Weight

Five Chapters of a Novel in Progress

by

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Ray Brousell stood in the lobby of his newest gym and watched the customers pass through the turnstile while he waited for the reporter to show. The magazine had called the week before to tell him they were sending down a girl - it had surprised him they were sending a female reporter - to spend the day with him, to tour the gym and ask him questions and take his picture. She was supposed to meet him at ten, and now it was quarter to eleven. Thoughts swam around his head like fish in a tank, each one larger and hungrier than the next, closing in fast on its next meal: it bothered him first that she was late, and second that he allowed her tardiness to bother him, and then it bothered him that what he actually felt was not annoyance, but nerves, and last that those nerves meant he cared about something he should not care about. He had thought he was past these petty things: annoyance at small inconveniences, the need for approval, the need to impress.

In the last few years of his career, his most successful, Ray’s life of go had changed into a life of pause, an inhale filling him as if he had crested a hill on a bicycle and had only to wait for gravity to take over. He had thought he was finished with the hardest part of his life. But here it was: the shark at the end, the thing that bothered him most: that this interview, and the prize and the fame that might come from it, dangled like another carrot inches from his face, and with this girl headed his way, Ray knew he had more work to do.

He did not want to appear nervous or worried, so he refused to look up each time he heard and felt the lobby door open, and instead focused on the girl behind the counter who took each customer’s key card and swiped it. She greeted each customer and swiped
their key tags, wished them a good workout, thanked them as they left. It was a job Ray had done himself when he opened his first gym. Now, it was performed by a high school girl who made minimum wage plus membership. Ray was pretty sure her name was Amanda, but he didn’t want to get caught looking at the nametag on her chest.

By eleven fifteen, he was looking up at the door each time he heard it open. He wondered if the reporter’s lateness was a bad sign. He’d been torn about which gym to use for the interview, and picked the Belmar gym because it was the newest and had seen the fastest growth, even though it was one of the smaller branches. The Belmar branch had been open less than a year, and other than during the planning phases, Ray had only been inside a handful of times. The employees all knew him from his picture mounted above the front desk, but to the customers he was just another employee clad in the standard issue black workout pants and black polo. He thought how odd it was to be standing in the foyer of a business with your name on its door and to have people walk past you as if you were anyone.

When he told the magazine to have the reporter meet him at the Belmar gym, he hadn’t realized that the interview was scheduled for a summer Saturday. Traffic coming down the Parkway was going to be brutal for her, but when they told him that he’d been selected along with nine other fitness professionals as a candidate for Men’s Health’s “Fitness Professional of the Year,” they’d given him a limited window for when the interview had to take place. Ray hoped that the traffic explained the reporter’s lateness, that it wasn’t some sign that he wasn’t being taken seriously as a candidate. They had told him, in what was probably the most satisfying phone call Ray had ever received, that as the founder and owner of the Bruiser’s Gym franchise, he had “revolutionized the
fitness industry.” But while their praise made Ray feel good, when he hung up the phone, he wasn’t quite sure what they’d meant, not because he doubted the substantial influence he’d had, but because he built Bruiser’s into the most successful private gym franchise on the East Coast by not revolutionizing anything, by trying to get back to basics, to avoid the flash and hope other gyms used to build their memberships. Twenty-one years before, he’d built Bruiser’s on the opposite philosophy: say what you mean, don’t exaggerate, don’t string people along. And then he realized that they weren’t talking about all the twenty-one years, just what he’d done in the past five: a new training method he’d devised that still excited and terrified him.

When the reporter came through the door an hour and a half late, she was small and young and serious in her apology, and Ray introduced himself down to her. Christina Scully, she told him. Despite the heat and her tardiness, and the way she seemed flustered, tucking her hair behind her ear and shifting her briefcase to her left hand so she could shake his hand, she had a freshness to her, same as some of the young twenty-something girls Ray watched walk out of his gyms. Perhaps it was because they had just stepped out of the shower, but they were cool with a non-sweaty sheen, and always in a rush, knotting their hair behind them, ponytails dripping, damp necks and clavicles.

She was not bad looking, not at all, he thought, dressed too professionally in a gray pantsuit, a little tighter than it needed to be in the thighs. She had the look of an ex-college athlete, an unsuccessful one, fit but with too much muscle in her legs to be a knockout. Ray could imagine her coming out of her suit easily, sweeping her hair up behind her head and pinning it back.
He suggested they start with a tour. She followed him out of the foyer and up to the railing of the landing overlooking the gym floor. He asked her if she belonged to a gym, and she told him about her membership as if she were admitting an illicit secret, whispering that sometimes she went an hour before work and an hour after. He pointed out the different sections of the gym, starting with the free weights, then over to the Nautilus machines, then to the cardio machines, StairMasters and ellipticals. He tried to keep his voice even as he pointed out the studios for spin and yoga and Pilates.

She drew her notebook from the outside pocket of her briefcase, clicked her pen reporter-style, and wrote something down. Ray paused.

“I’m just taking some notes so I can remember everything once I get back to the office,” she said.

“Is this part of the interview?”

“No, no,” she said. “Just notes to myself: the layout of the gym, the customers. Stuff I need for my write-up.”

“I’ll take you down in a minute, introduce you to some of the regulars. Then I figured you could watch a training session, see me in action. And after that we can chat.”

“I didn’t know you’re still training clients,” she said. It seemed unlikely that she didn’t know this, Ray thought. Though maybe they’d sent her in green.

“Might as well go put on a tie if I stopped. But hey, I get back to the things I really care about, and looks what happens with your magazine.”

"How often?"

"Two, three times a week. Nothing like when we first opened. It was all I did back then. Kick my own ass, then take a break kicking someone else's."
"Any secrets to your success?" she asked.

"I guess I'm just good at pushing people. You'll see."

"Thanks for the offer," she said. "I’m excited to see it. I’m sure there’ll be lots of good stuff I can add to the write up. We’ve got a photographer stopping by later this afternoon for a picture."

Ray smiled at her.

“We’re doing it with all the nominees,” she added. “Just in case.”

"Then I’ll make sure to get pretty," he said.

He knew there was no chance they were sending a photographer to all the nominees. He’d won, he was certain of it. Watching a training session would only lock it up even more. Ray’s heart surged. This was just the time for some of the material he’d been working on.

“You see,” he said, sweeping his arm across the space of the room, “despite all of these inspiring people, working out can feel like an individual process. Like you're alone. But you're not. You're surrounded by people who are just like you. You try not to forget that."

As he’d rehearsed these lines in the shower that morning, he remembered how he used to believe their opposite: that at its core, working out had to be a solitary action. Sometimes it depressed him to think of his clients as lemmings, filtering in and out of this gym and the others like it, coming and going not because of their own drive, but some masterwork of his own creation. And sometimes this same thought thrilled him.

Ray scanned the gym’s floor. He wanted a safe distance to point out the different kinds of clients he had. That was one of Ray’s favorite pastimes, categorizing his clients.
He pointed over to the elevated bank of treadmills, and felt his confidence grow. It was time for him to start showing off. He leaned down toward Christina.

“See that one woman on the center treadmill? Dark hair, late forties?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s Susan Knopf. I know her because she used to go to the Lakewood branch, but since this one opened she started coming here, even though it’s fifteen minutes farther from her house. Remember that. Now, I know her. But if I didn’t, I could tell you everything you need to know about her just by watching her work out. And that, Christina, is what I’m so good at: watching someone work out. Determining what’s important to them, using that information to get them results. That’s our slogan.”

He pointed to the tagline beneath the embroidered logo on his shirt: “Get Results.”

“Look at her,” he said. “What do you see?”

“She’s working. Hard.”

She was. Ray couldn’t see the treadmill’s console, but from her sweat, he would have wagered she’d been running for over twenty minutes.

“Yup. What’s she doing?”

“Running.”

“Yes, running. But watch her for a few minutes. Running how?”

Christina watched the woman run. Every once in a while, her pace would slacken down to a jog for a minute or so, then ramp back up. Christina guessed she had to be running at least seven-minute miles when she was at full speed.

“She’s doing interval work,” Christina said.
“Exactly. And why does someone do interval work?”

“To burn fat.”

“Does she look like someone who needs to burn fat?”

“No, she looks fit,” Christina said. “Skinny. Maybe too skinny.”

“Good,” Ray said. “Remember that. Now, forget what she’s doing. What’s she wearing?”

“Workout clothes.”

“Come on, Christina,” Ray coaxed her. “Look closer. What’s she wearing?”

“An orange sports bra and tight black workout pants.”

“Start with the bra.”

“Well, she probably shouldn’t be wearing a sports bra if she’s running. She’s a little top heavy.”

“What about the pants?”

She watched the woman run for another minute. Ray liked how Christina seemed to forget where she was, how she had no problem staring at someone on the gym floor for multiple minutes.

“They’re just black yoga pants,” she said. “I probably own five pairs just like them. What’s the big deal?”

“When do you wear them?”

She thought for a moment. “When it’s cold out.

“Which it’s not,” Ray said.

Christina tapped her notebook and then looked down at her feet and then back up to the woman. “Maybe she doesn’t feel good about herself. About her legs or her butt.
Maybe she’s covering up, I guess.”

“Remember that. So we’ve got what’s she’s doing and how, and what she’s wearing. Now, where’s she doing it?”

Ray saw something click in the girl, and when her voice came out, it sounded automatic, planned. It sounded like him.

“She’s in the middle of nine machines,” Christina said.

Ray finished for her: “Between two men. Elevated above the free weight area. Adjacent to the water fountain and the wipe down station.”

She took it up: “On the one machine that doesn’t have a mirror behind it.”

“Bingo,” Ray said. “Put it all together.”

“She’s trying to meet a man,” Christina said, relieved. “She’s looking for a husband.”

“Not so fast. Ring?”

Christina squinted toward the woman.

“Oh,” she said, disappointed. “She’s married. Diamond band. And a huge ring on top of it, champagne diamond.”

Ray watched Christina put her own left hand into her pants pocket.

“Doesn’t mean she’s not looking,” Ray said. “But more importantly, she wants to be looked at. To be ogled. That’s another one of my philosophies, Christina: don't come here if you don't want to be looked at. It’s what people do here. Susan Knopf’s a simple equation: a neglected housewife who wants to be told she still has it. Her husband is twenty years older than her, cares more about his cars and his portfolio than his wife. So, she comes here and works her ass off, shows off her good parts and hides her bad ones,
gets a few young guys to look her way.”

Christina nodded.

“So, if she’s my client, that’s what I use to motivate her. Call them her hopes or fears or goals or whatever you want. For me, it’s whatever it takes to get her here, get her moving.”

“Why did you tell me about her switching branches?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Ray said, chuckling. “She had an affair with one of the trainers at the Lakewood branch. Got out, word spread. I had to fire the kid. Now she comes here where no one knows her. Neglected housewife, Christina. Classic. One of the easiest reads out there.”

He motioned down toward her hand in her pocket.

“Don’t even get me started on the engaged ones,” he said.

Most engaged women went hard out of the gate. They dropped weight fast in those early months, but once the dress fittings began, they focused on maintaining their figures, not on improving them. They began to lift to tone their arms and shoulders, and they came to the gym in shorter bursts. Then they went away for a while; some regulars didn’t return for months, until the wedding and honeymoon were unclear memories. After their world had returned and righted itself, however, it would tip again, and they came back to him. Engaged women, he thought. They were their own separate group worth of his study. He pointed over to the Nautilus section.

“Look at those guys,” he said, nodding toward two men taking turns on a fly machine. “I like to call those guys the Young Proud Men. Shit, at least they think they look good. They wear these hybrid clothes that are made for working out, but also for
fashion, and all of it’s new: designer tee shirts, Nike this, Under Armour that, shiny sneakers. They wrap their freaking headphone wires down the back of their shirts and out through their armholes to the iPods lashed around their arms. I swear, one time I watched a man in the locker room snake the cord through his clothing like he was a goddamn surgeon performing a delicate procedure. This guy spent fifteen minutes changing and preparing for his workout, then left after thirty-five minutes on an elliptical machine, barely sweating. Even worse are the ones who stay longer. The Young Proud Men like to loiter. They’re worse than the Susan Knopfs. They want to see and be seen, but it’s like they think they live here. One of them asked me one time why we don’t have a smoothie bar. Can you believe that? You’re done working out, go home, buddy.”

Christina’s pen was flying. Ray was pleased he was giving her such good material. He walked her across the floor.

“Next, let’s go to the free weights, and I’ll show you my favorite group, the Old Veterans. These guys are the best. They’re all about minimalism. It’s like each one thinks he’s Rocky Balboa with his breakfast of raw eggs. They carry these gallon jugs of water with them as they move from machine to machine. They wear wool caps while they lift. I swear they’re trying to look like dockworkers. But if they’re really working hard, they would never wear something restrictive like that, something that would trap heat, right? I want to say, ‘Hey, I’m paying to air condition this place. It's May. Take off your winter hat.’”

Even if he didn't like the kind of men who came to his gym, however wrong-headed or pathetic or transparent they were, at least he understood them. Those thoughts they had – he'd had those thoughts himself. Often he’d dismissed them. But their bravado
and narcissism had echoed in his own head once, so that even if he didn't respect the men, he identified with their desires. As their numbers plateaued over the years, with the annual depletion of old veterans and their seamless replacement by their younger competitors, Ray began to see how the men in his gym wanted more than he had wanted for himself. People went to the gym for sex, or variations of it. He knew few customers who had joined his gym on doctor's orders, out of physical necessity. Fitness has always been an attempt to make yourself more desirable. This desire wasn't pointed at job interviews. It was bedroom desire. And on this Nature Channel path, Ray drew an easy connecting line between the Old Veterans and the Young Proud Men: each wanted to be the other. The old men wanted the youth, wanted to be in the running. The young men wanted the credibility, to feel as if they were experienced regulars, to belong to a club with limited membership.

And, then God help him, there were the women. And here was one of them, fresh and lungs full. He had already started to turn her.

This was, of course, all part of Ray’s plan. Two nights before, he had phoned the Lidners to ask if they would come to the Belmar branch, not their regular location, on Saturday afternoon for their weekly training session. Ray offered the session as complimentary, but he knew the Lidners would do pretty much anything for him. They were undoubtedly Ray’s biggest current success story: he’d been working with them for just over five months, and in that time, they’d shown remarkable progress, Kathy in particular. She’d lost thirty pounds, and though Scott hadn’t seen the same dramatic drop in weight, his strength had tripled in that time, and he’d gone from being able to barely
jog to running five miles three times a week.

“You should have seen these two when they walked through the door,” he said.
“Really, I mean it. I wish you could. Because now, they’re like two new people. I wish I’d thought to take a before and after picture.”

“Is your approach any different working with a couple?”

“Oh yeah. I love couples. They make it so easy. And these two are newlyweds to boot. Couples are the best. They work out like they hate each other. The man, see, he’s always fueled by embarrassment, with me there watching him and the other men in the gym, and his wife there watching him. It’s the same thing for her, but it’s also about me and the other men in the gym in another way, in the way they look at her.

“And there’s the big threat, what she might become.” Ray brought his head low toward Christina, dropped his voice down to her, leaned in. “Sexier, too good for him, too desirable for everyone else.” He stood back up. “Yeah, I love couples. They crush themselves in the training sessions. They show more motivation than I see in the hungriest of my individual clients.” He looked out into the parking lot for the Lidners. A second passed and he forced a chuckle.

“The worst part is, Christina, one always wins. It’s not always the man or always the woman, but after some time, one begins to see results and the other doesn’t, or one catches the bug and the other doesn’t. Or sometimes it’s even something simpler, like one's commute from work passes the gym, and the other has to go out of the way to get here. And so one stays, one wins, one lasts, and the other doesn’t. Next thing I know, I’m only training one, the survivor. Maybe I catch occasional sight of one on an elliptical on a Sunday afternoon, and I say what I said before: ‘Keep it up. Good for you. Just keep
coming. You'll get it back.’ But they don’t.”

He motioned toward a man and a woman opening the doors. “This is them.”

Kathy and Scott Lidner entered the gym with a bounce and energy not typical for people their size. Ray hated when clients came to the gym as if they were being punished. But Scott and Kathy, despite their proportions, entered the gym like healthy people. There’s something inspirational about watching healthy people enter and leave a gym with purpose. Men who stride into the gym in their suits, fresh from their offices at 5:15, undoing their ties as they pass through the turnstile, shrugging off their suit jackets. Or the women who come early in the mornings, who roll out of bed and into the gym and wake themselves up on the machines, and then emerge from the locker rooms after their workouts, showered and blown dry and makeuped, headed toward coffee and their car and some unnamable job. Like a successful chef who watches the tables turn with nightly consistency in his restaurant, Ray relished the idea that the product he was providing was not only craved, but that it fit into the natural pattern of people’s lives. In his fantasies, the gym became an object of elemental need for these people: he put it on par with grocery stores, with bathrooms, with doctors’ offices and funeral parlors.

In mid-January, five months earlier, the Lidners were one of the predictable resolution signups. Ray had asked them the intake question he asked all his clients: Why did you come to the gym today? It was a question, he told them, they should ask themselves every time they walk through the doors. And there were variations of it: if you were planning on going to the gym, ask yourself Why do I want to go to the gym today? If you were considering not going to the gym, ask yourself Why don’t I want to go
to the gym today? If they bore down deep, he told them, if they were honest and tough on
themselves, there was only one answer that would keep them away legitimately: the only
reason not to go to the gym is to rest your body so it can recover from going to the gym.
All the other answers, when you really looked hard at yourself, encouraged you to get up
and out the door.

On that first day, Ray saw Scott, the husband, linger and wait for his wife to catch
up to him before he opened the door; they were going into this together. Jesus, Ray
thought as they came toward him in the lobby, the numbers in their file hadn’t been
wrong, and Ray thought, At least they found one another. It wasn’t the first time Ray had
thought it about an obese couple, that their weight had to be the thing they had in
common, the thing they had to share. Whenever he saw two large people together, he
never thought the things he wondered about with non-fat couples: about the details of
their relationship, about their careers, about their sex, about their hobbies, the homes they
lived in. It was an odd stereotype: with fat couples, he never questioned their
compatibility.

In the office, Ray reminded himself not to overcook it, not to sound too
congratulatory or enthusiastic about their decision to join the gym and hire a personal
trainer.

“Why did you come to the gym today?” Ray asked after all three were settled.
Scott looked at his wife, and then down into his hands, and spoke of their desire to have
children, to be able to play with them, of not wanting to worry about their own health as
they grew older. They were always tired, he said, no matter how much sleep they got
each night, and they knew they had horrible eating habits. He was honest and frank,
funny and not apologetic.

“We’ve found we just spend a lot of time trying to figure out something to do,” Scott said. “There’s so little we can do that’s not a hassle. It’s like we’re old.” He looked to his wife for confirmation, for her to share in his humor, but she was looking down at the carpet as if she wasn’t listening. Scott cleared his throat, adjusted his tone.

“And I look at my mother, who’s also heavy, and she’s so limited. Everything’s a pain. Her knees are a wreck, and she can’t climb steps, and her life has just been reduced to this back and forth between the bed and the car and her office and the car and the couch and the bed. Handicapped spot to handicapped spot. The little carts when she goes shopping or to the mall. Kathy and me, we’re not there yet, but we don’t want to be.”

Sometimes after a dozen sessions, after the client felt dependent, he saw this kind of honesty. Most clients came to the introductory meeting with some goals: to look better, to lose. Sometimes there were deadlines - reunions half a year away, a daughter’s wedding, some arbitrary life milestone like a fiftieth birthday - that encouraged people to join. The occasional person joined to rehab an injury. There were plenty of members who joined for pure fitness, a health reason at its core - he’d had two clients who joined the same week they quit smoking - but they almost never led with that information in the consult.

As Scott spoke and his wife occasionally nodded along in a distracted, almost solemn way, Ray noted how different the Lidners were from the other obese clients he’d had in the past. When the gyms were running their highest numbers and Ray’s notoriety had him training over twenty clients a week, he had a whole slew of overweight clients. They were the best clients to have. Their expectations were low, and huge losses could be
made with pretty minimal effort. Take someone who never exercises and get them into the gym three times a week and cut their daily calorie intake by a third? They’re going to lose faster than anyone. It was the fit clients who were a pain in the ass. The ones who already had a routine, who were trying and it just wasn’t working for them.

Most of Ray’s heavy clients posted losses that looked good on paper (Ten pounds in one month! Forty pounds last winter!), but Ray never thought they looked any better at the end. They thought they did, though, and Ray told them they did, but they didn’t. They were hopelessly fat, the kind of fat where you can’t imagine that they ever were otherwise. Some overweight people can make their weight seem temporary, like pregnancy, as if they wore their weight in the same way they wear a coat, with evidence of a smaller self within it. But others wore fat as if it had always been a part of them, as natural as the color of their hair or their eyes. Their bodies seemed to say, _I’ve always been this way._

But not the Lidners. Scott seemed less a fat man than a kind of happy, plump child. Years before, Ray would have scoffed at his upbeat attitude, thought it delusion and ignorance for someone in such a state to be so happy, giddy even. He actually would have thought it: you have no right to be happy when you’re that fat. But that was the old, young Ray, and now he only thought that Scott was, instantly, the most genuinely likable overweight person he had ever met.

His wife was sadder, though, and on that first day, Ray worried about her possibility to succeed and liked her less.

They were, he guessed, within twenty pounds of each other, but even before they sat with him in the office and detailed the battles they’d fought against their bodies, Ray
guessed that they had gained their weight in opposite ways. Scott had size before he had weight. Like Ray, he’d always been big, even as a kid. He had a size that always carried with it the dangerous prospect of becoming overweight, but it wasn’t fat itself; it was a voracious appetite, a lumbering motion, and until Ray pushed it out of himself when he joined the high school football team at a coach’s suggestion, it was the allure of a large life, of respect earned by the girth of his arms and breadth of his back. To be a big guy. But when Ray had seen the way his world changed, or the way it saw him change when he began chiseling himself out of his former self, he saw that what he had been leaning on was only size, nothing more, there was nothing behind it but that, and any respect or awe or intimidation it earned was equally false. It must be the way some models though about themselves, and maybe even bad actors, to have things left at your feet not because of any work you’d done, but because of who you came out to be. And when he recognized this kind of largeness in Scott, that he had not put on any weight in a way that was contrary to his natural constitution, Ray knew he could lose it in a paced, long way.

Short Kathy wore her fat like a suit. She may have even started moderately thin—it probably wasn’t until after college that she began to gain. She had let herself get this way, and it didn’t happen overnight. At some point she must have realized that her body was changing. She may have tried to stop it, tried dieting, exercise. She may have joined a gym or hired a trainer before. It must have been awful cutting back, the yogurts, the salads, the tiny one hundred calorie snack packages, all with her husband, big guy, eating as he always did. But it didn’t work. In fact, sitting here as she was, she must have gained more after she tried to lose. She must have given up. But not in the same way that her husband might have resigned himself to a large life; Kathy’s resignation had been to a fat
life. And in the same way that Ray could look at her husband and believe that he could carve a toner, fitter Scott out of his large frame, Ray doubted if he could pull a thinner Kathy out of herself. There is a fat that will always be fat. Ray believed you could reinvent yourself once, but only once. Her reinvention had already happened, but Scott’s was still waiting inside of him. Scott Lidner was fat in a way that Ray knew he could fix. Kathy was fat in a way that he doubted he could.

“First,” Ray told them, “I want to tell you that this is an awesome decision you’re making, and your lives are going to change because of it, starting today. You’re lucky to have each other to do this with, and I’m excited to be working with you both.” None of these were lies. Ray believed deeply in what he told them. The last part was particularly true: for couples Ray charged $125 per hour.

On that January day five months before, Ray had told the Lidner’s the plan: “You’ll do a brief warm up while I get the everything set up for you, then we’ll head over and do some light weight work. There’s a whole set of people who come to the gym with regularity and never go near the weights. Women mostly, or people concerned with losing weight.

I get it. Weights can be just as intimidating as the people who use them. But what people who stick to the cardio machines - the ellipticals, the treadmills, the Stairmasters, the bikes - what they don’t realize is that, minute for minute, lifting burns more calories than cardio, and you get the added benefit of turning that fat into muscle. Results - that’s what’s going to keep you coming back to me: results you can see. In the future, you can arrive early to your training sessions and get the warm up done before we begin. I want to use as much of your hour as possible. Today, I go easy on you. We’ve only got about
fifteen minutes left. I don’t want you in too much pain tomorrow, or you might think about giving up on me. It should always be a good sore, like when you stretch in the morning. Today we’ll barely use any weight, just get you set up on a few different machines so you feel comfortable going through the motions. But next time we meet, that’s when the real work starts. That’s when I start kicking your ass.”

As the fifteen minutes on the machines neared an end, both Lidners began to show the smallest signs of exertion; they walked side by side on two treadmills, they were not sweating yet, but their color reddened around their ears and neck, and Ray could hear Kathy’s breathing beginning to waver. He couldn’t wait to show her what he had in store for the next day.

Now, walking toward the door, these were the new Lidners, the summer Lidners, that Ray was going to show off to Christina. They’d changed dramatically in the time Ray had worked with them. Now they approached the door as a kind of unit, like officers arriving on a scene. Instead of covering their bodies in folds of loose cotton, they wore athletic gear that was snug but flattering. Ray saw the definition in Scott’s triceps, the shape of his pectorals - they’d been legitimate man boobs before - but now, instead of peaking into awkward nipple mountains, they’d been smoothed down his torso, spread back toward his armpits. He wasn’t jacked, not yet, he hadn’t lost enough body fat to have any real definition, but he was on his way.

Kathy, though, Kathy was Ray’s prize.

It’s funny, Ray thought. For a guy to look good, he had to look good all over. You had to have everything: big chest, cut abs, ripped arms. Your back and shoulders
needed work, calves and quads, delts and lats. You needed that slim V shape that pointed down toward your groin. It was like every part of a man needed definition. But for women, the waist changed everything. Take a plump girl, and get her to lose around her middle, and suddenly everything that was a part of something awful before becomes a positive. Big tits look totally different with a slim waist. Legs, too: they don’t need to be long and thin. Even on a shorter girl, they can be something powerful. Even a big ass.
Ray smiled as he caught sight of Kathy’s rear as she turned to open the door for her husband. Even a big ass can go from a sad, lardy behind to something commanding. To a work-it-girl ass. To a you-want-some-of-this ass.

And this was exactly what Kathy had done. She’d burned so much body fat in those first five months, and everything she’d lost had been from her middle. Sure, there were signs of her fitness all over her body: her face had been somewhat drained of its plumpness, her wrists and fingers and ankles were slimmer. Everything was a little tighter. But like a lot of short, plump women who lose weight, Kathy’s slim middle had highlighted a host of fantastic parts that had been previously covered up by her weight.

Scott must be psyched, Ray thought.

No talk, Ray wanted to show Christine. No chitchat introductions. All business.
He greeted them both and reached behind the counter and handed them their headsets.

This was the gimmick. It was the reason he was in the magazine’s spotlight, the reason Christina had driven down to meet him, the reason she wanted to see his work in action. This was the method that was putting Ray Brousell on the map that would make him legendary, would make the results he got legendary. He owed it all - the multiple branches, his small fortune, his beginning to appear on the lips of fitness professionals
across the country, the controversy that was turning into notoriety - it all came with his whim of an idea, with the headsets and the cameras and the monitors. What had started as an experiment almost five years before had vaulted him to the top of the fitness world. It was what would win him *Men’s Health’s* award.

Each client got a headset. It was discreet, unobtrusive, just a small box that clipped onto your shorts or shirt hem, with a wire that ran up into an earpiece. No more cumbersome than an MP3 player. There was no microphone; it was one-way communication only. As his clients made their way through their workouts, Ray left the floor and sat in a dark room and watched them over closed circuit televisions. He had a headset as well, but his was beefier, with a microphone that wrapped around toward his mouth. A small switch box allowed him to cycle through the cameras positioned above the gym floor. The cameras were covered in dark plastic casings, as unnoticeable and sleek as in a bank lobby. Ray had had the system built custom, and when he described it to the man who would design it, he pictured a modern, futuristic setup. He pictured NASA, he pictured the directors of television networks, the producers of news programs, sitting before banks of switches and rows of screens, men who pressed buttons, men who issued commands. When he’d first seen the Control Room, as he liked to call it, he’d been disappointed by how rudimentary it looked. It was little more than a security system crossed with walkie-talkies. The pictures of the gym floor were grainy and too distant, and when he pressed the button to speak into the microphone, it crackled. But in those days it was still his experiment, he still had no idea if it would work, or how well it would work, and so for the first few years, he accepted that it was not as sleek and high tech as
he’d pictured it, and he promised himself that if he ever had the means, he’d hire another designer and spare no expense.

When Ray had done his market research before he opened his first gym, he’d driven out to Pennsylvania and posed as a potential membership client. He took their tours, listened to their spiels, took note of the machines they used and their floor layouts. He saw a lot that he disliked and little he hadn’t thought of himself. During his complementary workouts, which he always requested to do alone (his size usually convinced them to comply), Ray took his time and watched their clients work out. The clients were, for the most part, distracted. Their eyes wandered around to one another. Groups of men stood beside machines and talked, and after a few minutes, one would actually get on the machine and run through a quick set while his buddies continued their conversation. The moment he was finished, he was back in the conversation, even as the clang of the dropped weight stack still rang in the air from the final rep he hadn’t completed. Two minutes passed and his buddy sat down to do the same. These people thought they were working out, but in Ray’s eyes, they were just wasting time.

Worst were the trainers. In the same way that a lineman watches a football game with his focus on the line instead of the ball, when Ray walked into a gym, his eyes fell to the trainers. In those Pennsylvania gyms, as in almost all gyms, the trainers tended to be attractive, young, fit men. They roamed the gym floor in the same way they’d roamed the halls of their high school two or three years before, hungover, with nonchalance, carefree. They pointed at and flirted with girls they knew, they shook hands in uppercut with their bros. They preened.

He watched one trainer working with an older woman. The trainer was mid-
twenties, thick and built, with the potential to be intimidating and effective. His client was perhaps mid-fifties, and looked as if it was her first or second time in the gym. She was lost. He’d set her up on a fly machine, and she struggled with the minimal weight, its lowest setting. Each time she brought her arms together, she looked up to him with affection and admiration, eager for acknowledgement. And what was he doing? Stretching. Planning his workout for when he finished his shift. Yawning. Checking his watch. Looking at anyone but her. No doubt he was thinking how annoying it was, training these geriatrics, wasting his time on someone whose arms shook with the machine on ten pounds. Ray left before he said something cutting and blew his cover.

As his anger subsided on the drive back to Jersey, Ray realized that the trainers weren’t entirely at fault; it was, like everything else in the world, the system. There was too much distraction. How could you expect the trainers to focus? They felt the same way about the gym that Ray did. Or they felt a version of what Ray did: that pull, that confidence, that desire to be watched, to show the world around you how much you deserved to look after yourself. There was too much of the self involved. He wondered if there was any way to eliminate it.

He listened to what the trainers said to their clients. It was always a letdown. They babied them. They were so timid, so afraid that they were going to lose their clients, that they weren’t going to be liked, to that they were going to be seen as a bully or unkind. He wondered if they were reluctant to say what needed to be said because others would hear, or because their words would fall on deaf ears, or if they just couldn’t go through with it, couldn’t say the harsh thing. It was a weakness he didn’t have.

He had to find a way to shut it all out. To rid the floor of ego and distraction. He
wanted his clients to hear the same voice he heard inside his own head when he worked out: an honest, unrelenting voice, the voice of conscience. Almost, he thought, like the voice of God, but not the deity Himself, but some interior God. The God of the body.

After Ray sent the Lidners out onto the floor to do their five-minute warm up, Christina motioned with her finger back and forth between her ear and her hip. “The headset idea. Where did that come from?” she asked.

“I’ve learned not to take credit for it,” Ray said, patting his chest in false modesty. “My son, Vince, likes to remind me that it was his idea, even if, between you and me, he just led me to it.” He smiled. “Have you ever watched cycling?”

“On TV? I didn’t know cycling was something people really watched on television.”

“Me neither, but when Vince was in his teens he got really into it, really into the Tour de France. It was right when Lance Armstrong was winning all those Tours in a row, after he had the cancer. Early 2000’s.”

“Yup, I remember,” she said.

“So they run that race in July, and every morning for a few weeks, Vince was watching this race, and I tried to watch it with him, cause at that time, it wasn’t like he and I had a lot in common, and I thought, well, at least this is a fitness-ey thing that he’s getting into, I might as well try to go along with it. But a bicycle race, it’s a maddening thing to watch on television. It’s so long - four or five hours a day for three weeks - and there are so many riders, and you can’t really tell who they all are. And it’s complicated, way more than I ever expected. It’s so much more than just who finishes first.

Anyway, I won’t get that into it, but I started to really wonder how these men did
it. You’re talking about men who put themselves through a world of pain, to suffer for such long periods of time, for almost twenty consecutive days. And you learn that the way they do it is they’re all part of a team. They have a coach. They all have roles.

“And so, every once in a while, as we’re watching it, the coverage cuts to a shot of the coaches. They’re in the car riding alongside or behind the riders, and the coaches are speaking quietly into these handheld radios, and they’re coordinating the whole thing: telling guys to jump ahead or drop back, or to help get someone back into the main pack. And their guys, they just did it. Just like that. Like they were machines, or chess pieces. They just responded. And I thought, God, I wish I could get my clients to work that hard for me.”

It was even more than that, Ray thought as he saw the Lidners slow their treadmills and wipe down their machines. When he watched those coaches and their riders, Ray felt as if he was given a glimpse into some private space where real communication takes place. Where everything else was shed. Where there were no secrets. Where what needed to be said was said. It was a backstage glimpse, behind the curtain. It was why we want to know what the inside of the White House looks like. What the War Room looks like. What cards the poker players have hidden face down in front of them.

Christina hadn’t asked to see the branch’s Control Room, and Ray didn’t intend on showing it to her. That was part of the mystique he’d learned to keep secret. What he said to a client was for his or her ears only. He didn’t want them sharing his techniques, or telling their friends what he said to motivate them, and in the brief time the program had been up and running, they’d hadn’t. Ray knew, as long as it was working, they’d
keep their mouths shut.

He also didn’t want Christina to see the Control Room for another reason. With the upgrades he’d installed in the past year, after the program took off and he had to turn people away, he’d discovered a hidden benefit of his hidden approach: if he staggered their times, he could train multiple clients at once. If he booked four couples in fifteen minute increments in one hour (which he’d only done once - it was brutal - he’d wished he was Vishnu, needed his four arms to switch back and forth between the cameras and audio feeds and keep it all straight so that they felt he was speaking to each individually), but if he could book solid like that, at his max levels, he was talking $500 an hour. Lawyer money.

“You stay with Kathy,” he told Christina. “I want you to see it from her angle.” He patted her on the shoulder and walked back behind the desk, punched in the security code to the door, let himself into the Control Room. He took his seat before the screens, found each Lidner, opened his folder to their pages where he’d written their workout plans. He put his headphones on and switched the audio to Feed 1.

“Kathy,” he said, “you hear me?” She looked up into the camera, gave him a smile and a thumbs up.

Feed 2.

“Scott, you good?” Scott nodded, still breathing heavy, still recovering from his warm up.

Switch.

“Kathy, you’re starting today on the fly machine.” She nodded and he traced her from camera to camera as she walked toward the rows of Nautilus machines. Christina
followed.

Switch.

“Scott, head to the back. Starting with the legs today.” Scott took off his glasses, wiped the sweaty lenses with his shirt hem, nodded in earnest.

He reminded Kathy of her settings for the weight and height of the arms and the seat on the fly machine. When she’d started lifting five months ago, Kathy couldn’t finish a set with twenty on, and now she was pressing north of eighty. Every time Ray told her to move the pin down another setting, adding another twenty pounds, he reminded her that she shouldn’t be able to do it. Her muscles should give out before the last rep on the final set, he told her, but she looked back into the camera with steely determination, as if this was going to be the one time she was going to prove him wrong. He was always right, she only made it to eight or nine reps, but it pleased him to think that her intensity wasn’t a part of her before she met him. Scott, though, was dragging today.

“Come on, Scotty,” Ray goaded. “Hour’s going to be up by the time you get there.”

Kathy finished adjusting her machine and was ready to begin. As Ray had taught her, she did a couple reps with no weight on, just to make sure everything was in it’s right place, to remind herself of the correct form. She slid the pin into the weight stack and spread her arms to the bars. Ray watched her closely, saw her push out her breath as her arms came together and suck in breath as she eased them back out. She kept it slow. Her knees and hips at perfect forty-five degree angles, her back straight as a board. She finished her first set, and as she rested and waited for the go ahead, Ray kept time on his stopwatch. He switched over and gave Scott his settings.
At the end of her second set, Kathy began to waver. Her eyes came out of their unfocus, and she looked down to her lap and then up to the ceiling for help with the final two reps. She barely finished. She breathed heavy through her rest, drank water, shook out her arms. Christina looked from Kathy up to the camera and back again, wondering what was going to happen, knowing she wouldn’t be able to finish.

Kathy began her final set. Her arms began to slow on the seventh rep, and Ray double-checked that he wasn’t on Scott’s audio feed. When her arms actually stopped on the eighth and started to move backward, Ray leaned in and brought the microphone up to his mouth, and whispered the first true thing that had come out of his mouth that day, whispered magic words into the microphone and through the waves and into her ear. Ray saw her eyes grow wide, grow with fire, with alarm, almost as if she was out of control, almost as if she was coming. Her eyes locked onto the camera, locked onto him looking down, poised above her.

She pounded out the rest of the set, nine ten eleven twelve. Pounded it out like an animal.

Christina looked up to the camera in disbelief. Ray smiled. He knew having her watch would lock it up.

He looked over to check on Scott. Poor Scott. He was a good guy. He was trying. But he’d just finished his first set and he already looked wiped.
Guilt dragged him out of bed and into the shower. Into his jacket and tie. Into the car beside her. Into the pew beside her. Into the diner booth across from her. A year of Sunday mornings, surrendered. Though once he was up and showered and dressed and blessed and fed, Ben tried not to think of it that way. Instead, he thought: she does so much for me. These weekend visits and church mornings are my gift to her. He felt like a good son.

For some shapeless reason this morning, Ben called his slight hangover the sign of a coming cold. His mother left the house alone to go to 9:00 Mass. He only half heard the sounds of her exit – heels clicking, doors shut, locks turned – but he understood somehow in his semi-conscious state that she was gone and the house was empty. The time until she returned was like cash in his hand. He thought luck before he thought victory, and then he let himself wonder if he had broken her.

Imagine you’re fourteen again, he thought. Before Whittemore. Like nothing has changed in ten years. You should sleep until eleven and jerk off and eat four bowls of cereal.

Unfortunately, his mother would only be gone for an hour and a half at most, and Ben wasn’t up for a why are you sleeping so late conversation. He set the alarm on his phone for twenty more minutes, and when it went off, he rose and showered. Towel around his waist, he walked dripping between the three bedrooms of his mother’s house as he brushed his teeth. In her room, in front of her full-length mirror, he held the brush and bubbles in his mouth, and looked at his body. Flexed his chest and sucked in his gut
and dropped the towel down so that the very top of his hair showed. He let his stomach go and the towel dropped to the floor. Ben stood up straight, not sucking in, not pushing out. He looked down to see if he could glimpse the tip of his dick below the mound of his stomach: his obesity litmus test. Even when he shook it out, he could not see himself.

Ben stood beside his mother’s window. He saw the green spire of the Methodist church behind the rooftops across the street. They blocked his view now, but in the winter, the bare trees in the front yard allowed a view past the church spire to the pavilion by the river, and over the Delaware into Pennsylvania. The Bristol bridge rose to the left, and to the right, out of downtown, rose the double towers of St. Paul’s. His mother was there now. Kneeling, third row, he imagined.

He opened her top dresser drawer. Five months ago, at Ben’s insistence, his mother confessed her sleeplessness and exhaustion and work anxiety to her doctor, and started taking Valium at night. Ben pocketed two or three for himself on his weekend visits, never so many that she’d notice a dip in her ninety-day supply, just enough to take his own edge off a few times throughout the week. The bottle was tucked up against the front of the drawer, hidden behind a few open envelopes and his mother’s underwear. It always unnerved Ben to have to move aside his mother’s bras and panties to get to them, and he felt like a pervert refolding her silk panties into a perfect, undisturbed square.

He shook three pills from the bottle. What would happen if he swallowed all three? Would she notice? He’d taken three at once before, never at home, always back in his apartment on campus if he wasn’t on duty. The pills were his Sunday night detachment from the weekend. He rose rested on Monday morning, as if he’d been in a coma, and his weekend with his mother had taken place years ago instead of the day
He liked the way three Valium came on. One worked well enough, but in a gradual way – it took standing up too quickly or seeing a car pass by, some exaggerated movement, to register that the pill was working. There was never any doubt when three came on. Light-switch quick, he could feel white noise push out into his ears; he could sit down in it, let it wash through his arms and legs like warm water. He knew this was why he loved the pills: the space they made in his head, the way they filled him with open sound he could only recreate when he closed his eyes hard, or when he came.

He did not take three. Downstairs and dressed, Ben did what he thought would look like a responsible thing: he brewed coffee and cooked scrambled eggs, set the table with cloth napkins and poured a quarter of the orange juice carton into a glass pitcher. He hooked one of the pills from the pocket of his jeans and took it down with his first swallow of juice. He heard his mother’s car pull into the driveway and arranged himself seriously, weight forward, elbows on the table, napkin in his lap. He imagined how he would look to her, as if she were a teenager out past her curfew and he the parent, waiting up: an image he did not want to impart. Better to be moving. He rose from his chair, took off the foil he’d wrapped over the eggs to keep them warm, topped off his juice glass. At the counter, he readied the bread for the toaster. For some reason, he wanted to press the slices down at the exact moment she opened the door. The pill, he thought, though he knew he’d just taken it, although sometimes, he swore, he could start to feel it the moment he swallowed it down, even as he knew it had barely hit his stomach, barely begun to dissolve. A placebo. Her keys jangled as she unlocked the door. He readied his hand on the lever.
“Benny,” she said when she saw the table, “you didn’t need to cook. If you were feeling better, I was going to see if you wanted to go to the diner.”

“I am, thanks. I couldn’t sleep, so I figured I’d have breakfast ready for when you got back. Save us some time.”

She put her handbag in the closet and joined him at the table, folded her napkin lengthwise before placing it in her lap.

“Oh,” she said, disappointed, “can you not stay today?”

“No, I can. For a little bit. I have papers to grade for tomorrow.”

“You didn’t bring them? I thought I saw you carry in your school bag.”

“No, I did. I just thought it might be easier to get them done on campus. It’s pretty quiet there on Sunday afternoons.”

She collected the toast from the toaster, spooned herself a tiny portion of eggs, spread marmalade on a half-slice. “Speaking that school bag, your birthday’s coming up. I wondered if you might want a nice leather briefcase for your school materials. You know, something a professional teacher might have.”

“I don’t know. I like my book bag. L.L. Bean original. That thing’s bombproof.”

“I know, I remember buying it for you when you were in middle school. Don’t you think it’s time for something a little more grownup? You know what they say, dress for the job you want to have.”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t think they would have given you an apartment if they didn’t intend to keep you. Just be patient. I’m sure you’ve heard the talk that Mrs. Chapin’s might not be back after her surgery, and they’ll need to fill that opening in the department.”
He could tell she wanted him to agree with her. “They have mentioned that possibility.”

“Of course they have,” his mother said. “They’d be foolish to let you go. You’re young, energetic. You’re willing to live in a dorm. You’ll coach wrestling this winter and then maybe something in the spring. You’ll see. Doors will open.”

“They told me their first choice would be someone with a Master’s.”

“Benny, I’m the one who told you that. And my offer still stands. If you want to live here and go back to school, I’ll support that decision. Even if you wanted to just take a class or two at the college, just to get back into it, I could set it up.”

Ben’s mother: annoyingly supportive. Just after Ben had left for college, his mother was promoted from a member of the English department to a dean’s position at the local community college, and when its president resigned after a scandal involving his budget use, she’d taken over in the interim. She held the position for six months until they found a replacement. Her efforts and her stint as president afforded her slight celebrity in the tight circle of the town, and Ben hated to think that her influence had probably helped him land his temporary position at Whittemore. He also hated how she referred to Burlington County Community College as “the college.”

“Maybe.”

Ben watched his mother watch him eat. The glances came when she drank her coffee, lasted the duration while she picked up her mug, took her sip, placed it down, took her post-sip sigh. Again: up, sip, down, sigh.

For most of Ben’s life, he’d wondered what his mother truly thought about him. He had conviction in the big things, no doubt: that she loved him, wanted the best for him,
thought he was smart, thought he was moral. But when he thought of himself out in the world, in a world where he was expected to be more than just her son, he wondered how she thought he stacked up. All the praise he’d ever heard from her seemed to come with an implied caveat, like when he’d written a story for his sixth grade English teacher, a man he admired, and he returned it with the most cutting praise Ben could imagine: *One of the best stories I’ve read*, Mr. Crawford had written, *by a middle school student*. The same with his mother. When Ben imagined what she thought of him, he always wondered if she would be thinking it were he not her son. If he was doing well for him, or doing well, period.

His mother took their two plates over to the sink. She scraped most of her eggs into the garbage disposal. Ben took advantage of the five seconds her back was turned to close his eyes. When he opened them, the tension ran down his temples to his jaw. His neck rolled loose in its socket, a little too relaxed, a little out of control.

“So,” she asked, “have you started *Mockingbird* with your juniors?” She turned the tap on and soaped up the dishes.

“Yeah. We started it last Monday. Chapin didn’t leave me a lot of plans for it. I’m going to have to figure it out on my own, I guess.”

“Don’t they just love it? I taught that book for ten years, and I still tear up every time the people stand when Atticus walks out of the courtroom.”

“Yeah, that’s quite a scene.”

Ben’s mother put her hands down on the counter and looked out the window as if it were some kind of vista.

“Miss Jean Louise, stand up,” she recited. “Your father’s passin’.” She gave an
exaggerated shutter.

“Good ol’ Reverend Sykes,” Ben said. “Whatta guy.”

“Don’t be snarky. That book lasts. It’s going to be taught forever.”

Ben thought about doing some “chifforobe” lines, but couldn’t remember them exactly. That was his favorite part, when Miss Mayella freaks the hell out on the stand.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe not.” His mother turned around from the counter as if she’d heard blasphemy. “Don’t get me wrong, Mom. I love that book and I’ll always remember when I read it at Whittemore, but when I reread it last week, I kept thinking, I know my kids, and I don’t think they’re going to like it.”

“Well,” his mother said, “It’s not the easiest book to get. There’s a lot going on in the narration.”

“No, they’ll understand it. They will. I just don’t think they’ll like it. I think it’s maybe because racism isn’t really a part of their world. It just doesn’t have the same impact. And maybe that’s a good thing. If it were up to me, I’d swap it out for something that might be a little more relevant.”

His mother had placed the clean plates in the rack and started on the frying pan and the utensils. She turned from the counter and came toward him, holding the gleaming spatula like a pointed sword. “Benny,” she said, in the voice she used to try to soften the criticism that was coming, “If you can’t To Kill a Mockingbird relevant, you may have chosen the wrong profession.” She dried the forks and knives and put them away in the drawer, closing it emphatically to punctuate her point. “Now, you go upstairs and get working on those papers. Does those kids no good to get them back three weeks after they wrote them. I’ll put your laundry in for you.”
Upstairs in the bedroom his mother had converted into her office, all the focus Ben could muster for grading only lasted for a page and a half. Twelve three-page essays seemed a Sisyphean task. At his tortoise rate, he was looking at a day’s work, and even the thought of breaking them up, six here and six when he returned to the dorm tonight, seemed too much. The one page he had marked was filled with grammatical errors, so many that Ben barely had room to make a comment or two on what the paper was actually discussing. He’d been a teacher for less than three weeks, but he was already beginning to see how marking papers was its own small art. When his department chair saw him grading summer reading essays, he’d chastised Ben for ripping apart his students’ work. “You’re going to scare them into never writing again,” he said, handing Ben a green pen. “Write less, say more. And use green or blue, not red. Still gets their attention, minus the trauma.”

Ben swiveled in his chair to face his mother’s computer. It was almost 1:00. He logged in to check his fantasy football team. His college friends were really into it, but he couldn’t make himself care. The idea of having to pay one hundred dollars in order to keep in touch with people depressed him. He actually hated the idea of fantasy sports; he always ended up rooting for players he actually wanted to fail in real life. He should have cared about it a little for the money: the payout for the winner was what he made in a month at Whittemore, but his friends all took it so seriously that he had no chance of placing in the top three spots. After five weeks, he was sitting in the bottom third, and contemplating tanking in hopes that he could secure the five percent payout that went to the last place team. He checked his starting roster to make sure everyone was active.
There was little of note in his email: one message from a student asking if they were getting their papers back on Monday (little shit - Ben had learned to tell them that asking was a surefire way to not get them back), half a dozen daily emails from stores where he’d purchased something online once and forgot to check off the box to unsubscribe to their lists, a reminder from the Dean of Faculty that they were going to have a meeting on Thursday morning to check in on how the new students were doing in the opening weeks of the year. Ben clicked over into his junk folder and began deleting the 187 emails accumulated there. Halfway down the third page of messages, tucked between spam advertisements for Christian Dating and an express pharmacy, Ben saw a message from an address he did not know, but immediately recognized as his father’s. He considered marking it as “not junk,” and then he considered deleting it, and then decided to read it before making that call.

There was a period of time after Ray divorced his mother when Ben felt a pull toward his newly-single father, felt intoxicated by the idea of this man who had taken apart their lives so quickly and with what seemed so little regret. Ben was old enough at the time, twelve, to know there was another woman involved, and though he believed that his father was at singlehandedly at fault, and knew he would eventually end up on his mother’s side – there was never any question about where he would stay with following the separation – Ben, bizarrely, didn’t blame him. Instead, he envied the life his father walked into when he left their family. On his infrequent weekend visits to his father’s new house, just one block from the beach at the shore, Ben envied the careless squalor of his bachelor-style decor, envied the new television and the stereo, the grey leather sofa
and chair, the refrigerator filled with food he knew only his father wanted. In the glassy, modern bathroom, cardboard cylinders of toilet paper rolls and issues of *Maxim* and *Men’s Health* littered the floor around the toilet. His father had started again, had left their town and Ben’s mother, and in doing so, gained a free, kick-ass life.

Ben’s father’s escape into bachelorhood only lasted nine months, ending with an impromptu marriage to Claudia, a woman who worked at one of his gyms and had a son of her own around Ben’s age. It was not his parents’ divorce but this wedding, which Ben’s father insisted he attend under the delusion that his son would one day be a fully-functioning participant in his new family, which marked for Ben the beginning of the end of his relationship with his father. Claudia moved into Ben’s father’s new pad and turned it into her home. Ben was accepted into Whittemore, and Elizabeth ensured Ben it was okay, that he and his father just “had less time for each other,” and by the time Ben was a sophomore, he and his father were barely speaking. The last time Ben saw his father – from a distance – was five years before, at his high school graduation, which Ray had attended uninvited.

*Benjamin*, his father wrote,

*I’m going to hope that the letters I’ve sent you have gone unanswered not because you’re ignoring them, or because you tore them up. Though I’d understand if you did. In case they didn’t make it to you for some reason, here’s why I’m writing: I assume the news about me has reached you, either by the television or gossip or your mother. However you heard it, about what happened to the gym, and me I’m sure you didn’t hear all the facts. I’ll set them straight if you give me the chance.*
I need your help. This is not easy for me. But what’s not easy makes us stronger, right? Remember what Arnold says: what divides the champion from the non-champion is if you’re willing to go through a period of pain and say I don’t care what happens. When I think of our family and what I’m going through now, that’s what I think of it as, a period of pain. And we have to go through it and come out the other side.

Your mother will not like this. She will tell you to stay away from me. Just remember that I’m half of who you are.

Sorry to write to your school account. I found your address on the directory, and thought this might be a better way to contact you. You’re probably thinking, “Who writes letters now, anyway?” Just your old man, I guess. Saw your picture on the school’s website. You look good. Look big. Like me.

His number and address were at the bottom. Ben reread the message, his finger ready on the mouse in case he heard his mother on the stairs. When she called up to him a moment later, he instinctively minimized the window, his reaction as quick as if he were looking at porn.

She was going to the food store, and asked if he wanted anything different this week. She always sent him back to school with a few staples: a twelve-pack of seltzer, frozen pizzas, cookies, just drinks and snacks to tide him over between dining hall meals. Once he went back to campus on Sunday evenings, he rarely had the chance to leave until the following Saturday. He called down no, he was fine, he still had plenty left over from the weekend before. For the second time that day, he was relieved at the sounds of his
mother’s exit.

Ben knew nothing of the news that his father alluded to, but in twenty minutes of online research, he learned that in the past year, his father’s life had, by all accounts, imploded. The trouble began, according to articles he pieced together backward from various news sites and fitness blogs, with an award his father had won in *Men’s Health*. Following that award, there had been an article in another magazine painting him as some kind of abuser and calling into question his training practices. All told, from what Ben could tell in his hasty research, a group of former clients had filed suit against his father, three branches of his gym had closed in the last three months, and according to one sketchy fitness blogger, his second wife had left him.

How had he not heard about this? The last impression he had of his father’s business was that it was thriving. In the months following his divorce from Ben’s mother, Ray had closed the gym’s original location, a blue A-shaped building on Route 530 that was first a florist and then a seemingly abandoned building advertising psychic readings. Ray moved his gym business across the state, and built a brand new facility one block from the beach in Belmar. From there, according to the occasional search Ben did in college to check up on his absent father, Ray’s business had grown to five or six locations, and sometimes when Ben drove on the Turnpike or the Garden State Parkway, he’d see *Bruiser’s Fitness* bumper stickers, and think with disdain that his father’s success could only have come as a direct result of his abandoning them. He had always wanted to ask his mother what she knew about it, to see if she was aware of her ex-husband’s growing success, but she made it clear years before that Ray was *persona non grata*, and it would have embarrassed Ben to admit that he had the occasional urge to Google his father, to
see his face in the gym’s advertisements and online videos, to compare his face to the one in his memory, to compare it to his own face, to imagine what their life would have been had he never left them.

Other dads, Ben’s father always told him, were lazy sonofabitches. As a child, when he went over friends’ houses, Ben was shocked by how often their dads were just plain around. Jason Cantelli’s father built him a half a basketball court on the side of their driveway, complete with a key and three point line. Colin Corrigan’s father raked leaves in the front yard; they passed him over and over again as they rode their bikes around the block. Adam Allocca’s father vacuumed their pool on Saturday mornings, his hairy chest gleaming with oil. But Ben’s father was always doing one of only two things: working or working out. Later, in the dissolution of his parents’ marriage, Ben would see that his father’s motivation, his incessant work ethic, was only a cover for avoidance, but as a child, all Ben thought then was my father works harder than all yours, combined. And he could kick all their asses, too. Working and working out were, according to Ray, two versions of the same pure act.

Ben knew he had to tell his mother about the email at some point, and he was certain that his father’s premonition would be right: his mother would be utterly opposed to his making any contact with him. She was stoic toward his father, politely adamant that they had been fine without him, had no need for him. And Ben would tell her, could not keep it from her; he would need to know what his father wanted from him, why he had seemed so desperate, and he would not be able to juggle both, to seek him out and keep it from her at the same time. He would have to steel himself: take one or two more pills and let them kick in while she shopped. Then, over an early dinner, he would tell her
about the email, find out if she knew what had happened to his father, find out if she had kept this knowledge from him and why.

He thought of the pills, he remembered the envelopes. They were there, tucked into the front corner of her dresser drawer, pressing up against the bottle. He ran his finger along their open edges. He picked stack out of the drawer, saw that the top letter was certified, addressed to him. Ben read it. He sat down on his mother's bed and read it again, and then he read them all.

What struck Ben about the letters was not their content - there was little more information than was in the email - but their desperation, and that they were so well written. Ben’s father, a man he’d always thought of as an unintelligent brute, a man whose only non-physical skill was his ability to bully and self promote, seemed to have a gift with language. Even in his quoting of Schwarzenegger, a man he remembered his father idolized, Ray seemed thoughtful, poetic. As he read and reread his father’s bizarre handwriting, a combination of small and large uppercase letters, each sentence felt pared down and bare, even the broken thoughts, fragments; each seemed to do its job. In the end, regardless of what the letters were saying, you couldn’t come away from them without feeling they were written in earnest, that the writer had, above all else, heart.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Ben watched his mother struggle to prop open the kitchen door, her arms lined with plastic grocery bags. “A little help, perhaps?” She put the bags down on the floor and went back out. Ben let her go and didn’t follow.

He rooted through the bags his mother set out on the floor, looking for the items he would take with him back to Whittemore – a six-pack of toilet paper, a box of
macaroni-and-cheese, cans of soup and tuna fish, a case of soda, a couple boxes of Tasty-cakes. He looked through all the bags. Instead of putting the groceries away, Ben arranged his items in piles on the countertop.

His mother returned with the remaining bags. “What’s wrong?” she asked. It irritated him that she already knew. “Is there a reason you’re not helping?”

“Did you forget my Ellio’s pizzas?”

“I don’t recall you asking me to get you anything at all,” she said. She began rearranging the piles, grouping what was going to go in the freezer, the vegetables that needed to go in the crisper, the cans and boxes that went in the pantry.

“I didn’t ask, specifically,” Ben said.

“If you wanted something, you should have told me.”

“I never had to tell you before. You just knew.” He eyed her suspiciously. “Is this because I didn’t go to church with you this morning?”

“What? What are you talking about? Ben, you’re twenty-three. You can do what you want.” She turned and picked up some of the frozen items to put in the freezer, but Ben knew she wasn’t finished. “Frankly, it’s ridiculous that I enable you by doing your laundry and shopping. I think you know it’s high time you started doing these kinds of things for yourself.” He wished he hadn’t started. Behind the open freezer door, the ice smoke curled out around her head. “But now that you bring it up, you did tell me last night you were going to go with me. You said you were going to set an alarm.”

“I did set an alarm,” Ben said. “I must have turned it off in my sleep. That’s how wiped I am! I was up Friday night with this homesick kid, and then I was out last night with James, and I had that stack of papers to get through…”
“I was up early. I didn’t hear any alarm.”

“Well, neither did I. Obviously.” He spread his arms across the table like, No shit.

He’d planned it out in his head a dozen times. He’d say: I don’t have to come visit you, you know. Just because it’s Sunday doesn’t mean I don’t have plenty to do on-campus. I need a break. Need a day off. I come home to relax, and if you’re going to pull that shit, to hassle me, there’s no point in coming. As if she were bothering him, as if he had been working his ass off all week at some office and didn’t need the old lady breathing down his neck. Like he was the breadwinner. Like he was the husband.

Ben got up from the table to leave. He stopped in the doorway when he heard his mother’s voice. He wished he could walk away from her mid-sentence.

“Benjamin, pretty soon you’re going to realize that becoming an adult doesn’t just happen. Not when get your license, or when you turn eighteen, or when you turn twenty-one, and not when you graduate, or when you get a job, or when you move out.”

“Nice. I come visit you for the weekend, and you turn it into how I’m not a grown up.”

“Sure, you’re visiting. That’s what you’re doing. And if you get groceries and your laundry done in the process, that’s just a coincidence?”

Ben reached back into his pocket and pulled out the folded envelopes.

“And what about these?” he asked. “Were you ever going to tell me about them?”

She folded a dishcloth in half and then in half again.

“Eventually. I was waiting for the right time.”

“He’s been trying to contact me for three months.”

“There have been a few letters. I threw the first couple out.”
“This is my mail, Mom. It’s addressed to me. That’s breaking the law.”

She turned back to the window, shook out the dishcloth she had just folded and threw it down on the counter. “You know what? Call the cops, Benjamin. Call the cops.”

Ben went upstairs and stuffed what he needed into his duffle and grabbed his keys. “I’m going,” he said, storming through the house toward the door. His mother was still in the kitchen, standing at the sink, facing the window. Ben thought maybe she was crying, but when she turned toward him, her face was dry.

“Your laundry still isn’t finished,” she said, as Ben went out the door.

Ben parked his car in the faculty lot and carried his bag over to Old Main, the mansion on the river that was the central image associated with Whittemore. The school stood on the grounds of an old river estate, and they kept up the gardens and fountain behind the main schoolhouse, a renovated building converted from the mansion. The grass behind the mansion sloped down toward the river, three hundred yards of wide, uninterrupted green.

Sunday at five-thirty, a half hour before chapel, the campus was dead. Ben walked into the garden and sat at the fountain’s edge. He heard the pills in his mother’s bottle rattle as he set his bag beside him. He ran his hand along the edge of the rim, dipped a finger down to test the temperature. He looked at the four Greek replica statues that lined the edge of the garden. Before it was Whittemore, the estate had belonged to an art collector. Last spring, he heard, the seniors played a prank and painted the four black and white KISS faces on them.

Ben thought, “What the hell was that?” He said it aloud to hear his voice carry out
from the garden. His hands gripped the concrete rim. He felt the folded letters beneath him in the back pocket of his jeans. He opened his duffle, shook out three pills from the bottle. He put them in his mouth and bent down to the fountain, cupping both his hands. He swallowed them down dry with the slimy water still pooled in his hands.

He swung his legs above the grass. Even when he heard the chapel bells he stayed there on the edge of the fountain, watching the sun draw low behind the tree line beyond the river, watching big shadows come at him across the great lawn.
Vince

Ray’s texts were polished and commanding. *Belmar, 7 tonight.* The comma, the period. Vincent’s stepfather was late to texting, even for his mid-fifties age bracket, but he’d mastered the medium quickly. He fired off hundreds a day. Bare minimum messages were probably Ray’s ideal form of communication, his perfect voice: everything you needed and nothing you didn’t, direct as a punch to the shoulder.

Seven p.m. at the Belmar gym on a Sunday, Vince’s day off, when the gym closed at four. There was probably some two-man job, some piece of equipment Ray wanted to fine-tune for Monday, or one of the treadmills or ellipticals needed to be reset. Vince was Ray’s go-to for anything at the gym that required an electrical outlet - he’d taken apart the displays for the cardio machines so many times, he felt like a kind of surgeon, and when Ray finally broke down three years ago and allowed televisions on the walls, Vince had done the whole install himself. Sometimes Ray joked that he’d only hired his stepson so he could stop paying for the servicemen to come out and fix the broken machines, and Vince always wished it sounded a little more like a joke.

Vince parked beside Ray’s truck in the lot and walked up to the dark entrance doors. Locked. He cupped his hands around his eyes and pressed his face up to the glass. Ray had the front windows of the gym tinted so you couldn’t see what was going on inside. Give the idea of privacy, exclusivity, he said. Vince could just make out Ray’s form, moving behind the front counter in the dark. Ray flipped on a bank of lights and the floor lit up. Even through the tint, Vince could see the machines gleaming - they’d each been sprayed and wiped down before the employees left a few hours ago. Ray walked
through a row of Nautilus machines to the back wall and flipped another set of lights for the free weight section. He walked through the gym and turned on every light. Three Rays, dressed in identical black tracksuits, walked past the mirrored walls as if patrolling the grounds of their estate.

One of the machines caught Ray’s eye; he retrieved the spray bottle and paper towels from the behind the desk, shot down whatever smudge he’d seen and wiped it away. He bent down to the metal as if studying his reflection, and adjusted his collar. Vince knocked hard twice on the front doors, but Ray didn’t startle. He stood up smoothly, returned the bottle and towels behind the desk, walked slowly to the doors. Ray had been at the gym all day; he’d opened it up at 5:30 and stayed until it closed that afternoon. Still, he looked fresh, as if he’d just showered and put on a crisp version of his standard outfit, a black Adidas tracksuit with the name of his gym, Bruiser’s, embroidered on the chest.

Ray held out the door for him, thanked him for coming and asked him how he was feeling. Vince said fine, but an honest answer would have been off. He’d been tired for three days now, sleeping badly, eating little. He’d done nothing that day except sit on his couch, fold his laundry, and eat soup. But he said fine because, according to Ray, catching a cold was a failure of mental discipline. Your mind made you sick, not your body. Whatever you were feeling, you had to show it that you didn’t believe it, beat it out of your head by working harder. Vince agreed with Ray in this, and he’d tried, but his last two workouts, on Friday and Wednesday before that, had been disappointing. When he tried to go for an easy jog the day before, his abs cramped up after ten minutes, and he felt as if he was going to vomit on the sidewalk as he walked home.
Ray led him back to one of the offices they used to ink prospective customers to memberships, to ask them if they would like to have the monthly charges automatically debited to avoid late fees, to have them sign here and initial here, here, and here on a document too long and microscopic to read. These offices were all alike, so clean they seemed newly built. Each was furnished with the same desk and computer, the same three chairs, the same laminated posters advertising membership deals, the same monthly calendar of classes. Ray didn’t have his own office. The floor was his office, he liked to say.

It would be misleading to say that Vince grew up in the gym; by the time Ray married Vince’s mother, he was almost fully-grown. No man had ever tried to be his father; his mother had decided to have a child on her own twelve years before she met Ray, and though Vince had tracked down the donor years ago, he’d felt no connection to the married family man he’d found at the end of that brief, anticlimactic hunt. Vince knew nothing of fathers when Ray came into his life, so it was not odd to Vince that when he gained Ray as his father, Ray came with this other complete world, the world of weightlifting and the gym, and came with this other persona outside of the role he played in their family.

Vince had not been an athletic boy before he met Ray. He’d given up on it and turned reluctantly to computers and gaming, ashamed that he was too uncoordinated to pursue team sports with any realistic hope. Each season had become a series of self-deprecating realizations. Soccer: no lower body control. Football: not allowed by his mother. Basketball: too short and no ups. Hockey: on ice. Baseball: too fast, and he flinched. Lacrosse: see baseball.
He’d tried sports he felt were second class - tennis, golf, - but lack of hand/eye killed him there, too. And then Ray, this massive man who looked nothing like him or any of his friends’ fathers, came into his life, and convinced him, for the first time, that non-ball sports were legitimate. According to Ray, the true athletes were the ones who were up against themselves: runners, swimmers, cyclists, lifters. When Ray became Vince’s father - and Vince had thought of him as that from the beginning, even before he’d married his mother - Vince also gained a coach. Ray not only helped him transform himself into an athlete, but helped him realize he didn’t have to see the world with narrow, twelve-year-old eyes.

Vince had officially started working at the gym in college on the weekends and in the summers, but he’d hung around it ever since Ray and his mother started dating. Ray asked him if he wanted to earn a little money, just to have something to do, but to Vince the gym had become a calling. He didn’t mind that Ray insisted he start at the very bottom and learn every job. Now that he’d been employed there for almost ten years, Vince had held every possible position the place had to offer: he was a member of the cleaning crew; he worked maintenance; he worked behind the desk, checking people in and answering the phones; he moved up to intake, where he gave tours of the facility and signed clients to memberships. He made the jump to trainer. And as Ray began to include him occasionally in business-end conversations, Vince began to believe, hopefully, that Ray was grooming him, that soon they would run the gym together until Ray wanted to retire, and then Vince would take over. That was what tonight was about, he figured, as it didn’t seem that Ray had anything in particular he needed Vince to work on. He took a seat across from his stepfather in the tiny square office.
Ray’s heavy fingers drummed the desktop. Vince could feel Ray’s big leg vibrating against the underside of the desk. He was excited about something. Times like this, when he felt tired or off or whatever he’d been feeling recently, Vince hated Ray’s relentless enthusiasm a little; he wished Ray would recognize that he wasn’t going to be into whatever had Ray so jazzed up; and Vince hated himself a little, too, for feeling guilty about letting Ray down somehow by not meeting his enthusiasm equally. It wasn’t easy balancing a relationship with Ray, walking that line between being enough of yourself that he respected you, but enough of him that he liked you. It was a little like having a girlfriend.

Vince asked him what was going on.

“First,” Ray said, “how are you feeling? Really. It matters for this.”

“Pretty shitty, actually. But I’ll get over it. It’s just some bug.”

“But you’re pushing through?”

“Trying to. What’s this about?”

Ignoring the question, Ray looked him in the eye and Vince could see a new thought hit him. It was one of the things he admired about Ray, his ability to look you in the eye and think at the same time. Whenever Vince looked anyone in the eye, his mind went blank.

“Actually,” Ray said, “it might be better if you think you’re not feeling well.”

“What might be better?”

“Let me back up. I’ve got an idea, and I want to bounce it off of you. You’ve been a trainer now for how long? Four years?”

Vince nodded. “Five. Just over.”
“And do you like it?”

“Sure. Of course.” Vince was certain now that Ray was going to ask him to become a manager. Maybe he’d even ask him to take over one of the branches entirely.

“Do you ever feel like we could do more?”

Here it was. Even though Vince had anticipated it, he felt nerves begin to rise up in him, and as he began to speak, he felt himself fall back into a kind of rehearsed answer, almost as if he were in an actual job interview. What he heard in his own voice disappointed him: too much need, too much desire. Cookie-cutter phrases. Nothing real.

“Sometimes,” Vince said. “I think I have a lot to offer, and you know that I know the gym inside and out. I like training and helping individual clients, but personally, yeah, I think I’m ready for more. More responsibility, if that’s what you mean.”

Ray looked at him as if he didn’t understand. Vince felt the moment turn awkward just before it actually did.

“I’m sorry,” Ray said. “I guess I wasn’t being clear. I meant, do you ever think we could be doing more? As in for our clients. For the people we train.”

Vince sat back in his seat. “Oh.”

Ray did what he always did: he pushed through, awkwardness be damned.

“Because I’ve been thinking a lot about that: what more can we offer our clients? How can we help them in new ways? How can we push them in new ways?”

He let those questions hang as if he expected Vince to answer, though Vince knew Ray had his own answers already lined up.

Ray asked, “What’s the hardest part about being a personal trainer?”

Even if Vince hadn’t remembered the phrase from the first day he shadowed Ray
and watching him work with his clients, it was everywhere. Ray had typed it up and inserted it into the binder fronts of each trainer’s logbook. He had the phrase printed on business cards and told each of the trainers to keep it in their wallets. It was one of his mantras. Ray had a lot of them.

So Vince’s response was automatic: “You don’t know how they feel.”

“Exactly. You don’t know how they feel. A client could be working her ass off, working too hard for her own good, or she could be dogging it. Who knows? Only they know. That’s why there’s no substitute for free weights: everybody can see what you’re doing. It’s wide open. You see a guy put up two sets of plates, doesn’t matter who it is, you know that’s 225. With these bikes and ellipticals, and the way the Nautilus machines hide the stack, you never know. I was watching this young guy the other day, he gets onto a bicep machine right after this old lady’s using it, and he switches out the pin so fast, I’ve got no idea if he’s lifting twice her amount or half of it.” Ray made a self-satisfied noise. Probably half, by the look of him.”

Vince nodded along. None of this was new.

“I don’t need to tell you this, Vin,” Ray said. “You remember what it was like when you started lifting. When you first put up the 45s. It’s like, every high school freshman’s dream. It means you made it. All the old videos you watch of Arnold and those guys, that’s where they all start, where they all started: the 45s. One set of plates. And then another, and then another. And look at you now. Ripped. Huge. You look like those guys. Like me. We all got there the same way.”

Vince remembered the first time he’d put up 135: two forty-fives plus the bar. He’d managed only two reps, and when he rose from the bench, he felt odd, lighter and a
little disoriented, not from the strain, he knew now, but because he had taken the first hard real step toward transformation. It was the moment he knew he could do it. From then on, every time he walked back to the free weight section of the gym, he felt as if he owned a little of the room. The guys back there nodded to him when he re-racked the plates, they asked him if he was finished when he walked away. It was the best time of his life, that time when he felt as if he was watching his body change in a kind of slow, time-release photograph. It wasn’t fat he replaced with muscle, it was a nothing, a base of bone that got built on and slowly got thicker as a layer and then another layer was laid on top of it, like paint piling up, pushing away from the wall. When he adopted Ray’s lifting program and recommended diet, Vince was a freshman in high school, barely weighed one-fifty. By the time he was a junior, he’d grown five inches and weighed close to two hundred, and every ounce he’d gained was muscle. Now he looked like a bodybuilder, like a model of a man, and he’d never touched anything stronger than Creatine. All because of Ray.

What Ray had said before was not technically true: no one was going to mistake Vince for Ray’s biological son. They were both muscular guys, for sure, but Ray’s muscle had been on his body for over thirty years; it was grafted onto his frame with a permanence that Vince always envied. He had never seen a non-muscular Ray. Vince’s muscle fit his body like a kind of ornament. Whenever he examined himself in the mirror, he always had a moment when he was surprised by his size, as if he had gained it overnight, as if his muscles had unexpectedly popped up onto his arms and shoulders, like Bruce Banner transforming into the Hulk.

Not only was Ray built, he was tall - freak show big, six-eight. Vince stood just
under six feet, and he had to adjust his neck to look at Ray’s face. Ray’s long, dark hair ran down to the middle of his back in a ponytail, and his beard dropped down from his temples, making his sun-damaged, permanently tan face seem even darker: a storm cloud of a face. Vince had grown a beard in Ray’s image to cover his ruddy cheeks, but the two-week itch was too much for him, and he settled for his facial hair in a red triangle around his mouth and chin, and when his hair had started thinning early, he ripped off the Band Aid and took a razor to his scalp, Bic-ed the whole thing.

So no, not alike, not related; more like contrasting characters, two separate and not quite equal examples of the muscle-head stereotype. And they hadn’t gotten there the same way. Ray had never known skinny. He’d never aspired toward the 45s. The first time he walked into a gym, he could curl 135.

But when Ray told Vince that he looked like him, that they’d both gotten there the same way, Vince didn’t see these two falsities as lies, exactly. This was Ray’s gift: to take what you wanted to be true and convince you it was, to make it so, even in the face of fact. To make it so out of sheer will and persistence and enthusiasm.

Ray continued his speech. “But that old way, they way we did it, it’s not working anymore. Nobody wants it to work anymore. They want it quick and easy and painless. They want to join a gym and tell themselves all they need to do is keep coming. They say something, anything, is better than nothing. And I feel bad for them. So I’ve been thinking a lot about how we can do more for them. Make them feel that rush.

“Problem is, you can’t make a big deal out of it when you’re down there on the floor with them and the gym is crowded. Can’t distract everyone else, and people don’t want the attention drawn to them. So I came up with a new way to train people. A new
system. And I want to try it out. On you.”

“Tonight? You want me to work out? I’m not sure I’m feeling up to it.”

Ray smiled. “That’s the point. Go change. Meet me on the floor in two minutes.”

Stretching two minutes into six, Vince changed slowly in the employee locker room. His nausea had faded into a dull uneasiness, but even the movement of changing into his trainer’s uniform, black Bruiser’s polo and shorts, and swapping out his flip flops for socks and his gym sneakers required him to sit on one of the changing benches and collect himself. He walked back to the sinks and splashed cold water on his face. This was just like Ray, to put whatever he had in mind before everything else. But it was also just like Vince to go along with it, to trust Ray over whatever his common sense told him. The years with Ray had wired him this way, and whenever Vince began to think otherwise, to go the other way, he reminded himself of all the good things that had come from trusting Ray blindly, from blocking out the part of his mind that told him I can’t and keep going.

How does a person finish a marathon? He keeps putting one foot in front of the other. Another of Ray’s mantras.

Vince put his hands under the dryer and wiped his face with his shirt. The small, cleansing act turned something over in his chest, and a small seed of determination took root there. He would get through tonight as if nothing were wrong. Ray’s pushing through philosophy aside, his stepfather knew he wasn’t feeling well, but he was making him do this anyway. Maybe he just wanted to see if Vince would quit on him. Maybe the manager discussion was still open.
Ray stood over by the free weights, speaking with Greg Zahn, one of the local cops who’d struck a deal with Ray long ago: membership in exchange for parking and speeding leniency. If Zahn was here, this wasn’t just one of Ray’s whims. He’d planned this. Zahn was one of Ray’s inner circle, a member of a group of guys who’d been coming to Bruiser’s since it opened. They lifted with Ray at night just before closing, when the gym was nearly empty, or on Sunday nights like tonight, when the gym closed early, or in the very early hours of the morning, when a few obsessives were the only ones using the place. Vince had asked to come to one of their sessions - they called themselves the Night Owls, OWL stood for Old Wise Lifters - but Ray turned him down, told him that not a lot of lifting gets done, that it was mostly an old-timers’ story swap. Vince had his own group of guys he lifted with on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons - Ray joined them, too - but even though Vince knew he was getting a better workout with his peers, he felt left out whenever Ray talked about the Night Owls.

“Greg, good to see you,” Vince said when he reached them, and Zahn broke from the story he was telling Ray. Vince shook Zahn’s hand, made a point to hold it until Zahn let go. Zahn wasn’t built like Vince and Ray, at least not anymore. In his old age - that was how Vince thought of anyone in his fifties - Zahn had opted for fitness instead of size, and his frame, that was probably once called “wiry,” had some sag to it now. He was still strong, no doubt - Vince could see the strands of his wrist when they shook hands - but Zahn was a man more concerned with his waist size than the numbers he was putting up. Shame, too. He had the size for it. As Vince looked up to his face, he wondered when someone balding decides to give up the crew cut. If he’s a cop or ex-military, seems the answer’s never.
He’d met Zahn a handful of times, each in passing. Vince was skeptical of the men who hung around his father, especially the ones who thought of Ray as a celebrity, who thought buddying up to him and treating him like some kind of peer made them special. These men came to the gym for one reason: to see Ray. Working out was just their excuse. Vince overheard them tell stories about times when they were alone with Ray. He noticed how they went out of their way to touch him. Ray, to be fair, went out of his way to be magnetic. Vince just wished he was more careful about who he was attracting.

“Any idea what the old man has cooking here?” Zahn asked. Apparently, Ray hadn’t let him on the plan either.

“No idea.”

Ray was holding two walkie-talkies. He’d plugged an ordinary set of headphones into one of them.

“Zahn, your part’s simple,” Ray said. “You’re going to spot him. You have two jobs: don’t let him drop the bar on himself, and rack whatever weight he tells you. No questions. And don’t talk. Three jobs. Any questions?”

“No, sir,” Zahn said, rapping Ray’s stomach with the back of his hand. When Ray didn’t react, Zahn smiled to make sure they both knew he was kidding.

“Good,” Ray said. “Now go away for a minute. You can’t hear what I have to tell him.”

A wonderful moment passed when Zahn wasn’t sure if Ray was serious, and until Ray shooed him away like a bug, Zahn looked at them both like a confused Labrador. He put his hands up in an if that’s what you say, Boss motion, and walked chastised to the
front of the gym.

“Here’s the deal,” Ray said, once Zahn was safely out of earshot. “I was thinking about how to get into my clients’ heads, get to a place where I could talk to them and know they were listening to me. There’s too much distraction on the floor, too much looking around. I want my voice hard-wired into their brains.”

He handed the handset with the headphones to Vince.

“First, you’re going to do five light minutes of warm up. Elliptical, the bike, whatever you want. Then come back here. Clip this,” he held up the walkie-talkie, “to your waist and put the headphones in. I’m going to leave you alone in here with Zahn and watch from a distance. I just want you to do what I tell you to do. Even if you don’t think you can do it. Just try.”

This was a ridiculous idea. What was the difference between training someone in person and doing it over a radio? If anything, it was a step backward. At least when you’re training someone, you can look them in the eye and tell them to suck it up. From a distance, you had less impact, not more.

Vince’s stomach was starting to act up; he just wanted to finish whatever this was so he could go home and take Advil and go to bed. Ray didn’t have many stupid ideas, but this was one of them.

“Whatever you want,” Vince said.

Ray looked him over, a long, intense up and down, and walked back toward Zahn at the front of the gym. He stopped halfway there. “Oh, Vin?” Vince looked up from his examination of the walkie-talkie. “No talking. Not to me, not to Zahn. This is one-way communication. Even if you hear something you don’t like. No exceptions.”
Vince turned his legs slowly on an elliptical, putting out just enough effort to get through the itchiness that precedes sweat. After five minutes, his armpits were heated and his forehead was damp. Zahn talked nonstop to Ray at the front desk, probably needling him for information about what he had planned, and Ray paid attention convincingly while simultaneously ignoring him.

Vince dismounted the machine and jogged back to the free weight area. He clipped the device to his waist and put the headphone buds in his ears. When Zahn arrived, Vince made no eye contact, pretending he wasn’t there. It would be better for the experiment, he thought, but he also wanted to exclude Zahn from as much of this as possible, to make sure he understood he was here in an auxiliary role and nothing else.

After a few moments, a crackle of static and Ray’s voice came through.

Okay, we’re just going to work on the bench tonight. You warm?

“Yup,” Vince said aloud. A moment passed.

I can’t hear you.

Vince made eye contact with Ray across the gym and gave him an exaggerated nod.

Good. What’s your bench base? 245? Nodding’s fine.

Vince nodded.

And your max? 365?

Another nod, though it’d been three years since he put that up, and he’d only done it once for two reps. But once you put up a number like that, it becomes a part of who you are, and no one can’t take it away from you. Even if you only put it up once.
Tell Zahn to rack 185 for a warm up set. Give me ten reps, nice and easy.

“One-eighty five,” Vince instructed Zahn. Vince positioned himself under the bar and let his arms hang down to his sides, stretching out the muscles in his shoulders and arms and chest. Zahn racked a set of plates and slid twenty-fives over them. Vince lined his thumbs up with the bar grooves. He could remember when 185 was an impossibility. Now, it was nothing. He glided ten reps out with ease, sat up and cupped each pec with his palm. Taking his bicep in his hand, he slowly worked his arm, opening and closing at the elbow. These were the motions of weightlifters; he’d watched Ray and his buddies do them for years, and now they were second nature to him, too. Just feeling himself made him feel a little better.

Ray’s voice came into his ears. Good. Now give me the base, 245. Just eight, nothing crazy. Get the pecs singing a bit.

Vince passed the information on to Zahn, who replaced the twenty-fives with another set of plates and slid a ten on top of each. He locked in each side with a clamp. Vince had to push through the first two reps, but once his muscles understood the job they had to do, the remaining six peeled off smoothly. He sat up on the bench and lifted his hands like, What now? He had that jiggle in his leg, that buzz in his chest. He wanted more.

Though he didn’t look up at him, he could sense Zahn’s stare. He’d certainly seen guys put up that kind of weight, but it had probably been a while since he’d seen someone do it so effortlessly. (Ray famously didn’t bench with the OWLs, telling them he had to keep one thing to himself.) Some of the OWLs could put up solid numbers, even the guys pushing sixty, but those guys were all shouts and grunts on the bar, no
finesse. They manhandled the bar, worked themselves up into a state of fury, sounded like they were being tortured instead of working out. But Vince had learned from Ray that true strength on the bar came from a quieter place, came from the core and the legs, came from the breath. Any steak-face could pyramid lift for two years and get to the point where he could put up a crooked number. It took an athlete to bend the bar with grace, to lift it up, to place it down.

*Beautiful. Smooth. Now let’s go up to 285. Same thing, eight reps.*

Zahn added the weight to the bar and Vince felt good until seven and eight. He fought to keep it in, to finish strong. He placed the bar back on the rack and lay back on the bench, drawing deep breaths. Zahn looked down at him in study. The buzz in Vince’s ears went dead, and he stretched out his arms, dropping them behind him to the floor. The elastic of his muscles pulled them back toward horizontal, a tight, good hurt. Zahn looked like he wanted to say something, so Vince closed his eyes and focused on his breath, listening to his body. For thirty seconds of quiet, restful stretching, it seemed to Vince that he was alone in the gym, just a body suspended in open space. Everything faded except for his breath and the metal above him and the rubber mat below. He even forgot that Ray was in the building.

Ray’s voice crackled back on the line. *You good?*

Vince put a hand up in affirmation.

*Okay, let’s really get started then.*

Really get started?

*325. Four reps. Tell Zahn to rack it.*

For the first time since he’d completed his warm up set, doubt crept in on Vince.
He could put up 325, but not four times, not now. He knew his body. The 365, three years ago, had been a fluke. He was so jazzed about a quality squat that he decided to throw on three sets of plates with twenty-fives on each side as a topper and see what happened. Adrenaline let him put it up twice that day, but he’d never been able to do it again. 325, tonight? Four reps? No way. Especially not with this doofus Zahn as his spotter. Guy couldn’t even figure out the plates.

“Three sets of plates with fives on top,” Vince told him. He looked back to Ray and shook his head.

_No talking. What’s the matter? Don’t think you can do it?_

Vince rose from the bench, took out one of the headphone buds and took a few steps toward Ray. He started to speak, but Ray put up his hand to stop him.

_Wait. Don’t talk. Go back. Just try. I know you don’t think you can do it. Don’t worry about Zahn. He knows how to spot. I’m not going to let you get hurt. You know you have one more in you. Go back and put it up. Just give me one._

Vince closed his eyes. If Ray had not been the man who had overseen Vince’s transformation years before, who had come in and swept away a life of disappointment in himself, Vince might not have trusted him in that moment, might have listened to himself instead of the disembodied voice in his head. He might have told Ray that this was stupid, pointless, that it was dangerous, that there was always going to be a fundamental disconnect between trainers and their trainees. Some people are just lazy - after all, these are the people who have had to hire trainers. We can’t do the work for them. We don’t know how they feel. But Vince still thought of Ray as his rescuer; there had been too many times when what Ray asked seemed impossible, and it never was.
Even if he could protest, Vince realized, there was no Ray there to protest to. He had removed himself, and Ray wouldn’t let him reach him. To argue with Ray would be like arguing with the voice in his head, like arguing with himself.

When he turned around, Zahn had added the weight to the bar. Vince dropped his head toward his shoulder to crack his neck. He lay beneath the bar and hung his arms on it. Again, he measured the distance from his thumbs to the notched line, making sure his hands were centered and equidistant. He tried to push out any memory of the weight on the bar above him, push out any memory of the doubt that he couldn’t do it.

_I want you to count down from twenty in your head when I say so. I’m going to talk over your count. Just do as many as you can. Take a few deep breaths._

Ray waited. Vince waited.

_Okay, go Count._

Ray began to speak when Vince’s count hit fifteen. His voice sounded altered, changed, like when you hear your own recorded voice and it’s unfamiliar but unmistakably your own. It was Ray’s voice he was hearing - who else could it be? - but it was deeper, more formal. Almost rehearsed. And it held a tone Ray never used: bitter sarcasm. Vince struggled to maintain his count and hear what Ray’s almost-voice was saying.

_Listen, Vince: You thought I was going to give you a promotion tonight, but you’re not even close. What a joke. You can’t even do the job you have now. You loser._

Ray had timed it so that what he said ended exactly when Vince’s count was down to three. For those three seconds, the insult wound itself up inside Vince. The three, two, one counted down like bomb in his chest.
He grabbed the bar and pounded out the reps in anger. The voice punctuated each one at its apex: *you loser, you loser, you loser, you loser.*

His arms felt numb, amputated. Zahn looked down at him in wonder.

Ray’s voice came back into his ears: *Don’t think. Tell Zahn to put on fifty more.*

*Three reps. Breathe and count it down.*

In a shaky voice, Vince passed the information behind him to Zahn.

Confusion and awe swirled hot in his head. He saw Zahn slip the twenty-fives under the tens as if from a distance, from a surveillance camera on the ceiling. 375, more than he’d ever lifted. He told himself to forget the number. To breathe. The bar above him, eyes closed, he started counting at Ray’s command. Again, when he hit fifteen, he heard Ray’s rehearsed voice.

*Listen, Vince: When your mother first asked me if I’d consider adopting you, I wanted to say no, because I didn’t want a son who’s a pussy.*

*A pussy, a pussy, a pussy.*

The bar dropped to the peg stand not with its usual clang, but a deeper, thicker sound, a thump. Vince sat up dizzy. He looked down at his arms, swollen, bloated, as if they’d been pumped full of liquid. Three reps of 375. His pecs quivered, jumped toward each other as if they’d been run through with current. He stood and teetered toward Ray, who was walking toward him with an enormous smile on his face.

“My God,” Ray said. “It works. Three-seventy-five, and when you’re feeling like shit.”

“I don’t believe it,” Zahn said. “What were you even saying to him?”

“That’s between him and me,” Ray told him. “That’s the point.” He pointed his
thick finger down into Zahn’s face. “Don’t go running your mouth about this, Zahn.”

Vince felt something seize up in his stomach. He went down onto one knee. He looked up to Ray, standing above him, still beaming.

“Why would you say that, Ray?” Vince asked. “Why would you say those things?”

“Don’t worry about it, son. Think about what you just did.” Ray put his hand onto Vince’s shoulder. Vince put his hand down to steady himself and vomited onto the mat.

“Whoa! Easy!” Ray said, jumping back to avoid the spatter. “Okay, it happens.” He eased Vince down to his back. “Jesus, Zahn, go get him some water and a towel. And a mop to clean this up.” He looked down to Vince. “You just rest. That was really something. I knew it would work. You were amazing.”

Vince lay still on the floor. Zahn’s padded steps receded. Vince looked up to Ray, whose head, whose whole dark torso was ringed by the lights above, a solar eclipse that swam with the sweat in Vince’s eyes.

“I want to hear all about it,” Ray said. “What it was like hearing me through the headphones, knowing I was watching. What you thought when you heard what I said.” He looked up to make sure Zahn was still gone. “I didn’t mean any of it, of course. That’s the idea: to say the worst shit you could imagine to someone to fire them up. Things you could never say in person. Of course I’m going to make you a manager. Of course you’re not a pussy!” He laughed. “A pussy? You just put up three-seventy-five, son!”

Vince propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at his body. Everything, every shaking muscle, felt stronger than before. But something did not feel right, did not
feel true. Vince felt filled with emptiness. A black hole, a strong dark force, brewed inside him, right in the space where his stomach had been.
Elizabeth

Elizabeth could see her husband monitoring her body. It was unspoken, but she knew he watched the Elizabeth she ate, calculated the calories she burned when she gardened or cleaned or when they had sex. He threw out the regular mayonnaise and replaced it with low fat. Sometimes when they were out to dinner he would finish his meal and start finishing hers, just so she wouldn’t. He insisted on simple, healthy meals: roasted chicken, vegetables, no potatoes or rice. He told her he needed to eat in a specific way to maintain his livelihood, that his body was the product he was selling, and she yielded to his stringent diet, knowing his strict parameters were put in place for her, to keep her thin and energetic, to keep her young. She might not ever workout with him, she might never give in to that, but he believed he could make her over in his own silent way.

Which is why on the morning after the ceremony unveiling the gym’s first expansion, when Elizabeth stood at the kitchen table with a plate of eggs in her hand and announced to her son and husband that she was going to the gym, Ray asked if she was joking. He probably believed she was until she finished the dishes, went upstairs, changed into shorts, and left the house. Ray looked to Ben for a humorous reaction, but when he stared back in disbelief, he rose from the table.

He said, “Ben, I’ll be back. Just watch TV or something,” and Ben knew something was off. Ben was used to watching himself while his mother shopped for groceries or his father was training clients after-hours at the gym. Elizabeth argued that he was too young to be left alone, and accused Ray of wanting to save money by eliminating a babysitter. But Ray insisted, joking that Ben was not really nine years old,
that he was a boy on the verge of manhood.

While Benjamin had his mother’s small hands and thin arms, his face was his father’s, or at least, it was going to be: heavy eyebrows and prominent, thick chin, long, dark hair tucked behind his ears, a solid face. Though he was gentle around his mother, Ben was beginning to run through classmates during recess games. They stayed down when he hit them, and he rarely stopped to pick them up, and sometimes it would take three or four boys wrapped around his legs to take him down.

Years later, Ben told her what had concerned him was not that his father had left, but his brief instruction: that he should watch television, an activity Ray continually criticized. Until that day, Ben had never thought it strange that his mother had avoided the gym for so long, that they had separate spheres of operation (his: gym, hers: home), until their father drove after her and he was left alone in the living room, and Ben asked himself why his father had married his mother. Though he was too young to shape it fully, he thought it odd that a man whose life seemed devoted to his physical self would have chosen such a diminutive woman, a woman whose primary concern was the state of her family’s life, not the state of her body. Maybe he hit her over the head and dragged her home by her hair, he thought. Like a caveman in love.

And with that, Ben told her, he’d chalked it up to the ideas that he wanted to be true – that Ray loved their mother despite their differences, or that she balanced him out, or that opposites attract.

But Elizabeth had married Ray Brousell for a reason more compelling than love: he’d saved her life. She had agreed to date him out of embarrassment; her friends all had weekend plans and she wanted them too, wanted for once to have something to look
forward to, something outside her house. She did not expect there to be a second date, but imagined this one would check off a box on an invisible list of life accomplishments that were not remarkable, but were the ingredients of a normal life. *Dated a high school football player. Check.* As much as Ray’s bravado insulted her, she was attracted to his size and strength; she wanted to be seen with him, that she wanted to hold a little power over someone who could destroy her so easily. *Dated a guy with muscles. Check.* *Dumped him. Check.*

Elizabeth insisted that they drive to the movies in her car, that they see the movie she wanted to see, that they stop for ice cream, and that she be home by midnight. She allowed Ray to put his arm over hers in the movie theatre, no more. She rested her opposite hand on his bicep, just to see how it felt, and she pushed down at his muscle, felt it push back at her fingers, as if it were closer to the surface of his skin, almost as if he didn’t have skin at all. Her confidence wavered and she imagined being held by him, his arms would reaching all the way across her back to her front, to her ribs. The darkness of the theater lifted and Ray put his lettermen’s jacket on, and Elizabeth realized they had barely spoken the entire evening. She remembered her plan.

She yawned to set the groundwork, though she was truly exhausted from a day of anticipation, and suggested she was too tired for ice cream. He didn’t argue, just as he hadn’t reacted when she told him she would pick him up and the movie they would see. She wondered if deep down he felt lucky and nervous, if he had not expected to have this chance with her, and he sat silently in the passenger seat, no doubt imagining how he was going to ask her for another date, or how he would try to kiss her, and she turned down the dark road that led back to town and prepared her response.
They were close to his house when she fell asleep at the wheel. The car drifted left, Ray yelled and reached across her to pull the wheel to the right, but her foot was still on the gas as he overcorrected, and the car veered into the ravine that paralleled the road. It was already in the water by the time she realized what had happened, and as the car came to rest on its side, on her side, she felt the water rush in the open window and cover her shoulder. Ray opened his door toward the sky, vertically. He unbuckled his seatbelt and reached down to help her to climb up and out, but the weight of the car had pressed her door in, pinning the seatbelt down, and she struggled to find the red release button, to free herself as the water began to pool around her head, she knew it was futile. The water was rising up the sides of her face and then it was over her. Through the water and the panic she saw Ray’s form plunge itself back into the car, reach across her, and take hold of the seatbelt. He braced himself against the top of her seat, exhaled with the force of the wind god, she thought, of Aeolus. He pulled the entire apparatus from the car, seatbelt, buckle, button, attachment, all. And then her.

Ben did not know, not until later when they were divorced and he heard his mother tell it, that his father had followed her to the gym that day with the intention of intercepting her before she reached the gym and infiltrated the area of his life that he protected most. It was the unspoken embarrassment of Ray’s life that his wife did not attend his gym, did not even belong to it. More than her absence was her pronounced disinterest in his profession, a disinterest that had punctuated every moment of their relationship, starting when she ignored him on the day they met, when Ray was walking off the practice field and called out crudely to her as she crossed the parking lot with
friends. She’d known who he was when she heard his voice, but she did not look up as she opened the door to her car, disappointed that the first boy to show interest in her would choose that way to do it, and that he played football.

But she knew Ray drove after her with doubt mixing in his heart. He had opened the aerobics room out of necessity; too many of the men who came to his gym were mentioning how their wives were intimidated by the free weights and bulky machines on the gym floor, but wanted to join something, wanted the same membership and inclusion their husbands had, and Ray was not about to turn away their money, even if in his heart he thought that aerobics classes were for women who were too weak to run. As he saw Elizabeth’s car make the turn onto Corey Road, maybe he remembered that the first aerobics class was scheduled for that morning, and he knew then that she was headed there. Maybe he thought of how he went against his gut for the first time and his greed had come around to get him. How he had wanted her to make this change for so long, and felt an odd relief, but a relief clouded by an understanding that she gave herself over fully to everything she touched, and he should fear this new interest, the first she had ever really shown outside her family, fear would change their routines, fear would alter the space of her home and shift their family in some tragic tilt. Because it would.

He pulled into the lot and raced ahead of her, cutting through the spaces, and parked in front of the gym door. Elizabeth parked and locked her car and walked toward him. She had seen him following her in her mirror, and Ray could tell by her walk and her face and the angle of her head that any argument he wanted to start was already lost. Before he could speak, Elizabeth said, “You can’t leave Ben alone like that, Ray. Go home. Don’t ruin this for me.” Ray watched his wife walk through the door, exchange a
few words with the boy working the desk, and turn down the hall leading to the aerobics room.

When she walked through the kitchen door later that afternoon, his wife looked changed, different: younger, healthier, maybe more radiant even. She was flushed and dreamy, and she smiled when he said he was proud of her. She told him that the class had been crowded. It had been a hit, she said, and it was filled with wives she knew from town, all those the clients Ray had expected to pull in. When Ben asked her if she had gone to the new part of the gym, she nodded and swallowed, walked gingerly to the sink and drank a class of water, and Ray asked if the class had challenged her and made her believe that she could become more fit and active, and she saw Ray’s face and knew he was thinking *like me*. Then she told them she needed a shower, that she hadn’t sweated that much since she had Benny, and she locked herself in the bathroom and turned the shower on so they wouldn’t hear her. She had tried and failed and would not go to the gym again.

She woke the next morning, her legs shaky as she swung them off the bed and sore as she steadied herself for the walk to the bathroom, and her memory of that horrible class where she had choked and spat and heaved seemed like a memory from months before. She felt, in the quivering muscles of her thighs and shoulders, like a boat that had been pushed from the dock, rocking now on its own uncontrollable pattern of movement, untethered. Pausing in front of the hallway mirror, Elizabeth turned to her side and drew in her stomach, and ran her finger along the ridge made by her ribs pushing against her nightshirt. She had not seen or felt her body in that way for a long time, probably since her pregnancy. The parts of her body, her arms, legs, lungs, muscles, glands, and skin
were again parts of some organic mechanism, filled with purpose. She would have to go back. She would go back that afternoon.

She had felt the same way the first time she let Ben run away from her on a playground and knew she had to let him go, and when he fell in failure after a squirrel wound its way up a tree and out of his sight, she would not let herself pick him up and comfort him. He had run from her, and with his choice came his fall, and she understood the same unalterable commitment came with attending the aerobics class the morning before.

In the class that afternoon, in the darkened studio, as the hour came to a close and the music slowed, the aerobics teacher, triplicate as she stood with her back to the mirrored wall, instructed Elizabeth and her classmates to take a deep breath and lift both hands toward the ceiling. Lift your right hand higher. You’ve done a good job. Feel the stretch through your side. Now your left hand. Hold it there. Breathe.

Elizabeth saw her hand reaching up, the knob at the top of her wrist pressing back against the skin, the tendons pressing back. She saw the light filter down and catch the soft, brown hair on her forearm, saw the light in her sweat, and under its sheen, the shadow of a valley of muscle.
Schadenfreude! The good kind, the unapologetic kind: the bliss that comes from seeing an older man (not too old, of course - too old would be sad) pulled over in an expensive car. The car, a Mercedes something or other, its model a combination of letters and numbers meaningless to Ben Brousell, who knows nothing of cars. The man, mid-fifties, thinking quick of how to get out of this, a name he can mention, the windshield sticker and the free pass card he gets each year by making a sizable donation to the Darien police department. But this man knows no names, and that card won’t work here in Pennsylvania, so after opening up his one hundred thousand dollar coupe on the hilly two-lane road that winds along the river from Whittemore Academy into Bristol, Mr. Goldman Sachs is fucked.

Ben’s on the uphill, pushing his bike up toward campus, but he stops in the hope that he’ll be able to catch a word or two of failed protest.

Please be a dick, Ben thinks. Don’t let him off.

The cop, approaching the car window, checks the oncoming traffic and waves Ben around.

When Ben was a senior at Whittemore Academy, he’d opened up his class schedule and discovered a miraculous gift: his particular matrix of classes gave him the first three periods off every Monday. Back then, it meant sleeping, occasional cramming. Ten years later, by some serendipitous alignment of Ben’s stars, his class schedule as an English teacher at Whittemore gave him the same three periods free. An easy coast down into town, where Bristol’s main street lined up against the river, and Ben can drink real
coffee instead of the dining hall’s oily swill, and eat a full breakfast in a real restaurant, the Riverside Cafe, before pushing his bike back up the hill to campus in time for his first class. He had to do things like this, he learned in his first year at the school, to keep his head right. It was too easy to eat twenty-one free, mediocre meals and drop his tray onto the conveyor belt, and drop his laundry off in the basement of Old Main and pick it up three days later, to go to sleep early so he could get up early so he could go to sleep early: to see the campus as a place he never needed to leave. Monday mornings in the cafe, Sunday afternoons at his mother’s; these small, temporary reminders of a normal life, a possibly normal life, that struggle to exist beside the abnormal lives led by boarding school teachers.

The hill and the stairs have gotten to him by the time he reaches his three-room, railroad apartment on the third floor of Ragin, the freshman boys’ dormitory. Ben runs the shower cold and puts on his jacket and tie. The essays on his desk are two weeks old today; he’s supposed to turn back his students’ work within a week, according to his Department Chair, but six of the nine remain ungraded. He knows what grades he’ll give them; it doesn’t take more than a quick skim to decide if they’re laughable or passable or competent, or in the rare case, surprising. He still has a half-hour until class. If he takes them to the library, he can probably mark three or four before class starts, but no way would he get to all six. He leaves them on his desk. That way, if his students ask, he can say he graded them but left them there accidentally.

Or, he can pull the trick he learned in his first year: set a rule - no asking for them back - and when they inevitably do, tell them they’re not getting them back as punishment. Works every time. So far.
And there’s this: if they’re on the desk back in his apartment, they won’t call out to him from his briefcase, won’t remind him of his shortcoming. Those kinds of reminders get swallowed across the distances of quads and the lengths of hallways. Doors dilute them; stairs, too.

Briefcase is a misnomer. In a self-acknowledged attempt at eccentricity, Ben carries around an old piece of luggage for his briefcase. A half-hearted attempt, he knows, but he found the damn thing for three dollars at a garage sale, and its 1950’s blue clamshell called out to him. Once he’d opened it up, the deal was sealed: frilly, pink and purple silk pockets, lace ribbing. Granny Panties, a student had named it when Ben opened it up the first day. In just two months, it had become a kind of cult item. Seniors had begged him to give it away as a prize to one of them at graduation.

Hey, Ben figures, prep school teachers have two options: get eccentric, or get a dog. They’d dubbed him “Mr. Bruce,” and then they nicknamed one of his possessions. He might as well try to own it.

Had Whittemore been built fifty years earlier and built in New England, people might have heard of it; but even if it had been, the big three - Andover, Exeter, St. Paul’s - would not have to worry about there being a big four. Whittemore was third-tier: sitting barely one hundred years old on the banks of the Delaware River, facing the decay of South Jersey. Farther from New York than prettier schools in Connecticut (Have you seen Taft?), close enough to Philadelphia’s sprawl to cancel any chance of seeing a cow on the way to campus, the cow-passing a requirement for most city families who sent their kids to boarding school.

But it is of course the job of third-tier headmasters and admission officers and
parents who send their children to third-tier schools to convince the world that their school is actually second-tier, and on its way to first. This approach of sheer will was working for Whittemore. The school had risen, albeit only slightly, to relative prominence in the past twenty years, had somehow leapt over its reputation as a school for kids who couldn’t get into (or had already been kicked out of) Lawrenceville or Peddie, and in doing so, had managed to carve out for itself a little bit of pride. Ben’s class had been the first in thirty years to have a student accepted to Princeton (it wasn’t Ben - it was Adam Hobarth, who was, admittedly, in a wheelchair). The school had built buildings and diversified its student body enough to appoint one of its three black teachers as a Director of Diversity, won a state championship (in wrestling - still counts), and turned enough mediocre students into average ones to now be considered a “good school,” as long as no one asked: *good compared to what?*

To Ben, this all seemed desperate, and the biggest sign of Whittemore’s desperation was that it had hired him. It was the kind of pat yourself on the back move a school makes when it’s going through transition. Proof that their product is desirable. Proof that they’re reinvesting in themselves. Ben had held the Whittemore teachers in high esteem when he was a student there. Now that he was one of them, either their standards had dropped, or his admiration had been misguided. Maybe a little of both.

The class is small, five boys and four girls, and underwhelming. Two of the girls don’t talk: one, Ji-Sun, is probably going to be moved into an ESL class at the end for the first term, a new phenomenon at Whittemore this year, after the admissions office made a hard push in South Korea and recruited a dozen students last fall. The two girls who do
talk, Sam and Alex, talk too often; they think of themselves as pilots given the green light for takeoff; they’ve been waiting fifteen years to sit around a table and dominate a discussion, and here they are, doing it. The boys fall into three categories: two are weird with potential, that is, they shoot entirely from the hip, and a third of what they say, despite a total lack of preparation or development or follow through, catches Ben’s ear. Two are so weak but confident they might as well have “development” branded into their foreheads. And one, Griffin, who decided for the first three weeks of school to have a British accent and then dropped it with no explanation, has crossed the Rubicon of weird, and reached that land where he’s so unaware of his own eccentricities, it’s hard to find any joy in watching him.

They’re November juniors, so Ben still has a little sway over them. It will fizzle after the holidays. He takes his seat at the head of the rectangular table the school liked to insist was round, part of the Harkness method Whittemore borrowed from better schools twenty years too late. He keeps Granny Panties on the floor, not wanting to open it up in front of them and trigger a question about their papers. Reaching down, he pops GP open beside his chair, and slides out his copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the same copy he read at Whittemore himself, a carat and his last name newly inserted between “Ben” and “2001” written in a hand he reluctantly recognized as his own on the inside cover. They’ve just read Chapters twenty-four to twenty-seven, the deep breath time in the novel when Atticus admits that things are going to slow down after the trial, and time passes in the familiar, Maycomb-y way it did in the opening chapters. If there was air conditioning, he’d want to visit that slow town in slow time, even after all that’s gone down. Tonight, Scout will don her ham, and Bob Ewell will take a knife to the ribs, and Jem’s broken
arm will bring everything back around full circle.

But for now, all Ben wants is to have a discussion that for once in what seems like months doesn’t involve race or law. That’s all they want to talk about - Atticus and Tom and the trial - and Ben’s been fighting them, arguing that that’s the least interesting part of the novel (save Mayella, of course, but she’s more of a wonderful disaster in the film, really). Even if it’s not the most interesting, he’s argued, it’s probably (and he knows this sounds bad, considering it’s not 1962) the most predictable, the most popular, the most discussed, and so to Ben, the trial and Tom and Atticus are the parts of the novel he wants to discuss least. What he wants is to talk about Scout, and how goddamn hilarious she is.

“For instance,” Ben says, “look at 283. Jem’s still all confused and pissed off about the trial, and what’s he doing?” He pauses for a moment as if waiting for an answer, but really he’s just building momentum. “He’s eating. A lot. Why?”

Another fake pause. “He’s bulking up. To play football.”

Alex’s hand goes up. She’s the kind of kid who sounds like she’s planned out exactly what she’s going to say weeks ahead of time. She looks around the table to be sure everyone’s listening. “What he’s doing is the typical adolescent response to feeling hopeless. He’s under the impression that if he takes up these masculine goals - becoming bigger, becoming part of a team playing a violent sport devoted to a masculine aesthetic, it will somehow empower him in a world that doesn’t make sense.”

“Good,” Ben says in reply. Not just good, fucking great, honestly. This from a girl in high school. Sure, it was half full of shit, but Ben didn’t even sound like that when he was a senior in college. Alex was bothering him less now than in the beginning of the year, when he’d pegged her, not accurately, as always needing to take it one step too far
and toss around vocabulary she’d only heard at her parents’ dinner parties. At least what she’s doing is analysis. And maybe that’s enough. Maybe that’s what gets A’s in prep school now.

“And,” Sam this time, responding directly to Alex, a practice Ben supports in theory, though when they do it, they seem like the two best soccer players on a team who don’t trust their teammates enough to pass them the ball as well. “Remember how in the opening chapters, Jem’s really critical of Atticus because he won’t play football with him. Perhaps what we’re seeing is the start of a rebellion, a blatant attempt to be an anti-Atticus.”

“Another good point,” Ben says, “And good job connecting this moment to an earlier point in the text.” Bullshit back and forth. Did they realize it, too?

Ben looks across the table to the boys, who have placed themselves as far away from him as possible in some kind of middle school avoidance strategy. “Guys? Any responses to what Sam and Alex have just said?”

Nothing. Ben hones in on Brady Atkinson, one of the development boys.

“Brady? Anything?”

Brady eyes him cold for two seconds before turning on his wry, fake charm.

“Not a thing, Mr. Bruce. The girls are spot on. I was thinking the same thing. They just beat me to it.”

“Perhaps next time you’ll offer your idea first?”

A long moment builds when Ben wonders if Brady is even going to respond. The kid leans back on the two back legs of his chair and takes his time thinking of a response.

“Would if I could.” he says, finally. “Hard to get a word in with these two. You know.”
And the kid winks. He fucking winks. He shoots a smile over to Sam and Alex to remind them that whatever’s just come out of his mouth is complete and utter bullshit, that he couldn’t care less. Understood but unspoken apathy is an unwritten Whittemore rule.

Ben pushes on. “Anyway. What I want to discuss with you is Scout’s response to what Jem’s doing. What does she say to him?” They wait, expecting him to answer his own question, knowing he will if they wait long enough. How long had it taken for them to figure that out?

Ben says, “She asks him a question. What is it?” Another pause. Only half of them have their books out on the table, and none of them are open. “Guys, if you want to answer the question, you’re going to have to open your books.”

He can’t believe he has to say these things. What is he even doing here? It’s defeat, not anger, that seeps into his chest. They fumble to find the page.

“‘Whatcha stuffin’ for?’” one of them says, finally.

“Yes,” Ben says. “‘Whatcha stuffin for?’ What do you make of that?”

“She’s questioning him.”

“Yup.”

“She’s letting him know she notices.”

“Yup. Which falls right in line with what we’ve been saying about her all along. Ultra-observant. Named ‘Scout,’ of course. What else?”

“She’s busting his balls,” Sam says. “Sorry. You know what I mean. She’s calling him out for eating so much. Making fun of him. Then she tells him he’s going to throw it all up.”
“Yes. Good, Sam. This is what I mean. Scout’s a pistol. Still. Even after all she’s been through, all she’s seen. And she’s still funny. ‘Stuffin’.’ What a ridiculous way to put it.”

Jin-Sun puts her hand up. Ben tries not to show any surprise in his voice as he calls on her.

“Mr. Bruce?” she asks, “is this a common term in American culture? To refer to overeating as quote, ‘stuffing,’ unquote?”

God love her. She never talks, but when she does her sentences are perfect.

“Well, not common,” Ben says. “We say ‘to stuff oneself,’ meaning to eat a lot, but the way Scout is using it isn’t very common. At least to my knowledge. Then again, I didn’t live in Alabama in the 1930’s. Or ever.” Alex and Sam laugh, but Jin-Sun still looks confused. Ben puts his hands up in an exaggerated I don’t know. “I couldn’t say. Never been there.”

“Perhaps it derives from stuffing, the bread dish traditionally served at Thanksgiving?” Jin-Sun offers.

Murmurs from the boys. Ben puts his hand in front of him in an attempt to tamp down the reaction at the far end of the table.

“Perhaps,” Ben says, out of pity. “Maybe.”

Connor, the weakest kid in the room, the other development moron, says, “Maybe he’s stuffing himself with stuffing.” He draws it out and looks around, hoping for a reaction.

Jin-Sun looks back at her book. Not realizing Connor’s joke, if it could even be called that, she says, “No, Connor. It says he was eating bananas.” She points to the page.
“Twelve bananas and a bottle of milk.” She looks around the room, expecting confirmation, getting none.

The class continues this way for the remainder of the period. Ben tries his best to direct the conversation toward an analysis he deems the most valuable, and it almost gets there every time before it’s sidetracked by some miscommunication or tangential comment. As the last fifteen minutes of class approach, Ben resigns himself to the truth he realizes at the close of almost every class: if he wants to get them there, he has to lead. But their attention is shit at this point, and so as Ben speaks, eloquently, he believes, for several minutes about the unexpected but consistent wisdom in Scout’s voice, how when she does call out the people she cares about, she finds a way to do it without being too hurtful or judgmental. But the nine other bodies in the room are not even there, really. They’re breathing, they’re blinking. They’re tracing circles in the margins of their notebooks. But they’re not hearing him, not hearing him build toward the point he’s been trying to reach for weeks, the point he believes, truly: that Scout is as perfect a narrator as he’s ever known because she lets her edge creep in just enough to ground the story but not to distort it. And as they sit unmoved through the crest of his point and now in its wake, Ben wonders, unsure, how different his point is compared to the one they reached forty minutes ago.

And there are still eight minutes left in the period.

“Good job today,” he says. “I’ll let you go a little early.”

Half of them leave the room as if there’s free food somewhere. When Jin-Sun leaves, she looks at him with what he thinks is a kind of gratitude, but he can’t tell. He’s never going to connect with her. Only Alex stays behind.
“That was a really good point you made about Jem’s masculinity,” he tells her.

“Thanks. Hey, Mr. Bruce?” she says, pausing at the door.

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t want to ask you in front of everyone else, but did you grade our papers?”

Ben looks down at Granny Panties, and then runs his mind down the hallway and the stairwell, across the quad and up into his apartment, to his desk. All that distance.

“No,” he says. “I don’t. I haven’t finished them yet.”

“Oh,” she says. “I was just asking because I thought it’s been a week since we handed them in.”

Ben picks up GP, snaps open its cover, places his copy of *Mockingbird* inside the frilly lace. He snaps the case closed with a weak click.

“It’s been two,” he says.