

Already awake, and curled like a busted C, Jacob has just taken his hands from his ears when Dad thumps the bedroom door and says Up.

Two secs, Dad.

Had an extra half-hour already. Let's go.

Jacob hides his eyes, turns the lamp on. Rolls over. Almost a whole year now since Cornelius Waldengarden got Dad into running. Johnny Johnny, let me tell you, big boy, it's absolutely great exercise.

To watch them slog it round the old horse track up beside the arena almost hurt at first. Thick spit stuck to Dad's huff-puffing lips. His slow heavy strides, like the ground wouldn't let him lift his feet. Neily slowing down for him, jogging backwards. C'mon, Johnny McKnight, move those bones. Shut yer gob, Waldengarden. Jockeys on the trot flicking whip sticks and clucking their tongues and having a laugh, look at these wackos, who in hell runs round a dirt track at seven in the morning? Every day. Even Sundays. With Neily, without Neily. Like something inside Dad sprouted. Down to Belleville for new shoes, track suits. Running logs, electrolytes. It's got hold of me, son. Interval training, speed work. Johnny, Johnny, you're looking great, boy. And by spring it's Neily still driving down to the horse track for laps and Dad driving down the Sterling Road to spray-paint mile markers on the telephone poles and the pavement – three, then five, then six miles out. And back.

And Jacob with him since summer. Every day. Can't go as far, Dad, hurts my knees. Boy, I've told you, this sport is about your mind, and Dad tap, taps his temple. Good name for a body part, *temple*, it's what running is for Dad now.

*Whump* on the door. *Hey*, I said *up*.

Jacob sits up and says sorry twice. Rubs his eyes. Breathes out *phoooh*. It's Saturday. Hill day.

He shivers out of his pjs, into his sweats. Will need his nylon shell as well. Ice on the bedroom window.

In the kitchenette, Dad's waiting at the table, shell on and all. 'Bout bloody time, he says.

Sorry, says Jacob.

And Dad points his chin at the kitchen counter. Get stretched.

Jacob nods, lifts his left heel to the countertop. Leans, and counts in whispers, *one* one thousand, *two* one thousand, as Dad gets the electrolytes mixed. They taste like soap and go half-slush in the cold, make Jacob gag. He swallows, hard.

What's the matter, boy?

Just tired.

Look half-dead.

Didn't sleep too good.

You'll be wide awake by the time we hit they hills.

Jacob nods.

Right, that's us. Get your shell on and we're out the door.

Jacob tugs and zips and ties drawstrings. Steps into his Nikes. Could gag right now. Beginning – it's almost as bad as hills. Butterflies, bad, till you get going. Then it's okay. Can even be good, but mostly when Dad's not there and Jacob can go his own pace, have a look round, when the sun comes up, at all the colours only mornings have.

Double knots, kid, we'll have no more stopping to tie bloody laces.

Jacob nods, ties tight.

And that's them down the stairs, out the lobby, into the dark and hush. Still pitch-black almost. Cold. Jacob shivers – Buck up, boy, it's no that bad – and jumps on the spot to get a peek round Dad and across the road into Chuck Linton's yard. Hears Teddy's chain *clink* and *clank* against the doghouse, but can't see him behind Chuck's big shitty flatbed truck. Jacob puckers, makes a kissy sound. And Teddy barks like it's at the moon.

Wake up the whole town, why don't you?

Sorry.

Hope you're staying away from that mutt.

Yeah.

Half-mad, that thing.

Just lonely.

See if I care. He'll go for you like he went for bampot Linton.

Stay away, y'hear me?

Jacob nods and kneels and pretends to pull the tongues of his shoes so Dad can't read his face. He's been sneaking over to Linton's lot with bologna or a leftover banger since Grade Seven started. Talks nice, tells Teddy it wasn't his fault. It was an accident.

Right then?

Jacob nods.

Dad – *beep* – hits the stopwatch. We're offskее.

And Jacob checks his shoulder.

Teddy, quiet now, watches them going like it's for good.

Keep up, kid.

Jacob, *phoooh*, lengthens his stride. Dad goes out hard the first couple of blocks. Jump-starts the system, he says, lets it know what's what.

They turn off Victoria, onto Brock, then settle into a medium-slow pace. Saving it for the hills. Jacob breathes into his belly and – he could run the route blindfolded – closes his eyes. Opens them *blink* just as they pass Immaculate Conception – looks nice in the dark and the hush, without all the buses and kids – and then *blink* the chocolate factory. Night-shift folks filing out. Lunch boxes and laughing, cigarettes like fireflies. A few people wave and say Morning or Get there faster if you drove, Johnny, and Dad laughs and waves but looks down and says Keep fucken smokin and I'll be drivin you to hospital, smartarse.

Jacob picks it up a bit to make like he's not interested, but has a quick look back. Sun-up the factory looks dumpy for being so famous, but in the dark it looks, if you want it to, like a painting, an old painting, of a dark castle. The kind of painting you swear is breathing, and invites you in.

Okay, kid, let's get goan.

Dad pulls back alongside as they turn onto Sterling Road, into blowing snow, and their shells lash and snap like flags.

Get that head up.  
Hurts the eyes, Dad.  
Made of sugar?

No.

Then get your head up.

Jacob squints and blinks, blinks and squints.

And Dad says Let me by then. Moves in front. Usually breaks the wind on bad days.

On they go past the beer store and the Hydra restaurant and the old sign Welcome to Glanisberg, Apple Core of Ontario, Population 400, except it should be 4000 but the last zero fell off and no one gives a crap. Most of the orchards are gone, and Glanisberg is way more famous for the factory anyway. You can even buy Cook's chocolate in Australia because of the new boss – hardly anybody ever sees him, just his flash Jag with the tinted windows, and he's not even in the Cook family. He's American. And everybody says he's changing the way business gets done around here. Started with his own office. Jacob saw pictures in the *Herald* – swanko – and he's not sure why exactly but he wants *in* there, in the boss's office.

But the Murph won't let them in.

The mailbox – Jacob can read it from here – used to say THE MURPHYS back when. When his wife was alive. And when his kid was still there. Then he put duct tape over the S and the Y. Some people say it was Children's Aid had to come. Dad says people should mind their garbage mouths, stop talking daft crap all the time. Still crosses the road, though, whenever they run by and says – here it comes – Watch for dogs.

Dad, we've never seen them even once.

Take half your leg off, says Dad, snapping his head like a dog's got hold of a groundhog. And if they come for you when I'm no here, don't –

I know. Don't run.

Stand your ground, smartarse. Or they'll get you *here* – Dad dips down and pinches Jacob's Achilles tendon, makes torn skin and tissue sound. Right the fuck out they'll take it, and that's you hobbled. Never heals.

Jacob nods and swallows and blinks away the feeling of teeth on his tendon. Thinks of Teddy. Dad was dead wrong about him. Maybe he's dead wrong about the Murph's dogs, too. Might not be friendly with everybody, but probably pals for the Murph, up there alone in a falling-down farmhouse. Dean Spielman, mean Dean, speedy Dean, says the guy's just a pervert. Spielman should know. Except for the back of hockey cards, all he reads is *Hustler* magazines his dad leaves lying around the greenhouses. *Pornography* is Greek and means *writing about prostitutes*.

Kid.

Eh?

Away with the fairies.

Just thinkin.

About what?

Nothing.

You sure?

I'm sure.

So get a move on. And get this in you. Dad passes him the electrolytes.

It's cold, Dad, I'm fine.

You're still losing fluids. Drink.

Jacob drinks. Swallows a gag.

You right then? says Dad.

Jacob nods. Passes the electrolytes back.

Okay, kid, pick it up a bit.

They make the turn into Harris Provincial Park, jump the gate chain and turn left.

Here come the hills.

Jacob closes his eyes, puts a soft *please* in his out breath.

Lean into her, boy.

Trying, Dad.

Faster.

And then they come, like moths in his skull, smacking the backs of his eyes.

Dull dead eyes but open like saints' in pictures.

Attack it, son.

Martyred and mortified and looking –  
Come on, move.  
– up at God like he'll never let the pain end.  
Get that head up.  
And bits of skin and tissue, stuck to the sawtoothed pedal  
spinning this way, that way, this way –  
Breathe, fucksakes.  
Jacob spits and gulps air and tries to settle his breath, settle his  
breath, but stabbing the bits keep stabbing his eyes.  
Bone bits, and Dad's bloody hands.  
*Stay with me, son.*  
One and two and squelching like a sopping squeezed sponge.  
*Are you breathing, boy?*  
And Mrs. Simpson crying black smears *O John he came out of  
nowhere I swear.*  
They crest, and drop their arms for the downhill.  
Let it go, kid.  
*Johnny, let it go, Johnny, let him –*  
*Jim, you stop and I'll fucken kell you, I swear.*  
I can't, Dad.  
*Come on, boy.*  
Dad, I can't.  
Yes, you can, now come on.  
I'm gonna be sick.  
Be sick if you like. You'll take the next hill.  
Slow, Dad, please, I'm – Jacob gags – sick. And he stops,  
hands on knees, breath in heavens.  
Boy, I cannot believe you.  
I'm sorry, Dad, says Jacob, standing straight and getting –  
*bumpf* – a water bottle right in the chest.  
Dad's face. Boy, he says, fucksakes. I've no idea. I mean, what  
gets into you?  
Jacob looks down, rubs his chest.  
Nothing, is it? says Dad. Have you nothing in you? 'I'm sick.'  
Full of piss and vinegar yesterday.  
Just the hills, Dad.

Eh? Speak up. I said speak up.

Jacob can't talk. Just picks up the water bottle. Hands it back.

Guess you'll be walkin home then.

I'll give them a go tomorrow, Dad, I swear.

Tomorrow. Never fucking mind, tomorrow. It's what you do today. How d'you expect to win anything without increasing your speed, your –

Endurance.

But Dad – *Ach* – just waves him off, and starts running back.

Jacob watches him until he crests the hill. Then runs after him, hard.

Rest of the morning Dad goes to his room. Says he needs to study. Jacob goes to his room, too. Slides a stack of comics out from under the bed. *Iron Man*. *The Flash*. And *Green Lantern*. Can't read that one. Can't read any of them. Even in bed under the covers bits keep coming. June 21. The Bairns' Big Day. Icing. And you sing. Everyone okay.

*Happy birthday to you,*

*Happy birthday, you two,*

*Happy birthday, dear*

JACOB

A

I

L

A

N

*Happy birthday, you two.*

*Phooh!*

Eighteen candles *poof*, nine either end. But Jacob didn't blow. Jacob didn't wish. Said no to cake and – *You spoiled little bugger* – just stared at his dish. Because his bike was different. Was supposed to be the same. Every year before – toys or clothes or trikes and bikes – they always got the same. Mum said *Stop your*

*bloody grumbling.* But the bikes changed the game. Their favourite secret game. Criss-cross Go down the subdivision hill.

*You're me!*

*I'm you!*

*Faster!*

*You, too!*

Skid like a C the other way round, skid like a J but upside down. Then smack the stop sign, and do it one more time. A thousand times they did it, almost every single day. Cailan never traded. And cars hardly came.

Except the day after Halloween. Pumpkins still on porches. Windows needing cleaned.

*Please, Cailan, trade?*

Just to spook him was all. He never knew. Jacob's back tire. He can still see it. Worn almost through. Just one time. To spook him. If the tire even blew.

*We should go to the hospital, Jacob, Dad'll brain us if we're late.*

*Just one more time, Cailan, cross my heart it's true.*

Jacob knocks his fists together, whispers Stop it, stop it, please. But he hears the *bang* like yesterday. Bites his hand. Thumps his knee. *Bang* like a backfire, *bang* like a gun. Here comes the car. And that sound – Jacob slaps his ears – of skin, and metal. Scraping along road.

The rest is bits. Pieces. And, in between, big white blanks.

Jacob. *Jacob.*

Rubs his eyes. Yeah, Dad?

Lunchtime.

Dad's doled out the Chunky Soup and has his big ambulance book on the table. He's studying for his EMCA exam: Emergency Medical Care Assistant. Let's go, kid, quiz me.

'Kay.

Jacob stands the book one half either side of his bowl, and between mouthfuls of Beef Veg – Dad put Lea & Perrins in – asks him questions about procedure. Subdural hematomas. Puncture

wounds. Dad gets them all bang on but one: during CPR, intubation is recommended when there is excessive blood in the lungs.

Spoons, the sugar bowl and Jacob jump when Dad *bang* hammers the table and says I fuckingwell *knew* that.

It's okay, Dad, you got almost perfect.

But Dad doesn't hear, really, just says like a secret Should have fuckingwell known, and goes to his room. He won't come out for a long while.

Jacob sits on his hands. Stares at the gleam on the edge of the table, at the sugar that splashed out the bowl.

The phone's on its fourth, fifth ring and through the door Dad yells *Get* that.

'Lo?

Asalamalakim ...

Jacob's shoulders drop. It's Graham Hollingsworth. Except everyone calls him Cracker mostly because of his first name because even when he makes like black dudes from the tv – What's *hatnin*, you *jive-ass* turkey? – he talks slow as molasses.

Not much hatnin, Cracks. What you doing?

Factory ... You wanna come?

Who's all going?

Just us ... guys.

Spielman?

Yeah.

Jacob looks at Dad's closed door. Should maybe stay in, he says.

How come?

Read.

It's Christmas break ... sucka.

He won't let us in anyway.

Never know. You comin or not?

... Guess so.

See you there.

'Kay.

Fingers in his pockets, out his pockets, Jacob steps this way that way in front of Dad's door. Listens. No snoring.

Dad. Dad?

Eh?

Going outside.

Careful.

Will.

Jacob gets his togs on. Rummages through the junk drawer in the kitchen. Finds a safety pin for the busted zipper on his coat. Takes the stairs quiet. Jogs, hands in pockets, all the way to the factory, cold coming through the tear in his armpit. Out back the factory Dean Spielman says Nice coat, for the umpteenth time. Jacob just blows on his hands, does a dude shake with the Cracks. Bobby Hollingsworth, Graham's little brother, takes a haul on his puffer and says Colder than a witch's tit out here.

Shouldn't feel anything under all that fat, says Spielman, and Bobby flips the bird at his back when the Dealer turns and knocks on the black back door. Knocks again. Loud.

He always answers, but just opens the door a crack. You can see one eye. Part of his big bald head with the splotch on it. The scar on his lip. Teeth. *You* again?

Bobby always looks like he's going to shit his pants but it's him who says *Us* again.

Told you a hundred times, porker, don't give tours anymore.

Let a bunch of other guys in last week, says Spielman.

Who.

Garth Hutchinson. Lyle Bunyan.

Liars.

We saw it.

Saw *what*.

The chocolate, says Jacob. You gave it them.

And what are you gonna give me, eh, little runner boy?

Jacob looks down. But Spielman says Give ya two bucks.

The Murph laughs. Two *dollars*. *Rich* boy. Get outta here. Freeloaders –

Are not, says Bobby, but his voice and face are shaky –

Little cocksuckers, says the Murph, *out* of here! And everybody jumps.

*Boom.* Door closed.

Holy motha, says Cracker, bending with his hand on his heart. Thought he was gonna grab one of us.

I'd hoof him in the balls, says Spielman. Fucken pervert. Let's go.

It's not true, says Jacob.

Is so. Lyle Bunyan brought him a *Penthouse*. That's how he got in.

Lyle Bunyan talks daft crap. And anyway your dad reads *Penthouse*.

Ours, too, says Bobby, nodding and nodding and the ball on his toque bobbling and bobbling. Then he takes another haul on his puffer.

And Cracker hits him in the shoulder. Mum said just one pump, dumbbo.

Have to *breathe*, asswipe. That *hurt*.

*This hurt?* says Dean, and he nails Bobby's other shoulder. Jacob pictures nailing Spielman – right *smack* on the jaw, like Dad shows – except Spielman's mum always gives Dad good deals on flowers. Plus Jacob's hands, they've gone half-numb.

Let's just go tobogganin, says Cracker, and Bobby says Yeah! like no one ever hit him.

McKnight can't go tobogganin, says Spielman, he doesn't have one.

Can borrow mine, says Cracker.

It's okay, says Jacob. I should go home. My dad –

Needs you to cook dinner? says Spielman.

Shut up, Dean.

Make me. Dean stops walking. *Make me.*

Cracker stops.

Bobby stops.

But, Jacob – *Ach* – waves them off.

Yeah, Dean yells, run.

Jacob just keeps going.

I could catch you from here if I wanted!

Jacob keeps going.

Faster.

And doesn't stop till he's at the top of the stairs, his hands over his stinging ears. Stuffing falling out his armpit. Hard to turn the key in the lock. Hard to hold the key. Has to use two hands.

Just when Jacob comes in, Dad comes out of the bathroom. Looks like he woke up from a thousand years, but eyes Jacob up and down, says Look at the sight of you, boy.

Heat prickles Jacob's face. Fingers, tingling. I'm okay, Dad.

Okay nothing. It's bitterly cold out there. That's you Monday, new togs.

Sundays are distance. Long, slow distance. Past the park. Past Potts' farm. Almost to the big limestone house that belonged to the dead lady doctor who left all the books to the Glanisberg library. Jacob's been meaning to get down there. And will, tomorrow. The library's right next to the Sally Ann. Meantime, get the head up, boy. Focus. Replenish your fluids. Maintain your form.

Dad holds the jeans to Jacob's waist, lets the legs flop flop down. Jesus Christ, boy, will you *stop*?

What?

Groan, you're groan like a weed.

One of the little old ladies who minds the thrift shop looks up from her hemming. Hard to believe the size of him, John.

Eats me out of house and home, love, house and home.

Can't keep him in clothes that fit, I'm sure.

Dad folds the Levi's, grabs cwg's. No point in buying him new, dear. Kid grows so quick the clothes'd be down here before he wore them thrice.

No harm in second-hand, John, isn't that right, Jeanie?

The other old lady just nods and folds a T-shirt and Dad says Right you are, love. Eyes the hem, speaks lower. These'd be about right, no, son?

Jacob looks along his leg and says Guess so.

Go and try them on then, while I have a look round.

'Kay.

On his way to the changing area, Jacob keeps an eye on Dad, wonders if he still looks, too. Just last spring Jacob thought he saw the green pullover. Hanging there. Nothing where feet and hands and a face should be. Just holes. Could have kept all those clothes. All of them. Worn them. But *boom* Dad pounded the patio table. *Bugger* it, it's down the Sally Ann with the lot, the *lot*. And he broke down the other bed and yanked the drawers right out and stuffed garbage bags. That one's mine, Dad. How would I bloody know, there's two the same of everything. The name tags, Dad, Mum wrote C on his. What'd she write on yours? Nothing.

Jacob blinks hard, draws the big bone-white curtain, steps out of his trainers. Sock feet cold against the concrete floor, he unzips and shivers and tosses his trousers over the rickety stool. Between the gap in the curtains he sees Dad looking through the winter coats, this one no, that one no, this one maybe, then he stops, holds up the sleeve of a Toronto Argos jacket, takes a quick look at the tag. Makes like he's not had a fright when the old lady with the needle and thread says Goose down, John.

Eh, too small for that galoot of mine. Dad points toward the curtains and Jacob ducks away. Pulls on the jeans. Looks down his legs. Sees his ankles. At school Dean Spielman'll point and laugh and ask Jacob when the flood is coming.

Son?

Yeah, Dad?

How's it goan in there?

They fit okay.

Let's have a look at you.

Jacob gets the sticky zipper up, steps out.

Dad has a look. Those'll do you till spring.

Jacob just nods.

Right, says Dad, come on over here a minute.

Jacob follows him to the coat rack.

What do you think of these then?

One I have still fits.

Give your head a shake, boy, that thing's a goner. I was thinking this'd do you.

Dad picks the exact coat Jacob knows he will but hopes he won't. A green hunting jacket, reversible, with a wide tail that covers your bum. Stain like oil down the left side. The hunting side is bright orange like Dad's ambulance parka. Dad hides his mouth with his hand. 'Sonly five dollars, he whispers. Get it on you and we'll have a look.

The sleeve ends brush Jacob's fingernails but Dad says At the rate you're groan, it'll be bang on come next winter. Then he wrings Jacob's arm just above the elbow and in the old ladies' direction says Real goose down in this one as well. Warm as it gets, eh love?

Warm as it gets, John. Do you like it, dear?

Jacob says It's super, ma'am, but just wants to put his old clothes back on and get out the frigging door. Whenever he and Dad need new gear it's top of the line. Brooks. Adidas. Got tae buy what lasts, kid. Protect yourself from weather, and injury. But for normal clothes they always come back to this sad cold cellar that smells like holes and old people.

Best be on our way, kid, I'm workin afternoons.

Jacob changes, listens to Dad carrying on with the old ladies. Slow as molasses in January, that boy is. Not many in town can keep up with you, John. Aye, that's me, the Flying Scotsman. When the old ladies laugh it sounds like wheezy seagulls. Yepsir, real goose down. And who notices a little stain, John?

Then it's quiet. And Jacob can feel their eyes on him – *Poor boy, isn't that a pity* – as he and Dad head for the stairs.

Outside, Dad says Hello there to the Sally Ann man ringing his little bell by the money ball. Someone put in a whole two-dollar bill. Dad drops a quarter in and says All the best to you.

The Sally Ann man tugs the peak of his cap and says God bless.

Jacob jogs ahead. Jumps up the steps to the public library. Presses his face against the window. The dead lady doctor left the library a huge big dictionary. Twelve volumes. Plus art books with

Dali and Picasso. Jacob wants a look before Mrs. Bailey the librarian covers up the pictures like pornography. But she won't let Jacob or anyone see anything until all the books have been cleaned and catalogued and shelved.

Jacob raps on the glass.

Mrs. Bailey looks *shoo* over her specs and her mouth makes the words *my window*.

Jacob tugs his sleeve over his palm and gives the glass a rub. Jumps down all the stairs *smack*.

Here's Dad, shaking his head. Break your ankle, he says.

It's not high.

Weak bones.

Drink that calcium stuff every day.

I mean in your ankle. Anyone's. Fragile.

They shouldn't be.

Tell me about it.

Dad?

What.

Do you know what her real name was?

Who?

The dead lady doctor out the Sterling Road.

Henderson.

What Henderson?

Eh?

Her first name.

What do you care?

Just asking.

Trudy.

That's Mum's name.

No need to tell me that.

They have the same name?

Think your mother owns it?

No ... She left all these books to the library.

Who did?

The doctor. Art books and everything and a dictionary that has every single word in it.

Go friggin blind, you will.

I can see perfect.

Bloodywell hope so. Think I can afford glasses?

No, says Jacob, kicking a small stone down the sidewalk.

Dad digs the car keys from his pocket, sniffs the air like someone did a fart and says Jesus Murphy, factory smells something awful today. Didn't lock your side, I see.

Sorry.

You're always sorry. Get in.

When they get back to Hillcrest Heights there's poor Teddy across the road, out in the wet snow, no food in his bowl and howling. Inside, Dad takes the radio to the bathroom so he can listen to repeats of *The Goon Show* when he's having a shower. But the reception's bad so he just whistles like the Black Watch Pipes and Drums. Jacob shuts his bedroom door and tries to read *X-Men* but can't concentrate. Dumps the jar out on his bed, counts his allowances. Figures how much he'll have left over after he buys Luciano Pavarotti for Dad. Maybe he can get Teddy a bone from Rick the butcher at Sharpe's Super Save. A huge big femur. Sneak it over. Teddy can gnaw at it all he likes. Bury it. Dig it up again in springtime.

Jacob slides the jar back under the bed. Gets some paper and the pencil stub from his nightstand. Draws bones. Human bones. An elbow joint. An ankle. A femur. Then Dad pops his head in. That's me away.

'Kay.

What are you drawing there?

Bone.

Can see that. What's it called?

Femur. Largest in the body.

Correct.

A lot of weight-bearing responsibility.

Aye, so don't sit on your arse all night.

Won't.

Get some food in that belly of yours.

Will.

Lovely piece of fish in the fridge. Perch.

'Kay.

Some spuds and peas with it, not a bad wee nosh.

Sounds good, Dad.

Time you had a haircut, too. Look like a mop.

Not that skinny.

Skin and bloody bone, boy.

Jacob breaks the point of his pencil but makes it look like an accident.

Dad stares at it, the pencil, for a sec, two, then he's out the door and away down the stairs.

Jacob eyes the hole at the end of his pencil. Listens till he can't hear the Gran Torino anymore. Crawls under the covers. Hopes the rest of December comes and goes like a heartbeat.