

WILLIAM GIRALDI

Freaky Beasts: Revelations of a One-Time Bodybuilder

Now, my tongue, the mystery telling
Of the glorious Body sing

—Thomas Aquinas, *Pange Lingua Gloriosi*

We walked the earth as gods, heroes, monsters, true anomalies who existed in an underground culture of iron and anabolic drugs, of mammoth protein dishes and a shared understanding that we were *Übermenschen*, superior to the unmuscled rabble of the world. Our ways were alien, extreme, unholy, hellbent. We puked and bled and broke laws in search of massive, striated muscle, in search of stares and whistles from strangers. I see now that we shunned the wimpy Christian ideal that places a beautiful soul above the perfection of physical form. Instead, we were magnificent Greeks, idolizing male beauty and believing that the exterior was a reflection or embodiment of the interior. Achilles, Adonis, Atlas, Hercules: look at them. And, my Lord, we were arrogant, solipsistic bastards. We were New Jersey bodybuilders, and, for a brief time, singing the body electric, I lived in triumph.

But before immersing myself in the clandestine madness of belonging to this club for gods, I was a naïve sixteen-year-old whose first-ever serious girlfriend had chewed up his heart and spat it on the

pavement. My uncle Tony had been a weightlifter and bodybuilder in his early twenties and, missing the iron, had recently set up a non-sense, professional-grade gym in one half of his basement: dumbbell set from 10 to 100, squat rack, pulley machine, preacher bench, and the scores of Olympic plates held in various racks under the mirrors. My uncle lived across the street from my grandmother, and since my father was struggling to raise three kids by himself, besieged by a revolting mortgage, we ate dinner every night at my grandmother's house.

One late afternoon before dinner, stultified by grief and boredom, I went into the basement to visit my uncle, absentmindedly picked up a barbell to squeeze out a set of bicep curls, and found a passion I didn't know I needed. Part of my motive became to alter my pathetic, emaciated physique into a monument worthy of my estranged girlfriend's lust, and another part was an (unconscious) attempt to meet my family's outrageous, Homeric standards of manliness: their conception of the masculine was divided into the heroic and the cowardly, with no room for gradation. But the largest part of my motive was simply to stave off the aimlessness I felt bearing down on me. And I didn't become just another body in my uncle's basement gym every weekday from 3:30 to 5:00; I became his trusted partner, and together we set out on a mission of manliness.

Those first results I noticed in the mirror produced euphoria, infective and addictive. After only a few weeks of high calorie force-feeding—enormous piles of pasta for dinner each evening, a quart of protein shake before bed each night—and not a single missed day of training, my deltoids and pectorals began to mushroom, my biceps balloon, my back thicken and widen, my traps swell out from my neck, my quads sweep out from my waist. Each week I packed on more pounds, and my strength increased steadily; more and more plates were added to my bench press, my squat, my straight-bar and preacher-bar curls. In that fluorescent end of my uncle's basement, with the primal howls of AC/DC blaring through a pair of speakers, with the scent of dampness and rust hanging in that stagnant air, with posters of Bruce Lee and bodybuilder Tom Platz looking on (Platz was a steroid-ballooned aberration with the legs of a rhinoceros), I witnessed that teenage boy transform in the mirror before me, and the transformation proved all-empowering. I could move boulders,

topple buildings. And already I had been thinking about achieving an outrageous freakiness with anabolic steroids in my own blood, but at this early stage I knew very little about drugs. That would change.

In the seminal documentary *Pumping Iron* (1977), Arnold Schwarzenegger—still the monarch of all things bodybuilding—likened a good workout pump to an orgasm. Despite the ecstasy of those pumps, I cared more for what was permanent, for what I could carry through the day with me: the body armor that announced the arrival of a formidable opponent, a disciplined warrior . . . a man. Because, after all, being a man is the chief concern of any adolescent male, whether he recognizes it or not. In my family the concern was amplified: Girdi men were burly, stoic, hard-working carpenters, and I needed to make my place among them. I had the formula—I had it right there, bulging out in luscious roundness from beneath my T-shirt. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy likens the body to a machine, and so what I sought was the best possible machine, the mightiest machine, perhaps believing that it would make life's certain travails more endurable, much the way a luxury car makes highway traffic less nightmarish. And “machine” is the perfect word, because the grotesque bodybuilders I admired and aspired to join looked more mechanical than human.

I trained all that summer like a Spartan, and when I returned to school in September, as a junior at Hillsborough High, some people had trouble recognizing me. Friends and enemies both appeared befuddled, and my ex-girlfriend eyed me with fascination from distant recesses of the hallway. My math teacher, Mr. Roba—former Marine and star athlete—blessed me with what remains perhaps the greatest compliment I've ever received. He said, “It looks good on you, kid.” In June they had beheld a 115-pound waif with longish hair and a blanched, pimply complexion. What stood before them now was something altogether different—it didn't seem plausible: 145 pounds of lean muscle beneath a bronze sheath. The awe-struck reaction I prompted is the sole reason any person desires the physical conversion I had achieved, never mind what he tells you about the health benefits. Compliments and admiration are what fuel the addiction to the iron, to the mirror. And I did manage to win back my estranged girlfriend, though the reunion was a laughable failure and lasted only a few months.

Milan Kundera has named youth “the lyrical age” because, like the lyric poet, the youth is “focused almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him” (40). Give to this same youth the self-worship that bodybuilding fosters and what you get is a Narcissus so detached from the normality of others that his ego threatens to turn him into a loathsome sociopath, one who sees himself as walking poetry. But I had no qualms about my new life: it was indeed an addiction—one that would soon take me into some seedy, steroid-infested corners—but it also allowed me strength, poise, surety of character, and respite from a brutish melancholy. And so I intensified my training, since 145 pounds was still a munchkin; I needed another fifty pounds of lean mass, and it looked like anabolic drugs were the only route. If someone had told me then that in just over a year I would waltz across a stage in a frenzied bodybuilding competition, wearing only a blue bikini bottom, tanned an unnatural bronze, and mushroomed on three different anabolic drugs, I would have doubted it. My only focus at this juncture was to look like a genetically enhanced Atlas, to be the strongest eighteen-year-old guy in town. Formal competition seemed an impossibility.

Each day I devoured muscle magazines and took intricate notes on specialized diets and new training methods; these notes filled my composition pads alongside rudimentary observations on *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*—the three novels that would play the most instrumental role in my pursuit of literature. Then, in my senior year of high school, after eighteen months of steadfast training, my uncle began to go wayward, lose interest, get more involved in work and his children. But he had taught me every trick I needed in order to forge ahead without him: what to eat, how much, and at what times (eating was still my biggest issue—I hated to force-feed myself every night before bed, wolfing down a thick turkey sandwich); how to increase mass and strength (high weight, low reps); how to sculpt that mass (low weight, high reps); how to alter a workout routine in order to overcome a plateau, that dreaded wasteland of making no gains; how to target a lagging body part (pectorals in my case); how to get inspired for two unforgiving exercises known to defeat even the most austere bodybuilder, squats and dead-lifts. “Squats and deads are what separate the men from the boys,” my uncle would say.

My uncle had come from the Draconian gyms of New Jersey, Apollo Gym and Diamond Gym, hardcore dungeons for freaky beasts, elite training fields that eschewed the pencil-neck businessman and the middle-aged housewife. These gyms were bastions of unapologetic masculinity, of men preparing for the most prestigious bodybuilding competitions in Jersey, and my uncle cut his teeth there among the cracked mirrors, leaky pipes, and bloodstained floors. Some men carried buckets from exercise to exercise because they trained to the point of puking. To walk through those gyms was to be among single-minded giants, dedicated champions injecting themselves with the finest drugs science could muster. My uncle himself was always too honorable for drugs—for him the only glory came in doing it naturally, and he never had the slightest urge to step onstage. I didn't either.

As in gorilla or chimpanzee troops, reverence and fear dominated those gyms; if a larger, more animalistic specimen needed a machine or dumbbell, you humbly surrendered it. And you always kept yourself covered in a sweatshirt and sweatpants: to flaunt your own hard-won muscle in the presence of even greater muscle was blasphemous, hubristic, a cause for shame. This same hubris damns Pentheus in *The Bacchae* of Euripides: the young ruler tries to flex his muscle in the presence of the god Dionysus, but the god possesses superior muscle, and so Pentheus dies a gruesome death. The play is a masterpiece of eroticism, which was exactly how we bodybuilders viewed ourselves and each other: as muscled Casanovas. I didn't realize till long after I had left that odd world that, despite all the female attention and sex with women, the eroticism was chiefly homoerotic. We were more Greek than we realized (about which more later).

So my uncle imparted to me that Draconian workout ethic. When he retired from the iron, he allowed me to bring over my own training partners—since the kind of heavy lifting we executed made training without a partner or spotter deadly—and I in turn attempted to impart the same view to the friends who tried to join me. My long-time comrade Russ Brit began coming to my uncle's dungeon, and to my surprise he possessed the blood-and-guts warrior credo. Then, in a comical twist I couldn't have foreseen, my enemy Jimmy Ruh asked me to train him. Jimmy was the football player and class president who had snagged my girlfriend away from me eighteen months earlier. We were supposed to brawl in the parking lot a number of times

but, thankfully, those brawls never came to fruition—I would have been savaged and humiliated. Now, thinking me a mighty Proteus, Jimmy wanted me to transform him the way I had transformed myself. And we attempted to undergo such tutelage, but Jimmy didn't have the necessary genetics for muscle mass, or the even-more-necessary barbarian gumption to wrestle with iron five days a week. The psychological benefits of witnessing another man get crushed by the fierce training regimen and severe diet were in themselves almost worth the hours of sweat-drenched agony.

This severe diet, the bane of many, was for me not so severe because, like my uncle, I had a rapid metabolism: gaining and keeping weight was my problem. I could eat hefty portions of whatever I wanted (as long as I consumed the requisite grams of protein) and, as long as I kept training, the pounds adhered to the proper places, filled out my deltoids, quadriceps, pectorals, and biceps. I was doubly lucky because my waist was only twenty-nine inches, which allowed me the much-sought-after V-shape. Also, in addition to having full muscle bellies, I had narrow joints, which meant that I always appeared more muscular than was actually the case. For the competitive bodybuilder, aesthetics matter more than strength. I would discover that when you're on stage nobody cares about how much you bench press.

A precontest diet exacts cruel punishment, but at this point in my development I was able to eat anything, as long as I ate. And I did, nearly every two hours: I carried Tupperware containers to school, containers over-stuffed with tuna fish and wheat bread, and I sat in the hallway between classes and forced down the food. Fellow students glared at me as they passed by holding their noses. The smell of tuna fish was another way for me to garner attention, to announce my distinction, my discipline, my godliness. But still, I hated it—all those mounds of protein piled before me several times a day. It was exhausting to eat that much. A bodybuilder spends half his time thinking about the iron, and the other half thinking about food. If he ever gives himself a break from thoughts of iron and food, he thinks about drugs.

My first real attempt to score a cache of steroids came about through my boyhood chum Russ Brit, who was still training with me in my uncle's basement. Russ knew someone who frequented the pizzeria where he worked part-time, someone who had promised him a

shipment of anabolics from a hardcore gym in New York. Youth is brazen—or, as Disraeli has it, “Youth is a blunder” (61)—and so, after discovering the location of this guy’s apartment, I rode my twelve-speed bicycle there and knocked on his door. After telling him who I was, I tried to hand him a fistful of cash in exchange for the ampoules and needles. This nervous young man told me that the shipment hadn’t arrived yet but that it would within a week, and then he asked me not to show up at his apartment anymore. I rode home without feeling even the slightest bit of blunder in me, certain that I was one step closer to procuring the drugs I needed to realize my ideal physical form. I never once considered steroids a weaker man’s short-cut; the kind of freakiness I desired just wasn’t possible without them.

Of course we never heard from that fellow again, but sometime during my senior year of high school some pals and I were able to score—through vigilant negotiations with other bodybuilders and weight lifters who belonged to various gyms in the area—a potent oral anabolic called Anadrol. Designed for anemics, Anadrol was the most sought after bodybuilding drug on the black market, a badass chemical invention that increased size and strength as nothing else could. Anadrol was so attractive, not only because of its supreme effectiveness, but because it wasn’t an injectable steroid: many of my companions had a fear of needles, a paranoia about addiction and disease, and weren’t capable of plunging one into their buttocks.

The irony is that injectable steroids are much healthier because, unlike pills, they get directly assimilated by the body without having to pass through the liver. Anadrol, on the other hand, was so potent it unleashed hell upon the liver—sometimes I could feel mine aching. But the stuff was sweet magic: I inflated from 155 pounds to 165 pounds in just two weeks, and this for someone who could go months on end without gaining a single pound. Never mind the high blood pressure that caused me constant, beleaguering headaches: the granite roundness of my deltoids and biceps, the added body mass I felt in each step, the way my quads shook under my sweatpants, how my lats (*latissimus dorsi*) propped up my arms—it was so intoxicating I could think nothing of the possibility that I had begun inflicting damage on my vital organs with black market chemicals.

Nearly everyone in my orbit noticed the added mass, the increased

irritability and aggression, my complaints of headaches. My pal Mark Holden one afternoon ransacked my locker in hope of finding my pills; he said I looked like a cartoon character and was damned impossible to be around. I bickered incessantly with my new girlfriend Monique. Testosterone is the Yahweh hormone: too much turns a man into a hostile, unreasonable despot eager to flex his brawn. One day in the hallway I literally ripped a door off its hinges when it wouldn't open properly, and for some reason this felt good to me, much the way I imagine Yahweh grinning as he smites Gomorrah to ash. My uncle noticed the change in me, as well. At a picnic, a family member asked me, "How are you doing?" to which my uncle countered, "*What* are you doing?" He meant, What kind of poison are you pushing into your body? He of all people knew what a drug physique looked like, and he didn't approve, although he never mentioned it to me again.

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At around the time of my high school graduation my uncle's basement ceased to be enough for me. I had up till this point avoided joining a real gym because I feared I was not muscular enough to hold my own — this despite the fact that I was now 165 pounds at five feet eight inches, had only three percent body fat, was pumped full of Anadrol, and was lifting my highest numbers ever: 225 bench press for five reps, 315 squat for eight, 400 dead lift for three, 125 barbell curl for ten. Some boyhood friends from my hometown had recently joined the weightlifting and bodybuilding cult and were training at a gym a few towns over called the Physical Edge. Set back in an industrial park, off an ordinary road with patches of forest, the Edge was a sprawling facility with modern equipment, and it catered to both the overweight housewife and the dogged bodybuilder. I have seldom known the brand of excitement I experienced upon joining that gym and becoming a key member of its core. I was eighteen years old, fresh from high school, postponing college, living at home rent-free, loving a girlfriend who modeled in Manhattan: these are the formative circumstances old men miss.

Within only a week of joining I paired up with Pauly, a short Italian with diamond thighs, monstrous arms, and an unforgiving

case of acne from anabolic steroids. His partner had just suffered a hernia lifting too much weight, and so Pauly had been hunting for a serious, skilled replacement. His choosing me was confirmation that my rigorous training had impressed him, that I had achieved the kind of muscularity that wins admiration. We trained like animals: grumbled and groaned, spat and sweat, cursed and yelled. Our weight was heavy, our focus undeterred. And Pauly wasn't the only one impressed by my attitude and physique: the manager and head trainer of the Edge offered me a job working the morning shift from five to twelve, which meant that I was now an Edge representative. I had been there less than a month and was already the go-to guy, beginning friendships with gargantuan freaks of nature, guys who were so consumed by drugs and the bodybuilding lifestyle that they could scarcely hold a two-minute conversation with anybody who wasn't.

The fact that these champions considered me worthy of their friendship loaded me with a pride and honor that I have not felt since. What did they look like? You've seen them on the cover of magazines: the vascularity, thick cords coursing over dense, lean muscle; the complexion, a mixture of bronze, orange, and red; the outfits, skimpy and skintight; the facial expressions, determined and of singular purpose. And the women there who flocked to us: they, too, were fitness maniacs, all of them obsessed with physical perfection. We inspired each other immensely, helped each other with the weights and machines—skin against skin, sweat against sweat, the sexual grunts and groans coming from us as the iron rose and fell, as our strong blood surged through muscle tissue. The women spent hours there training, stretching, and talking with us, wanting to bathe in the expert light we radiated. This was our army, and part of the pleasure of belonging resulted from the secrecy, the illegality, the shunning of normal people and their normal ways.

It got to the point where most of us could not associate with anyone who wasn't a member of that army. Although none of us drank alcohol we would sometimes go to a popular bar and delight in how the whole place would part for us to pass through, this band of mechanical mammals. But we lived mostly for the charged environment of the Edge, looking forward to it when we weren't there and savoring every minute we were. We could not imagine how ordinary people walked through this life without muscle. And for me this was

especially true: I literally could not imagine what that felt like, much the way any given person can never accurately fathom having the genitalia of the opposite sex.

Imagine us there in the locker room of the Physical Edge: a clan of hairless, nearly naked men harpooning each other's buttocks with needles, massaging the painful cramps out of each other's deltoids and quads, positioning each other into poses before the mirror, lying naked in the tanning bed, showering each other with compliments on muscle shape and density. . . . Didn't this strike any of us as extremely gay? As a love affair with the muscled male form? If a sexologist had shown up and pointed this out to us, we would have insisted that he just didn't understand—the passion, the code, the discipline, the masculinity *in extremis* . . . right before slapping him senseless. We would have insisted that a portion of our esoteric zeal resulted from wanting to astonish women, to bed as many as possible. After all, procreative dominance is the main benefit of being alpha male in a chimpanzee or gorilla troop—those noble cousins of ours who would have felt quite at home in our gym. Or pick up Darwin's masterpiece and reread the chapter "Selection in Relation to Sex" to see how eerily similar a bodybuilder is to a bird: flashy plumage influences sexual success.

But the real aim of our esoteric zeal—so hidden from us then—was to astonish each other, to gain the unadulterated affection and admiration of other elite men. As in Hemingway's universe of men relying on men for survival, of disdainng the female and her interfering ways, we too responded only to male influence and praise. The irony, of course, is that we had ourselves turned into females: we sought the esteem and approval of men, shaved and tanned our bodies, wore scant clothing, were food-obsessed beyond reason. We had undergone sex changes and behaved exactly as prototypical women, constantly fretting over our fragile images and self-worth and control or lack of it—it was straight from the pages of an anorexia handbook. Pauly's hideous case of acne brought on by steroids was a tolerable consequence of his trying to be beautiful, much the way anorexic women become skeletal and hirsute and hideous in their quest to be stunning.

So the male bodybuilder and the female anorexic are separate though equal manifestations of the same social pressure placed upon

both genders: women must be rail thin, men superhero muscular, and damn everything else. You can blame prime-time TV and the magazine rack at the grocery store, but the real culprit is a modern malaise dictating that nothing is ever good enough: your job, your car, your spouse, your body. And so we dive into dangerous extremes to achieve an unattainable perfection, forgetting that the goal is to be attractive and healthy and loved. This is the American Dream of our bodies, as fallacious and silly as the American Dream that sells us all a ruse of guaranteed economic success (with a splash of fame). We different genders are more equivalent than we get credit for, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the gym.

So what did the Homeric patriarchs of my family think about my turning into a woman, my father and grandfather and the uncles I was desperate to impress? They didn't see it that way because I looked like a magazine's dream of masculinity, all marble brawn. And the truth is that they remained mostly ignorant to what happened at the Edge; they never saw my shaved body (except for my arms in the summer), didn't know that I pined after the acceptance of other men, considered my food obsession a necessary sign of election, and didn't witness us there in the locker room like a band of adoring femmes.

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Of course I didn't see it that way either, because I was too young and too busy harvesting the benefits of my physique. But, oddly, the most titillating erotic affair I experienced during my time at the Edge was not the result of the body I had so obsessively sculpted, but of F. Scott Fitzgerald. I had been keeping my pursuit of literature a secret from my family and bodybuilding comrades because reading Goethe and writing stories were considered effeminate, anathema, a high-minded waste of time that could in no way aid one's muscle mass. Erika came to the Edge every morning just after I opened the doors at 5:00 a.m., and she would sit at the counter for a while, chatting with me as she sipped on the protein shake I had blended for her. When one morning she pulled out of her duffel bag a copy of *The Beautiful and Damned*, I said, "Anthony and Gloria Patch. Miserable, aren't they?" I had finished the novel three weeks earlier, and Erika looked across the counter at me as if I had just conjured the dead. She said, "You read?" I said,

“Yes.” She said, “Books?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “*Literary* books?” And I said, “Yes, I think so.” My relationship with Monique was dying; she had gone off to Rutgers and buried me in the farthest reaches of her gray heart. So for the next few weeks I went to Erika’s apartment in the middle of the night, and as she ground fanatically in my lap with her wild blonde hair flitting around her head, she’d say, “Call me Daisy!” and this I would do, right before the eager ejaculatory bliss that only youth and anabolic steroids can inspire.

The drugs were necessary now—and not merely a tool for my vanity—because an inevitability had occurred: my fellow enthusiasts had talked me into competing in a popular bodybuilding show called the Muscle Beach, held in Point Pleasant, New Jersey. I wasn’t surprised by my allowing them to convince me of this; being around so many competitive bodybuilders at the Edge had begun to make me curious about my own potential on stage. It seemed the natural next step: from my uncle’s basement to the Edge to competing on stage. Was I petrified of having to strut almost naked in front of several thousand people, all of whom would be scrutinizing my every millimeter? Someone this deep in the bodybuilding headspace doesn’t blink at dancing in a bikini bottom; in fact, that’s the point: to show the cosmos what you created. I viewed my readiness for the stage as another signal of my worthiness as a man, never mind the fact that the competitive bodybuilder is more femmy than his noncompetitive brethren: a guy in a bikini wearing self-tanning bronzer and performing a little dance routine.

If I intensified my training, altered my diet slightly, and became even more of a single-minded beast, I could place high in the teenage division. Pauly and I and some others had been driving around Jersey each Saturday to watch different competitions, and at one of these shows we all became convinced that I could excel onstage if I wanted to. But I would have to wean myself from the Sustanon 250 I was injecting every week because this mass-building, oil-based anabolic caused water retention, and water retention blurred vascularity and muscle striation. It made one look strong, yes, but also puffy, and puffy was not the desired aesthetic on stage; rather, one wanted to look “ripped” or “shredded”—diaphanous skin with no water beneath the surface so that the thin lines of muscle composite were visible.

I had begun accumulating boxes of steroids for my own use; the

drugs would come into the gym from our key sources—two fellow freaks we trusted—and I bought up whatever I could, even if I wasn't just then using that particular blend of testosterone. Word of one's drug stash passed quickly through an incestuous gym such as ours, and when a fellow soldier needed an anabolic for his battle, you happily sold it to him. This hoarding and selling became rather chimerical once when a pal named Tom stopped by my place to pick up a thousand dollars worth of Dianabol, a magical anabolic difficult to come by. Tom was a gigantic cop, six feet seven inches tall and well over three hundred pounds, and he arrived at my apartment that day in his police cruiser and police uniform. So I sold a uniformed cop a bag of anabolic steroids in my sunlit kitchen. Through the window above the sink I watched him leave, and I remember saying aloud to myself, "What on earth am I doing?" But I didn't give it much thought after that moment, because this was the reality of the world we inhabited. None of us experienced even a second of shame over our drug use—shame was for everyday people, and we were champions who relished the secrecy and law breaking.

My precontest training spanned several weeks; the most taxing part was the purified diet: chicken breast, cup of brown rice, cup of steamed broccoli—all of it plain, seven times a day. My dreams were detailed collages of chocolate, cake, and candy. When I stopped the heavy anabolic drugs, I lost some of my mass, but this was necessary: each day I got leaner, more striated, more vascular. This effect was helped along by a drug called Winstrol-V, a water-based steroid designed to make horses run faster—it burned as it went in. Each evening after my workout I sat on the exercise bike for fifty minutes and tried not to let anyone see that I was holding Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. I practiced my contest routine in the aerobics room under the guidance of some contest veterans who wanted me to win, to represent the Edge in the teenage division.

Sometimes the image in the mirror startled me: that chiseled bronze statue had my eyes. When I shopped in the supermarket at night I could see the other shoppers pointing and whispering, and some of them not in admiration, but mockery. As I rappelled deeper into a contest mentality, I had mostly forgotten to think about the patriarchs of my family, about whether or not they were proud of what I had accomplished. If they wanted a real man (albeit one who

had turned into a woman), there I stood. But the solipsistic bastard doesn't have the space to consider his family; he's too consumed with his own lovely vision of himself. And was I a real man now, or just an image of one?

Scores of supporters and family members trekked down to Point Pleasant for my competition; the air inside that auditorium felt radioactive. Backstage, Pauly and some other pals from the gym covered me in a final coat of bronze paint—skin must be as dark as possible in order for muscle definition to be visible under the strong lights, otherwise your cuts get washed out. The distinct coppery smell of this body paint nearly overwhelmed me—every man backstage was drenched in the stuff. And there we stood in our bikini bottoms, eighty misunderstood warriors from each weight division, gently pumping up with the dumbbells, our eyeballs glowing against our newly blackened hides. Stage fright did not occur to me, and failure did not occur to me, even though I was smaller and weaker than I had been before the new diet. I spotted other teenagers who were larger than I was, but Pauly and the guys kept making the point: “You're shredded, bro. That dude ain't ripped like you. You're nails, got veins everywhere. Don't sweat him. You're *nails*.” Of course it was a monumental task not to sweat because I was wearing an extra layer of bronze skin and the temperature backstage rose to ninety degrees.

My song began and I strutted onstage to the eruption of shouts and hollers. The hot lights distorted my vision of the crowd; I could make out only a few faces; the rest was a bleary canvas of color. I performed my muscle-showing, semidance routine just as I had practiced it for weeks, and after a minute and forty seconds I was done, walking off into the wings, my hand held high in appreciation, exhilaration, joy. After every man had his chance to perform individually, all ten of us in the teenage division stood in queue on stage for the group competition, during which the judges called for various poses: front double bi, back lat spread, etc. Because my physique was harder and more symmetrical than the larger guys, I won second place that night. I carried offstage a two-foot sculpture trophy that weighed forty pounds, and as I walked behind the curtain and out into the fluorescent hallway that led to my seat in the auditorium, I became flooded by bliss. There's no other word for it. Bliss. I haven't felt that way since.

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Things began to unravel after that. The Edge went bankrupt and chained its doors closed; our group scattered to various other gyms in central Jersey. My relationship with Monique crumbled for good, my father sold my boyhood home, and a ruthless melancholy clobbered me into oblivion. Pauly and I remained training partners—I planned to compete in another bodybuilding show in just five months—but without the camaraderie and compassion at the Edge, the training and drugs and lifestyle began to lose their meaning for me. Pauly and I were driving long distances to try out various gyms in Jersey, but none of them ever came close to promising the happiness we experienced at the Edge. At this time of suicidal blackness my physique never looked better: I was fifteen pounds heavier than my previous contest weight, harder and more symmetrical, and this because I got the drug cocktail right. But still: I suffered through each workout with Pauly and through each forced meal (depression annihilated my appetite). I missed the Edge, regretted my estrangement from Monique, and read Raymond Carver's doleful stories every night and morning, wanting to shift my life from the gym to the library . . . wanting to write. I was nineteen years old and felt the jadedness of someone twice my age.

When it was time to step on stage again, I didn't even care: I fell asleep in my car in the parking lot before the show. That day and the day before I had screwed up my diet in a way I could not rectify—if you don't have the proper ratio of carbohydrates, potassium, and water in your muscle tissue before you step onstage, all your cuts vanish. Pauly said he couldn't spot a single abdominal muscle from his seat in the audience. It didn't matter. I took fourth place and walked offstage.

The depression would get a lot worse before I could begin to see my way out of it; the old crowd from the Edge—all those men and women I cared so much about and shared so much with—promised to keep in touch, but it never happened. Without the Edge as our mother ship we were unconnected orphans. If I thought that bodybuilders lived a bizarre, esoteric life, I was soon to find out that the life of a writer can be every bit as solitary and obsessive. People ask me all the time now if I miss those glory days, if I miss having that physique,

that mind-set, those dangerous methods. How could someone miss so much vanity, so much narcissistic pride and drug use? And why did I walk away so suddenly? The truth is that I had simply outgrown the iron, that fixation on my physique. I couldn't reconcile being a body-builder with wanting to be a student of Homer, Milton, Hopkins. And let's face it: a grown man looks rather silly flexing his biceps in the mirror, especially if he's holding *The Iliad* in one hand. I had found another way of being a man, one that involved imagination, knowledge, compassion. If the men of my family and my former gym friends couldn't buy that, I couldn't help them.

But I do miss those days terribly. And who wouldn't miss them? Didn't you see us?

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