

CLIFF BURNS

Harold Stensrud Watches the Olympics

HAROLD WONDERS what *repechage* means. At first he thinks they're saying *reportage* but that doesn't make any sense either. It must have something to do with all this rowing stuff but other than that he hasn't the foggiest idea.

He watches with moderate interest as the long, needle-thin, state-of-the-art sculls are propelled through the water at incredible speeds by well-synchronized rowers, four in each craft. Judging by the way the shoreline is flashing past in the long shots the buggers have to be going at least thirty miles an hour. Or because it was water did they measure it in knots? Knots and leagues and fathoms—nautical enigmas to a confirmed landlubber like Harold.

Canada is doing quite well in the race and will likely finish in the top three. Which means, apparently, that they will advance into the next round. Make that *beat*. The next heat. When they actually get to go for the gold isn't clear.

Vera has fallen asleep in the recliner, her head canted to one side, a bowl of pretzels threatening to spill out of her lap onto the rug. He thinks about it but decides not to disturb her. She is taking deep, regular breaths that he can hear even way over here on the sofa. Her nostrils are wind-filled caverns. He has always been partial to big-nosed women.

Like that Silken Laumann. Now that girl had a truly impressive proboscis. He has been secretly hoping that since they're showing rowing there might be some commentary from the lovely Miss Laumann. So far he has been disappointed.

There was a gal with true grit. Getting her leg all mangled up like that and then going through rehab, busting her butt to get back into shape and somehow, through sheer courage and determination, snagging a bronze medal. On one leg, basically, a big bandage wrapped around the other one.

They should have given her a special medal for that, for going above and beyond the call of duty and so forth. Shoot, if she'd been in the army they'd have given her a DSM at the very least. Maybe even the Victoria Cross.

Nope, no Silken. Now they had switched back to the main control centre and Brian Williams is yapping away about something or other. Drugs again, by the sound of it. Harold takes the opportunity to go off for a leak, picking up another beer on the way back.

Yup, another doping scandal. Cocaine this time. Did they count that as a performance enhancing drug? Harold wonders what gets into people to make them go and do something like that. To themselves, to their country.

Then again, it seems to him that too much of the coverage is fixated on who is taking what. And that led to all this yackety-yak instead of concentrating on the sports. And then when they finally got around to showing stuff, nine times out of ten it was junk like water polo or field hockey or crap like that.

Who wants to spend all day watching people half drown each other trying to get a stupid ball in a net? Not Harold.

He has to admit he likes some of the swimming though. Not the men, the women. Some of the thighs and bums on those girls are something to behold. Not much in the chest department—he supposes that gets in the way of the aerodynamics. Still.

Vera has hardly moved. Nothing less than a blast of an air horn is likely to stir her. Lucky woman. And she's always been like that, for as long as he's known her. Could fall asleep on a bed of nails while Harold flops around, trying to get his mind to shut down. The beer helped some but he has to be careful Vera never catches on to how much he's been drinking lately to bring himself to the point that he can close his eyes at night. He buys a couple of twelve-packs at a time, hides one in the basement or out in the garage, periodically topping up the box he keeps in plain view beside the fridge. Only two beer a night, that's my limit, yessirree.

Yeah, *right*.

And she'd out and out *kill* him if she caught him smoking again. So he has to watch it, do it outside or keep the doors and windows open so the smoke has time to dissipate by the time she comes home. One of these days she's bound to catch him though. Then what would he say?

Well, what does she expect? She still has her job and her circle of friends to keep herself occupied. Meanwhile, he's left here at home, bored out of his mind. Fifty-eight years old, retired, worn out and broken down, left to putter about looking for something to do to pass the time. During the day when he isn't watching the Olympics it's the bloody soaps. Meanwhile telling her that he'd gone out for a walk or changed the oil in the car or sharpened the lawnmower blade. Getting ready to paint the storm windows because it was just about time to replace the screens, fall already here, feeling it in his bones at night, two extra-strength Entrophen to dull the ache.

But it's all bullshit, he's dogging it and she likely knows it, no matter how much he lets on or tries to cover his tracks. But she has no idea how pitiful his life really is. That would really come as a shock to her. Prick her illusions completely.

He is about to switch to another channel when Williams finally shuts up and announces that now they'll be going down to the beach so they can show—

Well, *goddamn*. Beach volleyball. More to the point, *women's* beach volleyball. Now this is more like it.

He has no idea what countries are competing. Nor does he particularly care. Matter of fact, he turns down the sound so that no sudden outburst of crowd noise will disturb Vera. Not that he has much to worry about on that count. Still.

One of the teams has a decidedly Scandinavian look to them; tall, blond and, my God, look at the nose on that one. Like a faucet. Harold shifts on the sofa to get more comfortable, peeking over at Vera again but she's still out cold.

Whoever thought of adding beach volleyball to the Olympic Games was some kind of genius. It's fast, it's exciting ... not to mention the fact that the players wear the skimpiest outfits imaginable. Every time there is a stoppage in a game, they have to keep reaching behind them to tug at their bikini bottoms. Or brush talc-like sand off their tight, flat tummies.

It's even better than watching the Playboy channel.

It's a close game, thirteen to twelve for one side, which one he isn't sure. He can't figure out what the initials stand for, who represents what country. Doesn't matter. The slow motion replays make up for all that. He isn't too sure of the exact rules of the game either. It's like tennis, he deduces, you can't get a point unless it's your serve. Is that right?

The scoring is weird. The duo on the right ends up winning the match 17-15 but whoever heard of a game that ends at 17?

Afterwards they interview the victorious team but Harold doesn't have much interest in what's being said. He barely listens, staring raptly at the big-nosed blonde, the health and vitality radiating off her and her young partner. They look enough alike to be sisters. Perhaps they are.

But then it's back to Brian Williams and that's that. Besides, it's nearly time for the latenight news and after that bed. At least an hour of futile tossing and turning with Vera snoring away like a trooper beside him.

A few minutes into the news he has finished the beer and is pondering another. One last one for the road. His limbs feel heavy, ungainly, his thoughts definitely slowing. But is it enough?

The awful thing is that Harold remembers full well what it was like to be young and healthy. That's the worst part of all of this. Most of his day is spent dredging up the past, times when he could work hard and lug and lift anything that was put in front of him. He was like an ox that way.

But not any more. Now he's on muscle relaxants and these little green pills that, they tell him, will help with the dizzy spells. The blood not going where it's supposed to, his skin icy, Vera shying away from his chill touch.

There is nothing dignified about growing old, he has decided. There may be some cultures that treat their elders with respect, in recognition of their hard work and accumulated knowledge and wisdom but he doesn't belong to one of them. He's just a dumpy, ugly old fart whose best days are behind him, gone but not forgotten. Only he can't draw any comfort from his memories, only regret and pain.

Once upon a time, when he was a young, strapping stud he had turned more than a few heads and planted his fair share of wild oats. He was an impressive figure of a man, tall and lean, his shoulders broad, back straight. At the fall suppers and dances the girls used to fight to get next to him, and that is no exaggeration.

Another damn commercial. He thinks about going over and waking Vera but instead he gets himself that beer. *Last one*. Because he senses that tonight is going to be another bad one.

He reminds himself to switch a couple of full bottles from the box downstairs. That way Vera won't catch wise. He's sure she checks sometimes. She's no dummy, that woman, and that worries him. It's important to keep up appearances and not only for her sake.

Harold parks himself on the couch again, trying to nurse his beer along as he watches the rest of the news. People are dying like flies all over the place, starving or killing each other, the weather doing strange things ... and meantime the high tech stocks are soaring and those damn yuppies getting richer and richer

Before he knows it the beer is gone and so are the last vestiges of sobriety, a pleasant lassitude wrapping itself around him like a warm, fuzzy blanket. He fumbles with the remote, turns off the TV and in the quietness listens to Vera breathing. He lays his head on the back of the couch, closing his eyes, just intending to rest a bit before nudging her and going up to bed.

"Enjoying yourself?" Vera asks, and he might be imagining it but from the way she says it he gets the feeling that she has been wide awake over there for a good long time.

Harold sighs, knowing that for the sake of sustaining those necessary illusions, it is the only possible reply that he can make.