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The Houdini

WHEN I JOINED THE SWIM TEAM, I trained in the slow lane with a boy named Drew.

"I can't dive off the blocks," he announced, as though he was looking for an argument, "because my suit could fall off." Drew stared, measuring my response, standing so close that I could smell donairs on his halting, wheezy breath.

Eyes concealed by goggles, I shrugged and feigned blasé. "Cool."

Drew pushed off the blue cement wall with an undulating whoooooooooooooosshhhh that sent a swell of wash into neighbouring lanes. Two kids whooped as though a speed boat had passed, then flipped on their backs to ride out the wave. Arms extended in Latin crosses.

Awaiting my cue, I watched the pace clock. "They don't put drawstrings in Speedos that large," our coach Pammy explained as Drew hurled himself down the lane, thumping, convulsing in an ungainly fly. He looked like a captive manatee, hit with electrical shocks. His head jerked skyward, mouth open for air, a spasm of white-grey flesh. "I told him" Pammy's voice trailed off, aimed more at herself than me. "It's going to be an issue on race day."

"Now go!"

Because we lived in Myrtle, a minor town with modest expectations, the newspaper covered our every undertaking: Swim-a-Thons, bottle drives, meets. One night a reporter interviewed Drew, who boasted, without a hint of self-consciousness, "I like to play mind games in distance races," and the reporter, without a whiff of irony, printed it.

Drew quit, citing eczema on his feet. When Drew told you something excessive, such as details of his hernia surgery, he trapped you at the end of your lane, pressing so near in his voluminous purple Speedo that you squirmed. "It wasn't really a hernia," he confessed with the imperious air

of an only child. "It was a hydrocele, which is an abnormal swelling of the *scrotum*." He cupped his hands in the shape of a Florida grapefruit.

After Drew left his mother cleared his locker of towels and Pop Tarts. Swim team was *my* mother's idea. There was no reason, declared Ethna, with a tenacious optimism that bordered on madness, that I could not become the best in the province or maybe the world.



Sports were not part of Myrtle's collective psyche. An Olympic rower visited my high school and students asked, "Have you tried bowling?" "Is your brother a good dancer?"

The Myrtle Otters Swim Team (MOST) trained in the town's only pool, which had six lanes and a mural of frolicking dolphins wearing medals. We had forty swimmers, including twelve asthmatics, four kids with peanut allergies, and two boys who claimed, although they may have been lying, that they were legally blind. All of the girls were in love with Nathan, the Otters' fastest swimmer, who at fifteen had dreamy eyes and abs. Ravaged by chlorine, his hair had hardened like points of meringue, which in our minds gave him a dangerous, yet vulnerable air.

Before long, I was promoted to the middle lane with Winston, Austin, a compulsive lane puller, and Maura, whose father, Grant, was club president. Grant had the thankless job of bringing parents' concerns, when they arose, to Pammy, who would without exception cry when confronted. A veteran of lumberjack competitions—his specialty was the hot saw—Grant had a long grey mullet and a mellow disposition. Mullets, best when curly and blond, are not as ridiculous as cynics think. In the eye of the wearer, the mullet creates the illusion of youth and glamour, preserving the golden locks that had once drawn praise from grandparents and doting moms, who gushed, at a time when you could do nothing else to distinguish yourself. "Oh, look at those curls. Aren't they beautiful?"



Substantial enough for a poultry plant and a hospital, Myrtle had all of the colours of a spring bouquet, splashed on wooden houses. In a shady corner, where kids like Hubert MacLean lived, were flats and rental houses drained of pigment.

Our house was in a bouquet of modest bungalows, but what set it apart, my mother believed, with the same conviction she applied to my

swim career, was her flower garden. Every August my family drove through Myrtle, assessing Ethna's rivals in the annual competition. Ethna, a five-time winner, had plump peonies as rich as vanilla ice cream, and hydrangeas so blue that they looked like a science experiment on osmosis.

"I don't like all the marigolds." I pointed to one yard. "Too hard and spiky."

"Nothing pleasing there," agreed Ethna, who not only avoided reds and yellow but harboured an abnormal hatred of sunflowers.

To Ethna, the gangly plants had an unsettling human quality. Like tanners, they turned their faces to follow the sun. They grew too tall, then collapsed, heads down like lynching victims. The flowers had an eerie pattern of spiralling seeds, intricate enough to be named after a thirteenth-century mathematician and, quite possibly, a sign of something evil. The ominous plants had, in fact, possessed Van Gogh for an intense period before his tragic death. I am painting "with the enthusiasm of a Marsellais eating bouillabaisse," the Dutch artist wrote his brother from the South of France. "I am now on the fourth picture of sunflowers." Gold and yellow the colors of God and the Sun, dying xanthic flowers, seed heads built up with impasto.

Ethna's competitiveness, rooted in a family of nine, extended past her garden to her children, who she believed should be bigger and smarter than neighbouring offspring. That included the Kings, whose father was so tall that his license plate said BIGBOY.

Both my parents were of average size, but Ethna, ignoring the power of multiple and interacting genes, believed that the more we ate the larger we would become. Like Moullard geese, funnel-fed three times a day, we were stuffed with fried chicken, tortillas and cheesecake. To Ethna's delight, we did for a while grow tall and robust, surpassing our neighbours until the age of twelve, at which point we levelled off or succumbed to fat.

I was the fat one.



One day we passed a woman standing outside the poultry plant. Overhead the sky was heavy with eagles, massive birds that roosted in trees and feasted on entrails left by farmers, unknowable creatures that could, to my surprise, swim.

The woman's grey hair was piled in a stack with loose strands drifting down the sides. Under a bulky coat, as formless as a judo jacket, was a trailing cotton skirt. She wore wire-rimmed glasses. Across her chest was a

small cloth bag covered with embroidery and sequins. It reminded me of pouches I'd seen in old cowboy movies, stuffed with gold.

The woman was staring into a void as she twirled a clump of loose hair around a finger. Over and over, systematically, as though the hair was endless.

"Who's that?" I asked Ethna.

"Lavinia MacLean. Hubert's mother."

"Really?" His mother, people said, was an artist. I squinted and split-screened Hubert and the woman, who didn't fit my mental image of an artist: angular, chic, dressed in black. Maybe this was why Hubert didn't have a home computer or a car, why he wore used clothes. "He's really bad at math," I added airily. "I wouldn't be surprised if he fails."

"I don't like that kind of talk." Ethna's jaw tightened with the same look I'd seen when Uncle Roger, the town dentist, strutted into rooms, baring his teeth like a hyena. "Not everyone has the same advantages as you."

"I guess he has a really smart dog, though," I blurted, trying to recover. "They got him from the pound. His name is Scampy, and Hubert says he may enter him in a show."

"That's silliness," snapped Ethna, not to be tricked. "Silliness."

"Really! Hubert told Winston that his dog is related to a Newfoundland dog who just won a medal for bravery from the Second World War."

"The Second World War?"

"That's what Winston said, that the dog was a hero."

That night during practice I ignored Austin, sitting submerged at the bottom of his lane, hiding from Pummy. During a tedious set of free, I contemplated the decorated dog and I tried to visualize Scampy, whom I had only seen from a distance, walking in the rain, head raised, like he had something to be proud of.



Pummy took a course from a city coach named Beluga, who had a voice like grinding gears. I hated Beluga and his swimmers. At one meet they parked behind a turn judge, a dotty woman with failing vision, and amused themselves by prompting disqualifications. When one of us completed a turn they gasped en masse and groaned, "Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh noooooooo!" suggesting a grievous infraction, which the judge, not wanting to look inept, noted. Beluga's pool was located in a neighbourhood of neck

tattoos and knives. Once, when Pammy forgot to enter Austin in his races, he wandered away from the pool and got mugged outside a detox centre.

After her course, Pammy separated swimmers into lanes by stroke and distance. We added before-school practices and every day, with a determination I had to admire, Ethna rose at 4:30 am and drove me through the sleeping streets of Myrtle, a ritual that left us exhilarated, and feeling, for a short but wonderful time, absolutely special.



The stands at our pool looked like a church balcony, overhanging the lanes. Once inside, you were assaulted by chlorine and heat, a two-fisted attack that left you after several hours stupefied, unable to move.

During meets I occasionally looked up and saw spectators comatose, tongues extended, stripped to shorts or undershirts. Panting. The drug salesman who was always drunk and chewing gum; the senior who never knew where her grandson was because the parents had divorced and no one told her anything any more. "Is Jimmy in this race?" she would bleat. "Is that Jimmy?" The parents of marginal kids who feigned lack of interest by hiding behind books.

One day I saw Ethna's sister Irene and her husband Roger in matching track suits. Roger's pockets were always filled with business cards, which he flicked at strangers as though he was dealing from a deck. *Roger O'Ball, licensed dentist. Wearing dentures is as natural as putting on socks in the morning and taking them off at night.* And then in emphatic font. **One in four Canadians can't be wrong.**

The O'Balls lived in a modern house with three floors and four baths. Positioned throughout the dwelling, like Fabergé eggs, were ashtrays made from dental impressions, all one-of-a-kind, according to Roger. Big mouths, crooked mouths, and one so small, it had to be a child's. Always deferential, Irene put Roger in charge of the decorating. "No one in our family had style," she sighed to Ethna, as though it was a chromosomal burden like diabetes or colour blindness.

As teams filed out, Roger sat in the front row, judicious, studying the T-shirts: optimistic ones that urged: *You Never Succeed Unless You Try*, or the combative: *You Suck, so Suck it Up*. Our shirts invariably played on our acronym: *We Get The MOST Out Of Swimming*

If you fill a lycra swim cap with water and hold it above someone's head, then let it drop, two out of three times, the hat will conform to the head. While everyone practiced starts, Austin Moskovich demonstrated

the hat trick. I saw Roger frown, then point at Austin, who was wearing a T-shirt over his racing suit and a pair of winter boots.



The province's coaches held a meeting and decided that what was missing was Fun. To rectify this, they resolved to use the word "fun" whenever possible: the Fun Relay, the Fun Eliminator. They gave meets fanciful names like The Iceberg Classic and The Spring Fever. "Studies show swimmers will not drop out," they announced with the forced grins of vacuum cleaner salesmen, "if they are having fun."

None of this mattered until they decided to introduce at The Fall Gobbler a fun event that became known among swimmers as The Houdini. Using duct tape, coaches taped three batches of seven-year-olds together and pitched them into the pool. What was supposed to happen, I wondered as Beluga nodded his approval. Were the kids supposed to swim together? Or free themselves, then sprint?

Whatever the intent, it was like throwing a cat off a bridge in a bag. Thrashing, scratching, silent underwater panic. As the swimmers surfaced briefly, faces contorted in fear, a murmur spread through the crowd louder and louder until a lifeguard jumped in and grabbed an hysterical girl. "Mommomm-eeeeeeeeee. Mommomm-eee," she choked.

Don't complain, I warned Ethna, don't complain, but someone did.

"If these parents have nothing better to do . . ." Pammy collapsed in a puddle of self-pity. Then, she miraculously arose, fighting through her tears with the same spunk that had characterized her swim career. Parents were both shamed and inspired. "Now Pammy, we *know* you are the expert!"



Pammy looked like a forty-year-old softball catcher, thick-waisted, with the unfortunate hairline of a werewolf. In snapshots she always had a can of Coca-Cola in one hand. Ethna said Pammy had married Rory, a bankrupt divorcee, because she had "missed her window of opportunity." Rory was a natural blond with the porous skin of a white sponge, skin that could without warning flush to a violent shade of pink. He had invisible lashes, pig eyes. He wore a leather jacket and threw out "hip" expressions like "straight up, buddy" and "right back at ya."

According to Ethna, every woman had a window and it was small. Some squandered it on a man who dumped them after years of dating, others played the field too long. By then the choices were meagre: misogynists, divorcees with kids, alcoholics. I thought about the crowd outside the detox centre where Austin had been mugged. One man had been watching a pack of YMCA joggers pass, shouting encouragement, "Good pace, lads, strong pace," and then, to an old man, who had fallen behind: "Pick it up, jackass!"

My window, I decided, would open after high school when I would join Weight Watchers and lose twenty-five pounds. Suddenly men, like panhandlers, would be everywhere: in classes, at the bookstore. On the university team, I would meet Jeremy, a 6-4 backstroker with bleached hair and a flawless nose. He would, not coincidentally, bear an eerie resemblance to Nathan, who, during the summer, had discovered he could do other sports, including rugby. "You traitor," we scolded. "You'll be back." When Nathan didn't come back, but did become a rugby star, we comforted ourselves with cheap insults. "Anyone can play rugby," we decided. "It's a goon sport."



When my Aunt Gail was fifty she took up running and won a lottery entry to the celebrated New York City Marathon. Gail was one of 60,000 participants, including Kenyans and Ethiopians with wings instead of feet.

"Well, I hope she wins," offered Aunt Irene.

"She won't win," said Ethna, adjusting expectations.

"You don't know that," huffed Irene. "She might."

When Gail finished in under five hours, everyone looked miffed, as though she had failed them.

Pammy said we could not get fast unless we went to big meets in Ontario or Quebec, something she had earlier dismissed as a waste of money. Everyone signed on, including Georgina, who lived on a farm outside town. Georgina's whole family was slow, people described in empty obituaries as "kind-hearted," and as a result she was two grades behind in school. Georgina's brother wore a snowmobile suit and a thick black headband underneath a trucker's cap that said *Damn I'm Good*. He watched the movie *The Matrix* and for six months was terrified, believing it was real. Georgina had a lascivious side which made me uncomfortable; she called everyone—boys our age, parents and teachers—"hotties." She often posed with her mouth half-open, tongue suggestively exposed like a porno actress.

At the massage tables Pammy pointed out a muscular man who had been on the cover of the swim magazine I received in the mail. The man's name was Yorgo and he had flowing black hair and a permanent tan, unlike most of the swimmers, who seemed pale and bleached from chlorine. Yorgo could have been an Argentinean polo player with a Rolex and a Porsche and a thin, obscenely wealthy heiress who supported him and his one hundred ponies until one day, in a jealous rage, she shot him dead. When Yorgo rolled over I saw a maple leaf tattoo on his chest.

I stopped at the T-shirt stand where a man with a press would personalize your meet shirt with: Freestyle, Butterfly, Backstroke, Breaststroke or IM.

I was still thinking about Yorgo, who had in my eyes the elegance and passion of the tango, a man at home in an opera house or a throng of colourful pressed-tin houses. Yorgo would be magnanimous, I decided, knowing that success was *naturally* his, and not something to be lorded over others. He would be gracious in victory, unlike the six-foot-tall girls, who talked in stage voices about how embarrassing it would be not to make finals.



At home meets Pammy wore a cowboy hat and ran down the side of the pool, screaming "go, go!" as though we were in a round-up. Sometimes I imagined her on a palomino. If one of us had a good finish Pammy would turn, find the parent in the stands and beam, sharing in the feat.

Years later I saw Pammy at a junior hockey game in a jester's hat, jumping up and down in the same state of manic enthusiasm. Why the histrionics, I wondered, until I saw the wide-screen TV and realized that Pammy—the embodiment of Fun—was hoping to be captured by the roving camera.

Here, in an unfamiliar pool that grew longer every day, a pool with stadium seats and an echo, Pammy sat immobile on the sidelines, Sphinx-like with a can of Coke.



When I was in Grade Ten we took metal shop in a drafty annex filled with squealing saws and power tools. "Now don't touch that drilled metal," warned our teacher, who, ominously, had one arm. "It's extremely hot. It will burn you!" Because Derald Murphy was an idiot and was sit-

ting directly behind me, I had no way of seeing him press the smouldering metal to my unprotected neck. As the teacher gasped and Derald tittered, I shivered in shock. Why, I wondered, as my head whirled with pain. Because I was fat?

When things go badly at a swim meet, you pay for every sin of your life. Your time is flashed on the scoreboard, then pasted on a wall. There is no way to make the mortifying walk from the edge of the pool, wet and half-naked, to the dressing room, without someone asking, disingenuously, "Oh, is she crying?" "Is she upset?" Through a gauntlet of Darwinian scorn, you dash, praying for your towel. Thighs rubbing. Stomach sucked in. Videotaped. Your only true allies, your parents, are, in a calculated act of cruelty, imprisoned in the stands where they cannot reach you; they cannot help.

"Why did you bother coming?" Pammy screeched at Georgina, who had her race numbers written down her arm in permanent marker. "Why?"

Gradually, on the pretext of seeking advice on scratches, Pammy abandoned us for the higher ground of Beluga and his star, a freestyler named Wren, whom Pammy had earlier described "as an anorexic mental case." When Wren won her heat I saw Pammy turn to the stands, find the parents and beam.

Still wearing my hat and goggles, I stumbled past bodies and bags to my locker. I didn't think about my stash of energy bars; I didn't see the girls sucking on puffers, eyes closed like junkies. Somehow I landed in the hallway, black and hollow as an elevator shaft, stripped of signs and inspirational posters, where I waited for my mind to stop racing like a rebooting disc. I tried not to think about finishing ninety-eighth in the 100 Breast, about Austin's four disqualifications, about Beluga poking me in the stomach and saying, in his counterfeit voice, the one that dripped with wisdom and care, "You know what you have to do ..." another poke, "to get faster." After an hour, maybe two, the team wandered out wearing T-shirts that improbably claimed: Otters Have the MOST Fun in the Pool.



Before we left for Ontario, Roger and Irene stopped to wish us luck.

"Now win some races for us," Irene grinned. I shrugged, armour in place, while Ethna, who dared to dream, twitched.

"It's a *very* big meet," Ethna started to explain.

"Oh you'll see," scoffed Irene, which was code for: "we'll be checking the results." And then before Ethna could protest further, Irene added, "Roger is hiring another assistant." I glanced at Roger, who had grown rich on the backs of toothless seniors and seasonal workers, mouths immortalized as ashtrays.

"Really?" Ethna asked.

Roger flashed his calling card: two rows of polymerized acrylic resin. When Roger smiled, he looked like someone caught rifling your medicine cabinet, a false, extravagant smile that suggested it was your fault, not his, that you'd caught him. "I need someone to handle the overflow," Roger announced. That smile, threatening and ugly as a stump fence.



Sounding high-minded for someone who'd spent the night at the motel ice machine, insensibly filling buckets, Austin said he had not bought a meet T-shirt because he was saving \$400 to get his cats' teeth cleaned. He had a picture of one of his cats in a hat made from an orange peel.

"Why?" asked Winston.

"Because no one else is going to do it," Austin answered. "Because I am not selfish."

Across the hall I saw Grant admiring his mullet in a window; I saw him stoically smile at Ethna who seemed in shock. At that moment I wanted to tell Ethna about Hubert MacLean, who might be moving to another town. Winston said he'd met Scampy and the dog did seem extraordinary. Leashless, he walked by Hubert's side and couldn't be distracted by squirrels or cats, or a low-flying eagle that swooped from the sky like a malicious gryphon with satanic powers. You could see, Winston argued, why Hubert would want to show him. Not for himself, but for the dog. And when that show woman lectured him on pedigrees and papers, she proved how little she knew about life and love, how little she knew about dogs, who don't need a war to save someone. Hubert, I decided, when I was wiser, should have kept Scampy under the pillow of his heart, with all the things that gave him joy.

And then, before I could speak, I noticed a policeman interviewing the president of the host club, a haughty woman from South Africa. Austin raised an arm and pointed. There was no way of getting around it, he declared, louder than necessary, someone *had* to be in trouble, and it was probably *her*.

How could a fraud, an impostor with absolutely no training, walk in off the street and massage swimmers for three whole days? he demanded, as though he deserved an answer. Why didn't she ask him for ID? What if he was a pedophile?

Maybe, Winston suggested, the story would make the newspaper. Or the TV news. I was upset, I said, because the charlatan had worked on Yorgo, who'd had a fabulous meet and didn't deserve to be associated with something so sordid. Yorgo, Georgina snorted, was "a hottie."

After four endless days we felt a tenebrous relief, as though something *truly* awful had happened, something that could have—*should* have—been prevented. Something as witless as The Houdini. It wasn't just relief, I admitted, as the woman threw up her hands. It was the same *schadenfreude* we had felt when Drew dived at a meet and his suit fell down. The same joy I had seen on Irene's face when she realized, long before Ethna, that I was hopeless, an emotion so potent and primal that it must, some clerics preached, be the devil's work. And it was all around us, as eerie as sunflowers in the South of France.