in a dead heat.

They decelerated quickly, dumping speed with stiffened knees. A small crowd watched at the finish and offered scattered applause as Ponytail and the other runner walked back to the coach who transferred splits from his stopwatch onto his clipboard. Their chests heaved as they held their arms high, fingers interlocked behind their heads. As the remaining runners filed across the finish line, they gathered around the coach, the boys bent over with hands on knees talking in three-word sentences while Ponytail chatted comfortably, one hand resting on her waist while the other pointed to the far side of the track recounting nuances of the race.

Re-starting my trek home, I glanced at Ponytail one last time and recognized her from Mr. Carter's calculus class in 4th period. She sat toward the back with a couple of friends and mostly kept to herself. Not that it would be easy to be noticed in that class. The popular kids were the loudest and sat toward the front. I sat toward the middle, my

seat location more a function of my volume than my popularity. The wallflowers and dweebs who still ate their buggers sat in the very back.

As I walked by the group huddled around the track coach, Ponytail looked up and caught my gaze. Blushing slightly, she flashed a small white-toothed smile and then turned away. I walked home intrigued.

The next day in Carter's class I saw her in the back of the room with her clutch of friends. We exchanged smiles as I took my seat and this time she held her eyes until I looked away self-consciously. I faced the chalkboard blankly while straining to hear her conversation, hoping to hear her name mentioned. Only catching bits and phrases, I resigned I would have to learn it some other way. At the end of class, Mr. Carter began calling returning graded homework, calling out the names. I perked up and waited patiently, listening for which one she responded to.

"Jess," he droned, holding out the sheaf of papers as she walked by my desk to retrieve them. "Good work, Jess," Carter said without looking up. "Keep it up."

Jess. Of course, I knew that! I kept my head down as if still engrossed in my homework while I scribed her name in the inside cover of my Pee Chee. Determined to talk to her at the next opportunity, I gathered my books when the bell sounded and left the room quickly. Walking across the hall, I waited on the other side as the classrooms spilled into the hallway transforming the space into a jangle of laughter and shrieks. Soon Jess appeared in the doorway sandwiched between two friends, purse slung over one shoulder and hugging her math books to her chest. Not appearing to notice me standing across the way, she headed down the hallway.

Careful not to follow too close, I dropped in behind her heading to the opposite side of the high school, directly away from my locker.

“Damn,” I whispered to myself. “I’m going to be late for physics class,” thinking about the books I needed to swap in my locker. After a couple of more turns and waiting as Jess came out of the bathroom, she eventually made it to her locker. I made note of the location and button hooked, running for my locker to the shouts of the hall monitor to slow down. I made it to the physics lab right after the bell and emitted an audible groan. A pain in the ass with late arrivals, Mr. Nilsson locked the door and made me shout my explanation for being late through the glass. Satisfied he had made his point and the class thoroughly entertained, he opened the door while giving me his signature bloodshot glare. I took my seat while the attention prickled in my neck.

The next few days I made it a point to wander by Jess’s locker but didn’t seem to catch her there. Studying in the library later in the week, I had my head buried in a history book when the grating of a chair being pulled across the tiled floor drew my attention. Jess sat down across from me.

“Hi,” she said smiling.

“Hi,” I responded dumbly.

“What are you studying?”

“History.”

“Who do you have?”

“Smith.”

“Hmm. Boring?”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I like history but he’s a dweeb.”

We sat there for a moment while I fidgeted the history book, flipping the pages with my thumb.

“Can I study with you?” she said, breaking the uncomfortable pause.

“Sure,” I said, doing my best to suppress a smile. She pulled her books out of her backpack, sending a wave of her scent my way as she did so. The Lavender perfume smelled sweet, but not overpowering.

By the end of the week I was walking Jess home and it quickly became a daily ritual. She lived on the opposite side of the high school from our house and though it added forty minutes to my walk home every day, my legs were getting in shape from the hike and I did not mind at all. I even did my chores willingly when I arrived at home, whistling while I worked. Christine looked rolled her eyes. Mom smiled and didn’t say a thing.

The end of the school year approached. Jess began to drop hints about turning out for Cross Country the following fall.

“You should do it,” she finally came out and said directly. “It will be great. We can ride the bus together to the meets.”

Even though I’d never been much of a runner, never completing more than a mile or two in Jr. High, I tried imagining what it would be like running against the long legged guys on the team. They were fast and it looked painful.

“Come on, you’ll be great,” she assured, somehow reading the reticence in my expression. “Once you get in shape, you’ll be running with the best of them.

Even with Jess’s encouragement, I didn’t give her a definitive answer and she dropped it. School soon let out and summer was upon us. We began spending almost

every day together, earning wary looks from her mother. Looking for opportunities to escape the scrutiny, we began venturing out on our bikes. Initially around the neighborhood, finding small green spaces where we could lie on the grass and stare at the sky. Our excursions eventually lead us to Lincoln Park in West Seattle, full of towering old-growth fir trees and scores of hidden clearings. We easily found privacy and spread our windbreakers on the ground, lying under the forest park canopy with our arms and legs intertwined. It became our favorite destination and we returned there regularly. On one afternoon at the park we stayed until dusk and rode home chasing the twilight. Arriving at her house by nightfall, we coasted to a stop in front of her porch dimly lit by the sodium streetlight.

“Where have you been?” a disembodied voice asked from the porch shadows. I froze in my tracks and stared at the direction of the voice until my eyes adjusted to the dark. I could barely discern the outline of a figure sitting on the front porch swing. The sodium streetlight had attracted a small army of bugs orbiting the buzzing yellowish glow. They cast a faint shadow onto the ground, arcing to and fro in their vain attempts to reach the source of the light.

“Out riding,” Jess responded. Her voice sounded tight and quavered slightly.

“It is too late for you to be out on your bike,” her mother responded coldly. “Say goodnight, Rick.”

I looked at Jess, trying to make eye contact but she kept her head down and walked to the side of the house with her bike in tow. “Bye,” I said, hoping for a response but none came. I pushed my bike up the hill toward home while the pit in my stomach grew heavy. My thoughts went back to our time together at the park, wondering if Jess

would ever be allowed to go for rides again. That was how I thought about most things – in absolute terms; as if life could only happen in the full measure of how I wanted it, or not at all. I couldn't imagine anything in between.

Grounded for a week, her mom eventually gave Jess permission to go for bike rides again though emphatically stating Jess must be home before dinner. We rode out to Lincoln Park, eager to be free again of her mom's reach. Lincoln Park also had an outdoor pool that opened during the peak summer months. Located on the bulkhead overlooking the Puget Sound, Colman Pool was a popular place, especially when the temperature reached into the 90's. We packed our swimsuits and headed to the pool. Entering the pool deck to a sea of humanity covered with coconut oil, AM radios blared loudly as blue-lipped kids ran about, ignoring the Lifeguard's calls to slow down. As we picked our way through the sunbathers to an open patch of concrete, I heard someone yell my name. Inspecting the crowd around us, I found Patrick and a group of his basketball buddies occupying a large section of pool deck a couple of plots over from ours, strategically placed next to the ladder to the high dive. If Patrick's group approved of what they saw, a bevy of catcalls and whistles would ensue.

"What's up shithead?" Patrick yelled at me. As I prepared to respond in kind to match his insult Jess gave me a look that clearly communicated disapproval. My eyes darted between Jess's reproaching stare and Patrick waiting for my response.

"No much," I said mutely, shrugging my shoulders.

"What? What happened to you?" he shouted back to a round of laughter from his group. "You are so pussy whipped," he smirked.

Jess shook her head in disgust. She had met Patrick before and didn't find him amusing in the least. We spread our towels on the warm pool deck and lay on the towels, doing our best to ignore Patrick's taunts. Her disdain for Patrick was evident and only served to egg him on. Eventually he tired of making fun and moved onto the pool, taking turns at the high dive.

The temperature continued to climb toward mid-afternoon and we decided to go for a swim to cool off. Not a strong swimmer though and self conscious about it, Jess headed toward the shallow end where are the young kids were, screaming and shouting while playing water tag. I followed her into the water, lounging in the shallow end while watching Patrick and his buddies perform jackknives and cannonballs off the high dive.

"I'm going to give that a shot," I yelled her way over the din of screaming kids playing water tag. A large kid was now on the high dive, bouncing on the end of the diving board and waving his arms in circular motions as if rolling down the car windows. Pitching forward, he tucked into a ball as he dropped. The kid hit the water with a *kwoosh* and droplets rained on everyone within reach. The kid bobbed to the surface punching a fist into the air, receiving a round of hoots and hollers for more.

"You're going to do that?" she said incredulously, pointing at the epicenter of the cannonball, the pool still reverberating from the displacement of water.

"Well no, not *that*. I'm going to dive off the high dive. It's really cool."

"I'll just wait here," she said.

I stood in line behind blue-lipped shivering kids until my turn came climb the ladder. Standing at the end of the bouncing board, suddenly it high dive looked a lot higher off the water than it appeared from below. Uncertain, I stared across the water and

watched the Fauntleroy Ferry make its way to Vashon Island. The Olympic Mountain range still peaked with snow stood in the distance.

“Come on!” a kid whined from below.

I reluctantly turned my attention back to the pool. Taking one bounce I dove headfirst, feeling the sting of the water on the back of my calves from going too far over on entry. I swam to the edge and climbed out to get in line and try it again. After a half-dozen more turns I was jumping out confidently, thrusting my chest and spreading my arms behind me like the Spirit of Ecstasy hood ornament. Having packed my sinuses with enough of the pool water, I swam over to Jess to take a breather.

“Hey, show off,” she kidded. “That was pretty good.”

“Thanks. It’s really fun. You should try it.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. You can jump straight in. You don’t even have to dive.”

She thought about it for a moment as she watched a young girl take a bounce off the high dive and knife strait into the water feet first with her hands tucked tightly to her sides.

“Will you go up with me?” she finally asked.

“Of course,” I said as I led the way through the floating assortment of water wings and mothers holding babies with ballooned diapers. I fed her instructions as we stood in line. “Just jump out and keep your body upright and you might want to hold your nose, by the way.”

Jess nodded while she kept her eyes trained on the steps leading up to the diving board. When her turn came I stepped aside to let the kid behind me go ahead.

“I’ll wait right here and remember,” I repeated, “Jump out and keep your body straight.” She gave me a last furtive look and then climbed the ladder to the diving board. Making her way slowly to the edge, she reached the end of the board and stood frozen, shoulders hunched and knees bent. She looked at me, the uncertainty clearly painted on her face.

“What’s taking her so long?” whined the kid standing at the bottom of the ladder. “Come on!”

Jess looked back one more time and I smiled reassuringly. Resolved, she leaned forward and stepped off the board. At that moment I knew it would not end well. Her upper body continued forward at a faster rate than her feet until she reached the water parallel to the surface, one hand on her nose and the other splayed out as if being held at gunpoint. Her torso hit the water with a resounding *THWOP* that echoed off the park bluffs above the pool. As if on cue, a collective groan resounded from the crowd, followed by a chorus of exclamations, laughs and pointed fingers. Jess had served up a belly flop of epic proportions.

Having returned to his roost on the pool deck, Patrick and the basketball buddies had been watching Jess’s high dive attempt unfold with prescient fascination. When the flop had echoed across the pool, Patrick and his entourage had immediately erupted with whoops and hollers, gripping their midsections as they doubled over in laughter. They followed with shouts of, “Bravo,” and “Do it again!”

I ran to Jess clinging to the side of the pool and did my best to comfort her. She wouldn’t look at me. Glancing at Patrick for a moment, he caught my expression half-

hiding a nervous smile. I had to admit it was a spectacular belly flop. As if blood in the water to the shark though, he jumped on it.

“Ha, you thought it was funny too!” he yelled, pointing an accusing finger at me.

“Shut up,” I shouted back, still trying to force the smile from my face. I held my hand out to Jess but she ignored it, climbing out of the pool on her own. She gathered her clothes and headed toward the locker room. Obviously pissed with me, I imagined the ways Jess would make me pay for the humiliation she had endured. None of them were good. The belly flop was pretty damn funny, though.

The day at the pool clearly over, I grabbed my things and headed into the boys locker room. Waiting by the bikes outside, Jess emerged from the entrance about a half hour later, hair wet and eyes swollen. She walked purposefully toward her bike without looking at me.

“That was *fun*,” she said acidly as she dumped her gear into the basket, finally shooting a burning glare my way. I might as well have been bug frying in the focal point of a magnifying glass. Not waiting for a response, Jess began pedaling home without looking to see if I would follow. I hopped on my bike and trailed her the entire way in silence. Reaching the hill in front of her house, she dismounted and turned to me.

“You don’t need to walk with me.”

“Jess, I’m sorry,” I pleaded.

“You said it would be easy!” her voice wavered.

“It is. It was. I mean...!” I realized instantly I had spoken too soon. It didn’t matter that she hadn’t followed my instructions. She stood and glared.

“I’ll see you at school,” she said with finality. As school didn’t start for another couple of weeks, her comment said a lot.

“I’ll call you,” I shouted as she pushed her bike home.

* * *

The first day of school finally arrived the day after Labor Day weekend and it didn’t take long before the novelty of being back at school had worn off. Jess and I had history and science together, though she still would not talk to me. Noticing the signs posted in the hallway for the cross country team turnouts, I decided to try out for the team. I sought Coach Clark the next day and asked to try out for the team.

“You run before?” he growled, not even looking up from the geometry he was grading.

“Uhh, yes. Well sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, not competitively.”

“This is not a social club, Thomas,” he said looking up this time. His ice-blue eyes pierced through me, as if he knew exactly why I wanted to turn out for the team. “We are serious about running. Do you understand?” he asked, holding his unblinking gaze for an eternity.

“Uhh yeah. Yes, yes of course.”

“See me right after 6th period then,” he said just as the bell rang ending the lunch hour.

“And don’t be late!” his voice boomed out the door as I jogged down the hall feeling a renewed sense of purpose.

* * *

Pain shot down the back of my right leg like a hot fire poker. I wanted to stop at that moment, but I didn’t dare. Gasping for oxygen as I rounded the track for the last lap the interval, I heard Coach Clark’s voice boom across the infield.

“Pick it up, Thomas!” he yelled, looking with disdain at his stopwatch. I labored around the track for the final quarter mile, lunging at the finish line all arms and legs flailing.

Turning out to be much harder than I had imagined, I completed my third day of practice wondering if I had it in me to continue. I could barely keep up with the group as we hit the neighborhood for our longer runs.

The first two days had not been bad. Though I didn’t have the wind to keep up, my legs had enough conditioning that I maintained pace with the tail of the pack. Jess usually ran way out in front so I didn’t see much of her. We hadn’t talked yet either; always engaged in conversation with the other lead runners while we gathered for the course briefing. I still had hope however; I swore she smiled my way in Science class earlier in the week. I held onto hope I had more than imagined it. Not wanting to push it, I gave Jess plenty of space and didn’t try to start conversation. I vowed I would say something to her tomorrow, however.

The training run the following day had us heading down to Alki Beach. Downhill most of the way from the track, I easily kept up with the group. Once we hit the headwinds along Alki however, the distance between the pack and me began to grow quickly. By the time I turned the corner to climb the west slope of Admiral Boulevard, the pack had all but disappeared and my chest heaved uncontrollably as I gasped for oxygen. Lumbering up the hill well behind everyone else, I gave up looking ahead and kept my head down, focusing on placing one plodding foot in front of the other.

“How’re you doing?” I heard a voice say beside me. Looking up, Jess had suddenly appeared next to me, loping along effortlessly on the balls of her feet. I stopped at the intersection and leaned over, hands on my knees to catch my breath.

“Where did you come from?” I wheezed between gulps of air.

“I circled back down the hill,” she said with a flirtatious smile.

“Thanks,” I said, pausing to hold my gaze with hers. She smiled again and then looked up the hill.

“Come on, we’d better get going to catch up with the team.” We ran together this time – me plodding away while Jess bounced on the balls of her feet as if running on springs. Reaching the track well behind the rest of the group, most had headed for the locker room. Leaning against his pickup with an expression more puckered than normal, Coach Clark shot a sideways glance our way as he talked with the remaining runners doing warm down stretches.

“Jess!” he barked.

“Uh oh,” she said. I’d better go see what he wants. She jogged over the pickup as I pushed against the bleachers adjacent the track to stretch my calves. Carter’s voice

carried and I tried to make out what he said over the pulse still pounding in my ears. While I couldn't quite catch every word, I didn't need to hear what was being said. His thick finger stabbing at the stopwatch and then pointing in my direction clearly communicated the story. Coach finished with an unhappy glance my direction and then headed into the school building.

Jess walked over to where I stood, stretching my legs and still recovering from the run. Her face wore a coy expression, showing none of the affects of Coach Clark's reprimand.

"Want to walk me home?" she asked.

"Sure," I replied, feeling renewed. Coach Clark can stuff it, I thought smugly. We headed into the locker rooms to shower and change, and I waited for her in the parking lot after. She emerged a few minutes later, her black hair still glistening wet. Her face scrubbed pink and shiny, Jess smelled fresh and I wanted to bury my nose in her neck. I walked along dutifully instead. Clutching her books to her chest, we walked for a few minutes without saying anything and then I broke the silence.

"What did coach say to you?"

She tilted her head back slightly and mocked his tone, "If you want to make state again this year I need to take it more seriously."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah." I could tell she wasn't telling me everything but she didn't need to. She would not qualify for state championships running with me at practice. Fresh off of rekindling our relationship, I did not want to hear what that meant even though I had a pretty good idea. My Neanderthal pace held her back. I changed the subject, asking her

about her other classes this fall and we talked all the way to her driveway. As we stood in front of her house I could see the curtains in the kitchen window move slightly.

“I think I just made her day,” I said sarcastically, nodding toward the house. Jess’s free hand shot to her mouth while she looked away to hide the giggle.

“First Coach Clark and now my Mom,” she said in false dismay. “You are getting me in all kinds of trouble today!” We shared a smile and then she headed toward the house. “See you tomorrow,” Jess said over her shoulder as she walked down the drive.

The trek home was a killer and I loved every minute of it. My legs ached with every step yet it didn’t matter. I laughed out loud and could have floated home.

* * *

Jess and I quickly returned to spending every possible minute together; as if the events over the summer were just a figment of my imagination. Jess was also running strong at the meets, hardly challenged by any of the schools she faced and the newspapers were starting to comment on her standings along with another top contender from Ballard High School. Coach circled the date on his calendar at the end of the month that indicated the all city meet.

“This is the big showdown,” he said to Jess with an unwavering look. Let’s make sure you are ready,” he emphasized with a hard glare in my direction. Coach had lectured her many times on mental conditioning, telling her she had all the physical ability to win state if she wanted it enough it. “What stands in your way is focus. No distractions,

okay?” Coach Clark emphasized with a sausage sized finger tapping her forehead. Jess nodded her head and looked away, avoiding my gaze.

“We’re going to need to cool off a bit until after the big meet,” she said as we walked toward her house. Quieter than usual, I could tell Jess was distracted. “And my Mom has really been on my back about us.”

“What’s her problem now?” I snorted.

“She thinks we are getting too serious. She wants me to start attending church with her again.”

“Church?” I challenged. “You told me she hasn’t gone in years.” Her mom attended the Catholic Church in town, but after her divorce she couldn’t receive communion anymore so she had stopped attending.

“Regardless, I think it’s a good idea to get her off my back for awhile. And I need to focus on the upcoming race. It’s just for a few weeks, okay?”

“I guess,” I said, not feeling okay about it.

The next few weeks were gray and dark. Jess and I still ate our lunches together but her mom was picking her up after track practice every day so I didn’t get any time with her alone. Her mom’s full-court-press lasted until the Friday before the last local last local meet. The all city followed the week after. We had run hard that day and even Coach Clark was in a good mood, managing to crack a smile after the practice run.

“Well done today. I like the effort I’m seeing,” he said, actually looking my direction when he did so. “Get a light run in tomorrow morning and let’s be prepared for Monday’s meet.”

The group began to break up when Jess approached me as I headed into the locker room.

“Hey,” she called my way. “Do you want to walk home with me?”

“What about your mom?”

“She’s in a meeting until after dinner tonight. We won’t have to worry about her.”

“Yeah, sure.” I said with a smile and with a surge of energy in my step. I jogged to the locker room to shower up. Heading to her house afterward, we held hands and talked about the upcoming meet.

“My mom is going to be there by the way.”

“Great,” I said, imagining the cold stare from the mustached woman.

“What about your Dad? Do you think he would ever come?”

Jess walked quietly for a few moments, as if weighing her words carefully before speaking.

“Rick, there something I’ve haven’t told you about my dad.”

I stopped and turned to face her. Her eyes were moist and vulnerable.

“What about your dad?”

“He’s a bum.”

“A bum? What do you mean?”

“I mean literally, he’s a bum. A Skid Row bum.” Skid Row is a nickname for Yesler Street in downtown Seattle. The name hearkens back to the roots of Seattle in the mid-1800’s when timber ruled the economy. Horse drawn wagon trains dragged the monstrous fir trees down from the hillsides, through skid row to Henry Yesler’s sawmill located on Elliot Bay. In later years as the sawmills moved outward chasing the

disappearing timber around Seattle, Yesler Street became the hangout for the unemployed laborers and the downtrodden.

“When is the last time you saw him?” I asked, amazed at the revelation.

“A couple of years ago. My mom, my sister and I were waiting for a bus at bus at Pioneer Square when my sister recognized him. He was sleeping on a bench.”

“Did you talk with him?”

“No. As soon as my sister pointed him out my mom dragged us across the street.” The tone in her voice indicated finality. She didn’t want to talk about it anymore. We walked the rest of the way in silence, holding hands tightly as we descended the hill. Arriving at her home and expecting to say goodbye, she surprised me with what she said.

“Do you want to come in?”

“Really? You won’t get in trouble?”

“No one is going to tell. My sister has boys over all the time and my mom doesn’t know about it,” she said with a sly grin.

I followed her into the house and we settled in the kitchen to munch on leftovers in the fridge. I talked with her younger brother for a while and then we watched a couple of sitcom reruns. Jess disappeared up the stairs and called me up a few minutes later.

“Come on up.”

“Up there?” I asked, looking up at her from the bottom of the staircase.

“Yes, up here!” she said, rolling her eyes and laughing.

“Okaay,” I replied, feeling the omnipotent presence of her mother. Her room was not filled pictures of rainbows, stuffed baby unicorns and cute bunnies that a lot of girls had, but was plainly decorated with a Steve Prefontaine poster on one wall and a pin

board with a handful of ribbons and medals pinned to it. As I sat on the edge of her bed, she moved around the room nervously, showing me old pictures and trinkets from her past. Eventually she sat down beside me, making small talk and playing with the fringe on her pillow. I'm not sure who moved first, her, or me but we were soon wrapped around each other, exploring the undiscovered territory of each other with the zeal of missionaries. We fumbled with buttons and zippers, clumsily removing each other's clothing until nothing separated us but the self-consciousness teenage intimacy. Each touch produced a cascade of sensations, quickening the pulse to the point of breathlessness and everything external to us grew dim and distant; even the sound of crunching gravel, the car door slamming and footfalls up the stairway went unnoticed as we lay nestled together in the dark room. The click of the light switch ripped us from the sanctum of intimacy.

"Ohhhh," her mother growled, gray face framed by the scarf pinched around her neck like a noose as she hovered in the doorway. Jess shoved me aside in reflex and I flailed at the sheets to cover up as I fell off the bed, landing on my butt in a loud thud on the bare wooden floor.

"Get out. Now!" the gray face spat at me.

Scrambling to my feet, I pulled on my pants and shirt, grabbed my shoes and walked out of the room, flattening myself against the frame as I passed her in the doorway. Skipping down the stairs in two's I retrieved my backpack and jacket from the kitchen where her brother and older sister were sitting at the table.

"What's wrong?" her brother said as he poured himself a glass of milk.

"Nothing. I gotta go."

“I’ll bet,” her sister said with a knowing grin.

Sitting briefly on the front porch steps to tie my shoelaces, I hurried out the front door and didn’t stop running until I had reached halfway home. I hadn’t noticed it had been raining, my jacket almost entirely soaked through. I walked the rest of the way home in the dark, drenched by the steady downpour and dreading the consequences from being caught by Jess’s mom.

Our German Shepherd, Holly, announced my arrival at home. She sniffed my hand and then wagged her tail as she headed back to her pillow. I could hear Yolanda practicing the violin up in her room as I headed to my room, shoes squishing with every step. As I peeled out of the wet clothes Mom walked into my room, wooden spoon in one hand while the other scratched her scalp with floured fingers. She looked at me for a long moment.

“Why the long face my love?”

“Nothing. I’m just tired from cross country and I’m hungry.” She looked at me for another moment and then kissed me on the forehead, as if acknowledging the unsaid that passed between us.

“Get some dry clothes on, Honey. Dinner will be ready shortly and we will eat as soon as your father is home.” Mom walked back into the kitchen quietly humming an improvised tune. I shed the rest of my wet clothes and fell on my bed in my underwear, feeling too taxed to even put pants on. The turn of events in the afternoon had left me spent and aching. I turned on my side into a fetal ball and closed my eyes, imagining myself arguing with Jess’s mother. I put up a valiant fight and Jess stood by my side while I said things to her Mom that Jess could not. I said the right things that her Mom

did not have responses to. Smart, intelligent arguments that shut her up and made Jess proud of me. The pounding on the door woke me up.

“Dinner,” Christine’s voice announced, muffled through the bedroom door. I stumbled out of bed, put on the rest of my clothes on and joined the family in the dining room, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the light.

“Hi, Ricky. How was cross country practice?” Dad greeted as he passed the food around the table. He was still in his work clothes – bright red tie pinned in the middle with a pearl tie tack to his white starched shirt. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. A large black iron pot sat in the middle of the table, steam rising from the yellow mound of *arroz con pollo*, dotted with red pimientos and green olives. Yolanda and Christine were chatting energetically as Mom dished out heaping spoonful’s of the favored dish. The smell perked me up as I sat down.

“Fine.”

“Just fine?” he asked again with a slight grin.

“Yeah, fine.” Mom shared a glance with him and changed the subject, quizzing Yolanda on her schoolwork. Though the dull ache of the afternoon’s encounter had not gone away, it felt good to be home with my family, around the dinner table. The chatter of talk about everyone else’s activities allowed me to be part of something without having to participate. Regardless, I had to force myself to eat, my stomach filled with dread of what the outcome would be with Jess’s mom. I tried not to think of it but her scarf-wrapped head and glaring eyes would not leave my thoughts. I went to bed early.

* * *

The next day, Jess avoided me between periods until lunchtime when I caught up with her outside the cafeteria. “We need to stop seeing each other,” she said brusquely, drawing into her coat as we stood under the walkway. The rain poured in sheets outside, the first big soaker of the fall.

“Jess.”

“Stop. I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, holding up her hand.

“Can I even say I’m sorry?” I pleaded.

“Fine.”

I paused for a moment, wishing for something to come to me in the form of an apology that would elicit more than monosyllable responses from her. Nothing came.

“I’m sorry.”

“Fine. I need to go,” she replied no sooner than I had offered the apology. Jess turned on her heel and walked into the cafeteria. I stood staring across the wet and deserted school grounds uncertain what to do next.

* * *

I did not talk with Jess the entire following week. Her body language indicated she had nothing to say to me and I did not want to push it. On Friday we rode the van together to Lincoln Park, the venue for the last meet before Districts. Though a warm up for the big race the week after, the meet had all the excitement of state championships. Buses decorated with banners from each school lined the parking lot, and the spectator

areas were cordoned off with multi-colored pennants jammed with bystanders. I had no energy for the race and dreaded the 3.2-mile run through the park.

The boy's race was the first event for the day. Runners gathered at the starting flags, doing stretches, shaking their legs and practicing sprints from the starting line. I, on the other hand, felt like a half thawed piece of meat – cold, stiff and barely bending at the knees. I feebly mustered a jog back and forth across the starting line. The smell of Atomic Balm wafted through the area – the spearmint smell usually to my liking but today I wanted to vomit. Though late afternoon, the fog had persisted throughout the day and had not burned off; the sun no more than a light gray disc in the sky. The foghorn from the Fauntleroy ferry could be heard in the distance over the water.

“One minute!” the starter announced and the crowds of spectators pushed forward to the starting area, bundled tightly in their heavy coats, gloves and scarves. I wanted to be one of them, watching on the other side. The race marshal lined us up by school behind the starting line and we huddled together waiting for the gun. A runner from Rainier Beach next to me shivered and laughed nervously, and wave of his bad breath hit me as the gun went off. In an instant, we were running and pushing each other out of the way. The faster boys were already disappearing into the trees. I ran hard, trying my best to keep up with the pack while recalling none of the pre-race advice Coach Clark had given us.

“Establish a steady pace and finish strong,” he had said. The advice now lost among the heavy breathing and cheering along the sides of the course.

Entering the trees, the course narrowed and one by one, runners passed me by. My lungs ached and legs felt like wobbly stilts as the trail began to climb, and still more

runners passed me. My legs went from stilts to sandbags as I trudged up the hill. At the crest of the incline the course dodged right and headed into a clearing where a group of bystanders were cheering the passing runners. As I passed the course monitor reading our splits, my lungs were screaming for air and I wanted to collapse.

“Eight fifteen, eight sixteen, eight seventeen...” Visions of dropping out began to play in my mind as I imagined the conversation with Coach.

“Why did you stop?”

“I dunno. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“You couldn’t take it?” he would repeat, really slowly, punctuating each word with projectile spittle.

I spied the root in front of me in the Nano-second it bounced into my field of vision and with hardly a thought my right foot spun outward. A cried out, more in surprise than in pain and the dark underside of the old growth canopy filled my view. An older woman, perhaps a grandmother who had come to cheer for her grandson, looked on oblivious, smiling and clapping as if my descent were nothing more than a whirligig falling to the forest floor. I landed on my side and lay where I dropped, staring at the fuzzy maple tree helicopters and moss collected on the ground as the musty smell of the earth filled my nostrils.

“Runner down!” I heard the monitor shout. Straining to breathe, I rolled over clenching my gut as I moaned, the slow intake of breath finally delivering air.

“Are you okay?” the monitor asked as I continued to gasp for air.

“He turned his ankle on that root,” a spectator said while pointing at the hump in the ground, saving me from explaining myself.

“Let’s get him up,” the monitor said and hands grabbed my arms and shoulders, pulling me upright.

“Are you okay?” the monitor asked again.

“I don’t know?” I mumbled, holding the ankle up.

“Can you put any weight on it?”

Gingerly stepping on my foot, I noticed the spectators were watching while I tested my weight on the ankle. I gently placed the foot on the ground and retracted it reflexively, not certain if I had felt the stab of pain or just imagined it. Runners continued to stream by, footfalls pounding hollowly on the forest floor. I held the ankle up, simultaneously thinking it would have been so easy to admit I could still run.

“You know, I think I’m fine,” I would say testing the ankle, taking a few steps in place. “Yeah, it’s fine. Just a slight twist. I think I’m going to finish the race,” I would resolve as I jumped back into the stream of runners.

“Okay, don’t try to move it. Let’s move him out of the way,” the monitor said as they formed a Roman Chair and carried me off the course to the parking lot. I pointed to the location of the van and they toward it as Coach Clark approached.

“Leave him here. I’ll take care of him,” he said as they deposited me on the rear bumper.

“What happened?” he asked as we were left alone. He looked through me with his pale eyes.

“I dunno. I think I twisted my ankle on the root.” I said, avoiding eye contact with him.

Coach pursed his lips as he knelt to inspect my ankle, wrapping his bratworst sized fingers around my foot and lightly twisting it one direct and then another, watching my face for a reaction.

“The swelling doesn’t look bad,” he said flatly. “Let’s get it wrapped to be safe.” He dug through the plastic toolbox re-purposed as a first aid kit and extracted moleskin and tape. As he wrapped my ankle I contemplated confessing again.

Hey Coach, it’s feeling better now. Yeah, I think I can walk on it. I’ll be okay.

Some of the other girls on the team had gathered behind the van. They all had a look of concern on their faces and peppered me with questions. The urge to confess subsided as the small knot of concerned onlookers grew. “I hope it’s not a bad twist,” one of the girls said. It would be too bad not to run next week.

“Yeah, especially if he was faking it,” Coach said under his breath as he tossed the tape into the open toolbox. No one seemed to have heard him except me and my ears burned with humiliation. “You can wait here until the girls race is done and we’ll head back to school. I have some crutches in the gym you can use,” he said as he grabbed his clipboard and walked back toward the start area. “Come on ladies, you have a race to run!”

They followed him over and I felt more trapped than before, alone with my thoughts. Watching the race from the van, I wished I were out there crossing the finish line. As I craned my neck to see the race, glimpses of runners were visible through the spectators lined along the sides. Though coming in last, the slowest runner in the race had a look of euphoria on his face as the other runners cheered for him and a few even

slapped him on the back. The crowd applauded his finish while I sat quietly in the van with only the sound of the squeaking vinyl upholstery to keep me company.

The race marshal soon called for the girl's race to start and the crowd cheered them on as the marshal fired the starting gun. Soon after, a group of boys from our team approached the van, their legs and faces still pink and flushed from the race as they joked and jostled each other, recounting their finishes. Their voices were high and pitched, elated from the shared experience of competition. I cannot remember a time when I felt more alone and the regret of my belly flop during the race roiled in my gut. I wanted to vomit.

"Hey Rick, I saw you go down," one of them said. "What happened?"

"Twisted ankle," I said glumly.

"How bad is it?"

"Dunno yet."

"That bites," he said.

"Yeah."

As expected, Jess won her race but not by the margin she had been winning with in the last few weeks. Her finish didn't do anything to improve Coach's disposition. When they arrived at the van, Jess still appeared winded and had a nonplussed expression on her face. I congratulated her on the win and she returned in with tepid concern for the ankle. Both inquiries were returned lukewarm responses.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

She nodded her head affirmatively and then climbed to the back of the van, not saying another word. We rode back to school with the smell of sweat and Atomic Balm

permeating the van and steaming up the windows. I rode in front with Coach, mute as the rest of the teammates laughed and shouted all the way back to school. Coach fetched a set of crutches from the gym after we arrived and I struck the pose of the injured athlete; balancing on the crutches while holding my ankle off the ground, leg bent at a slight angle. The charade complete, I pogo'd into Coach's office and called Mom to tell her what had happened. Expressing sympathy, she said she would pick me up as soon as possible but I would need to wait until after Yolanda's violin lesson. I huddled under the arch of the entrance to the school to wait for my ride as the rain began to fall. The parking lot emptied and the amber streetlights winked on, casting a yellowish light over the deserted school grounds. Night had fallen by the time the headlights of the 1962 Dodge Valiant swept the parking lot as it pulled up to the school. The steps illuminated in front of me, I hovered in the archway as Mom leaned over to open the passenger door and opened it, and then I slung my bag over my shoulder and maneuvered my way down the stairway.

"How are you honey?" she asked as I balanced on one leg between the car door and the front seat, handing the crutches to her.

"Okay Mom. Tired."

"Does the ankle hurt?"

"Sort of, I guess."

I quenched her other questions with monosyllable responses for the first mile or two, and then we finished the ride home in silence.

"We'll eat when Dad is home," she said breaking the silence as we pulled into the garage. I responded with an affirmative grunt and made my way into the family room,

dropping onto the couch. I turned on the TV hoping for something to distract me but there was nothing on except for news. Hobbling up to my room, I laid on my bed until Mom called me for dinner where I had to repeat all the answers to the same questions again about what happened, and how much it hurt, and so on. I began imagining how next week would go, answering all the same questions and I started thinking of ways to stay out of school for a few days.

“We’ll see how you feel after the weekend, Honey,” Mom said when I tested her with a question. The weekend crawled by, faced with having to fake my way through the entire weekend on those stupid crutches. I spent most of the time in my room where I could drop the charade and walk normally. Yolanda walked in on me one time though.

“Hey, you’re walking!” she exclaimed.

“Haven’t you heard about knocking?” I snapped. “And I’m just testing it. It still hurts,” I said, not sure who needed convincing more.

Mom examined the thermometer Monday morning after I complained of not feeling well and did my best to will myself into sickness. She tilted her head back as she peered through her bifocals, inspecting the mercury level on the thermometer.

“Uh huh,” she said, leaning over to give me a peck on the forehead. “Ninety-eight point four. Looks like you are fine. I’ll drive you to school this morning.”

Defeated again, I finished my breakfast and then spilled cereal milk down my pant leg as I attempted to return the bowl to the sink. With no time to change my clothes, I hopped to the car, surly as ever. When we arrived at school, I hobbled out of the car and slammed the door without saying goodbye. Entering the side hallway hoping to go unnoticed, I began to be peppered with questions and sympathetic statements almost

immediately -- everything I had imagined, and worse. The questions about how I injured the ankle kept coming and I began wishing I had skipped school. By the time 4th period came around, slitting my wrists seemed like a desirable option. But then Jess saved me from my suicidal thoughts, pulling up beside me as I vaulted myself down the hallway after class.

“How’s the ankle feeling?” she asked with genuine concern. If it had been anyone but her, I would have screamed.

“It’s okay. Getting better.”

“Good,” she said. “How long till your are off the crutches?”

“Dunno. The sooner, the better though,” I laughed. “I can’t even eat Cheerios by myself.” Jess laughed along with me and for the first time in days I felt better.

“Your big race is this week,” I said changing the subject.

“Yeah,” she responded with a roll of the eyes. “Coach hasn’t let me forget it.”

“You ready.”

“I s’pose,” she said too quickly.

We stood in silence for a moment when the bell rang for 5th period.

“I’d better get going,” she said as we locked eyes and then she leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

“You’d better hurry,” she said. “You’ll be late for class.”

Caught by surprise from the incidental affection, I stood dumbly with my mouth hanging open. Grinning, Jess turned and walked quickly down the hallway as it drained of students, filing into the open doorways on either side.

“Good luck, Jess,” I finally managed to call, but I don’t think she heard me over the sound of shutting classroom doors echoing down the vacuous space.

After a couple more days I ditched the crutches and limped around the house and school until walking normal again did not raise any suspicions. Except for Coach. He caught me in the hallway soon after I’d lost the hitch in my step. I’d been the first one out of the classroom after the bell as he walked by. Almost running into him as I bolted through the door, I spun on my heel to dodge his large frame.

“Ankle’s looking pretty limber,” he said looking down at me through his Ben Franklin glasses. “As if you never turned it.” His comment hung for a moment while I stood speechless in front of him.

“Yeah,” I finally responded, laughing nervously and negotiating my way around him. “Feels pretty good now,” I said, walking a little faster with a slight limp suddenly returning to my gait.

I caught the race results in the Sunday paper the following weekend. Jess didn’t do well, placing well behind the winner. I’d considered calling her after reading the results, but the thought of talking to her mom banished the urge quickly. At school the next week she looked sullen and unapproachable. I left her alone, thinking I would give it some time before trying to reach out again. I never did. The urge wandered away like a transient pet.

I fucking hated high school.