for the girls of the track shack, original and honourary

chronic

by

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abstract

Framed by the physical language of elite athletics, *Chronic* depicts the experiences of a young collegiate woman as she navigates a chronic pain condition known as vulvodynia. Despite the literary tradition of women in pain, women suffering, and women with illness, this particular condition lacks much in the way of a literary cannon. Set on the grey shores of BC's west coast, the narrative follows Kit and her fellow athletes over the course of a competitive year, their inter-twined exchanges forming a narrative that muddles and globalizes the concept of pain. Through its depiction of sexual relationships and athletic endeavours, the novel strives to challenge traditional models of physicality, identity, mental health, and female sexuality. By couching a story of vulvodynia in the physical language of an athlete, *Chronic* conveys that one of the primary struggles of chronic pain is the perception of, and the relationship with, one's body

acknowledgments

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introduction

In the field of medicine and psychology, the study and the understanding of vulvar pain is in its relative infancy. And, despite the robust literary tradition of women in pain, women suffering, and women with illness (Jameison), the condition known as vulvodynia lacks much in the way of a literary canon. The dearth of cultural and social understanding initially drew me to create on thesis on this subject; in terms of a narrative, however, such a topic presented a peculiar challenge. The inciting incident is the uncovering of a condition with no cure, and by extension, the primary obstacle and central conflict must therefore remain unresolved. This thesis , *Chronic*, represents the experiences of its

protagonist, Kit, as she struggles with vulvodynia, but ultimately becomes a more globalized story of bodies and pain.

According to a 2010 paper published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine,* vulvodynia is a "highly prevalent vulvovaginal pain condition that results in significant sexual dysfunction, psychological distress, and reduced quality of life."(Rosen, "Woman'). Despite its significance and prevalence—an estimated sixteen percent of women experience vulvodynia-like symptoms—there exists very little in the way of literary representation or discussion. Given the obscurity of the topic, writing a vulvodynia narrative meant there would be a great responsibility to accurately depict the physical sensation and the inter-personal conflicts often associated with the condition. As such, a significant amount of research was paramount to creating this work.

One of the key resources for writing a general, contemporary depiction of vulvodynia includes the research of psychologist Dr. Natalie O. Rosen. From her forty-plus publications, which focus on relationships and perceptions of vulvodynia-related issues, it is possible to pull a comprehensive picture of the typical life of a woman with vulvodynia. According to the 2010 paper "Provoked Vestibulodynia (PVD)," the most common subtype of vulvodynia can be characterized in the following way:

> It is characterized by discomfort or a burning pain that is specific to the vestibule, and for which there are no relevant visible findings or clinically identifiable neurologic disorder. PVD is a chronic, recurrent, vulvovaginal pain problem that is triggered mainly through sexual contact but also by other activities involving pressure to the vulvar vestibule, such as tampon insertion and gynecological examination. Women with PVD

> experience negative sexual and psychological repercussions. Specifically, they demonstrate impaired sexual functioning, including self- reported lower levels of sexual desire, arousal, sexual satisfaction, orgasmic capacity, and frequency of intercourse, compared to control women. Researchers have shown that women with PVD also suffer from heightened anxiety, depression, fear of pain, cognitive salience of pain, hypervigilance, and catastrophizing com- pared to women without PVD. (Rosen, "Provoked")

Rosen's more recent publications also inform the relational challenges faced by women with vulvodynia. The results discussed in Rosen's paper "Understanding the Sexual Satisfaction of Women with Provoked Vestibulodynia and their Partners: Comparison with Matched Controls" explore an interpersonal aspect of heterosexual couples where the woman experiences vulvar pain. The article states:

> Both members of couples affected by PVD reported lower sexual satisfaction, lower relative sexual rewards, lower relative sexual costs, and a less favorable balance of relative sexual rewards to costs than did the control couples, although the differences were larger for women . . . However, male partners of women with PVD did not report experiencing fewer sexual rewards or more sexual costs than did the men in the control group, suggesting that the actual experience of the male partner in the PVD couple during sexual activity was not negatively affected. (Rosen, "Understanding")

Findings such as this one help inform the relationships with the protagonist's sexual partners, such as her primary sexual relationship with Callum. One study

in particular, "Relationship Variables, Pain, and Psychosexual Functioning in Women with Provoked Vestibulodynia (PVD) and their Partners," also directly presents a way of framing the novel. The study looks at "how [sexual partners] respond to the woman's pain during or after intercourse," recognizing that "women with PVD may communicate their pain to a significant other who may unknowingly respond in a way that can negatively or positively impact her pain and the coping and sexuality of both members of the couple" (Rosen, "Relationships"). The study identifies three categories of reactions: solicitous (expressions of sympathy, attention and support), negative (expressions of hostility and frustration), and facilitative (encouraging of woman's efforts at coping with pain*).* Rosen outlines the study's results:

> Solicitous and negative partner responses may be detrimental to, whereas facilitative may improve women's pain and the psychological and sexual well-being of couples. When attention is directed toward the pain (i.e., solicitous & negative partner responding), a woman and her partner are less able to focus on the pleasurable rewards of the sexual activity, thus interfering with any existing sexual desire and arousal, and leading to greater pain for women and poorer sexual well-being for both. Solicitous and negative responses also encourage greater avoidance and enhance negative thoughts related to the pain, both of which are factors known to increase pain and decrease sexual satisfaction in PVD. Furthermore, negative partner responses convey to women a lack of empathy for their pain, leading to greater depression. In contrast, facilitative partner responding directs attention toward the pleasurable aspects of the sexual interaction, creating a more positive context for the

> sexual experience, and also encourage more adaptive approach-oriented coping, leading to less pain and more satisfaction. (Rosen, "Relationships")

In light of this study, I determined that the novel must depict three sexual relationships involving a woman with vulvodynia, to contrast the healthy from the unhealthy ways in which the situations can be handled. Kit and Callum's relationship begins as tentatively facilitative, but ultimately spirals into the negative. The study helped complicate the events between Kit and Stephen, for his solicitous response appears considerate but is ultimately frustrating for Kit. Finally, the interaction between Peony and Mona displays uninhibited facilitative qualities, and as a result, is a positive sexual experience in the novel.

Despite my desire to focus on vulvodynia as the novel's central subject, *Chronic* is far from a simple medical novel. It refrains from overusing jargon or heavily representing the therapeutic. For instance, it does not define dyspareunia, which is the occurrence of pain during vaginal intercourse, and it does not articulate that lidocaine, a medication the protagonist finds ineffective, is usually prescribed to patients but has been proven to often worsen symptoms. By keeping away from theses aspects and focusing on the characters, I strove to write more about human experience than to create an informative treatise.

To date, the sole book-length depiction of vulvodynia leaves much to be desired. Susanna Kaysen's memoir, *The Camera My Mother Gave Me,* grapples with an inexplicable surge of chronic vulvar pain, tiptoeing around the obstacle's taboo nature. Frustrating at best, and heartbreaking at worst, the simplistic narrative focuses on the doctors' lack of answers, as well as the middle-aged

narrator's self-pity and refusal to cope with change. The narrator represents her vulvar pain with a whiney, almost-manic fixation, and, in the process, fails to develop a rounded protagonist or a narrative arc. Rather, the book remains a poorly-crafted rant on what it feels like to have pain between one's legs. Given that Kaysen published her memoir in 2001, the book's depiction of a medical experience is dated, which drains the book of credibility and up-to-date knowledge.

Along with the overwhelming structural and educational flaws, the work's most problematic element is the fact that the protagonist does not exist beyond the limits of her condition. She does not appear as a woman who manages pain; rather, she is simply a vulva, bared and raw. This memoir's reductionist and disease-oriented approach to storytelling does bring vulvodynia to the reader's attention, but it also conforms to a historically-destructive point of view, one that defines women by their sexual organs and sexual organs alone. For instance, the protagonist's obstacle and primary threats stem from her difficulty pleasing her male partners with penetrative sex. Further, the memoir does not address any other critical issues surrounding the condition. The work does not depict challenges in identity, perceptions of the body, effects on mental health, or really even *female* sexuality, when all of these factors become key issues for a woman who experiences chronic vulvar pain. *The Camera My Mother Gave Me* takes an opportunity to represent a complicated women's issue and, instead, consigns it to the patriarchal tradition. If this book is the sole prose representation of vulvodynia, then there is a gaping hole in the world of fiction and nonfiction.

Around the time that Kaysen's memoir was published, popular culture and accessible media diminished or misrepresented vulvodynia. An episode of *Sex and the City* features Charlotte with a so-called "depressed vagina," depicting a factually-skewed and oversimplified version of vulvar pain. Characters in *SATC*-writer Candace Bushnell's novels reference discomfort upon intercourse, but the depictions of their experiences almost always coincide with a lack of sexual desire, and with a hysterical or bitter disposition. In 2013, the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* featured an article titled "I Botoxed my Vagina," which sensationalizes vulvodynia, and Buzzfeed published "Learning to Love Life Without Sex," which perhaps unintentionally contributes to the perception that those who manage vulvodynia are relegated to a sexless and lonely life.

With this thesis, I set out to write the book that these misrepresentations made me want to read. I sought to write a story with a young narrator whose developing life and identity require a sudden, dramatic shift in perspective. I wanted a tough character, a character who was not de-sexed or reduced by her condition. I wanted a woman who existed beyond the pain between her legs. As it stands, the creative works that most influenced my thesis's progress were not illness-related, but works that skilfully represent sexuality, physical choices, and emotional honesty.

When looking to accurately represent female sexuality, both novels and nonfiction served as resources. The prose of Jeanette Winterson and the graphic novels of Alison Bechdel depict pragmatic and non-romanticized sexual relationships, the kind of perspective essential to creating an in-depth representation of a complicated and unconventional dynamic. The first parts of Winterson's *Written on the Body* capture the emotional pain of loving another

human, and the final section is a love letter to an ailing lover's body. Through Winterson's exploration of sexuality and medicine, the book wields physicality to illustrate the internal and emotional world of the woman it describes. In *Chronic*, I chose to represent Kit's physical and emotional states through her movements and sensory perceptions.

The images in Alison Bechdel's graphic novel, *Fun Home,* unabashedly display an emerging sexuality. The novel is full of drawings of nudity and bodily functions, and they're represented in a straightforward manner. Bechdel draws scenes of herself masturbating while reading, and of a mortician working over a completely nude corpse. The images are not quite brash, but definitely far from apologetic, and none of these representations feel out place, or employed simply to shock the reader. Rather, they thematically contribute to the grander narrative of processing and grieving Bechdel's father's death.

From the earliest days of drafting until the final edits, the abrasive honesty and hard images that pour from Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water* remained a source of inspiration and courage. Through a voice that screams off the page, the memoir depicts a sexually- and emotionally-turbulent woman, revealing scenes of physical and sexual abuse, sex, and childbirth in a manner that grabs hold of the trauma and lays bare the complexities. In addition, it utilizes elite swim training, and a resounding relationship with water, to convey the complex fluctuations between grief and solace, frenzy and peace. The explosive rage in this book demands attention, and from that came a source of kinship when writing *Chronic.*

For the athletic elements of *Chronic*, I was guided by John L. Parker's novel *Once A Runner* and Dan Millman's fictionalized memoir *Way of the Peaceful*

Warrior, both of which manage to universalize the toil and grace of something as finite as individual competition. Widely considered the definitive novel on middle-distance running, *Once A Runner* broke ground in the athletic genre, successfully rendering the heart-plundering yet edifying loneliness in the physical pursuit of training and racing. Set in the Vietnam War era, it captures the hermetic lifestyle of the track runner, and articulates how such a pursuit cultivates a deep connection to the physical body and to the natural world. Parker crafted the novel after realizing the story he wanted to read had yet to be written, and despite having to self-publish, his novel became the most sought after out-of-print book for over thirty years. Much of the same motivation has gone into the writing of *Chronic.*

Five years ago, popular culture and general media representations of vulvodynia either represented the condition as a miserable mystery or as a trivial women's problem. However, in an echo of recent medical advances, society has begun to consider pelvic floor disorders worthy of proper exploration. 2015 saw the publication of "Consensus Terminology and Classification of Persistent Vulvar Pain and Vulvodynia" (Bornstein), which finally categorized and defined the locations of pain, and further separated unexplained pains from those with known causes. That same year, *The Stockholm Review* published the brilliant essay "Pink is the Colour of Pain" (Capel), which successfully represents the confusion and frustration of the condition while maintaining a sense of women's sexuality. In 2016, Buzzfeed released a series of videos depicting personal accounts of vulvar pain; they feature women who bravely and graphically bare their challenges (Buzzfeed, "I Have A Condition"). Between 2014 and 2017, the Couples and Sexual Health

Research Laboratory published over thirty peer-reviewed studies (Rosen, "Publications"). And, in that period, the Canadian Foundation for Women's Health aired a commercial for the Vulvodynia Public Awareness Campaign (CFWH). In conjunction with the medical progress, the dissemination of representations of vulvodynia reflects its growing prevalence, but there is still a dearth of literary works that treat the condition in an empathetic and rigorous manner.

The story that came out in this thesis is markedly different from the one I had intended to write, but I hope it conveys something of the mindset fostered by the condition it features. While it maintains a third-person omniscient point of view, largely focalized through Kit, *Chronic* also dips into the perspectives of five other characters whose cumulative weight balances out the vulvar struggles of the protagonist. As well as furthering the plot and developing characters, the inter-twined exchanges create a grander narrative that muddles and globalizes the concept of pain. By couching a story of vulvodynia in the physical language of an athlete, *Chronic* conveys that one of the primary struggles of chronic pain is the perception of, and the relationship with, one's body. As a result, I hope that these creative choices will contribute to the normalization of vulvodynia.

Despite the plot of my thesis, I did not intend to write a novel about sports. And, if I were to write about what it is to be an elite athlete, this is not the story I would tell. Rather, this novel utilizes athletics as a both a symbol and a language for communicating physiology. Elite athletes have a working relationship with their body, and they are constantly aware of its state. They care for their bodies like a job, and they learn to respect them as entities almost

separate from themselves. It seemed only too fitting that a protagonist with vulvodynia should to be in the process of reaching that athletic stage.

The story begins with an omniscient introduction to the world of varsity women's athletics. Especially through the unnamed daughter of the immigrant Polish couple, the story establishes that suffering and pain is to be expected in such a pursuit. When this girl races, "pain [creases] on her face" (11), and she runs with a "weighted dejection"(11), eventually becoming "this skinny, tired, and sallow bundle of limbs"(11). In the novel's opening pages, her figure entwines ideas of physical and emotional decay. The images presented in the introductory chapter serve to form a narrative perspective that acts as a motif for the rest of the novel.

The fact that Katherine Andrews, the protagonist, is an aspiring elite athlete establishes her willingness to push her body to its limits and withstand any amount of physical trial. First and foremost, this gives her pain tolerance credibility, so when she is diagnosed with a chronic pain condition, the legitimacy of the pain she experiences remains undisputed. Since women are still perceived to have a lower pain tolerance than men (Hoffman), it was important to cast Kit as a reliably tough character and to immediately eliminate any possibility of representing her as the traditionally frail female. Further, the paradox of chronic pain in a robust athlete indicates the depth of the condition's complexities. When vulvodynia manifests in a normal girl with full health and excellent fitness, who also has no history of sexual trauma, it highlights the condition's mysterious lack of explanation.

Further, giving a chronic pain condition to a character who already seeks to master her body provides a delicious opportunity for internal conflict. In the

beginning of the novel, Kit possesses a simplistic and ultimately distorted perception of control over her body. She believes that as long as she can withstand suffering—a feat she takes pride in—she will accomplish anything.

> She ran six days a week, sometimes twice a day. She lifted weights and she ate healthy food. She had circled tracks at a pace that pedestrians deemed unsustainable, gutted through workouts to the point of seeing double. She had lain on massage tables and exhaled slowly, slowly, as therapists dug their hands into her abdomen, trigger pointing the screaming muscles until she felt like fainting. She never once told them to stop. She travelled to races up and down North America, and no she was not the best but one day she would be.
>
> She felt she earned the right to be proud; there couldn't be ego in something if she had suffered for it. She had pushed through the pain of competitive running to get to this long, strong state, one where she knew she could handle any physical duress asked of her. That was the secret ability of the endurance athlete; to keep going, no matter the protesting tissue. It didn't matter if she was pretty, or if she was smart. Her body was her own and she would make it great. (10)

From her introduction, Kit identifies as a master of pain, but this ideology is challenged and ultimately dismantled by vulvodynia. Though she fights it at first—with her medical doctor and physiotherapist, with her routine of manual therapy, and with her quest for a solution—she ultimately gives in to the hopelessness of her situation. "'It's defined as having no known cause or

cure'"(122) , she says to her boyfriend, Callum, indicating her own sense of defeat. Where she once felt strong, vulvodynia creates in her a sense of weakness. She throws one race, walks off the start-line at a championship, and later quits her sport. Further, she stays silent in the face of her boyfriend's bullying tendencies, displaying traits of increasingly low self-worth. Throughout this process, she delves into punishing behaviours; she overruns workouts, displays negative self-talk, and commits various forms of self-harm that culminate in blurring the lines of sexual consent.

However, the protagonist's problematic perception of pain is not resolved by developing an unwillingness to suffer. Rather, she learns to find true strength in the healing process. At the low point of Kit's emotional arc, her best friend, Liv, confronts her about her sliding mental health, putting it in an athlete's terms:

> Liv said, "In a race, there comes a point where you make a decision. You know this."
>
> Kit nodded.
>
> "It's usually at the middle. In the long dark part, before the final lap."
>
> Kit knew exactly what she meant. The place where the fatigue and pain begins to set in, when the racer realizes they have a lonely long way to go. Liv said, "You decide, right then and there, that you're in. You're in or you drop out. That you're going to pick up your knees and see this through, now matter how hard it seems. And Kit, I've seen you make that choice a hundred times before."

> Kit whispered, "And I'm trying. But vulvodynia– "
>
> "—I'm not talking about vulvodynia." Her voice was hard.
>
> "I'm talking about your life." (251)

Thus, the novel manipulates an athlete's language to convey the larger challenge and choice that the protagonist faces. There is pain, and there will always be pain; the point is to recognize it, respect it, and still continue on.

The novel uses other characters to flesh out perceptions of the body. The primary example of this is the character of Greta. Several chapters unfurl from her perspective, and other characters reference her or repeat her words throughout the novel, continually involving her holistic perspective in the plot and subplot:

> Not many therapists subscribed to the belief, deeming it folly and impossible to prove, but she saw in these athletes the inseparability of mind and body. The stress of an external situation made their bodies react far more severely to what could have been a minor aggravation. Stress lived in the muscles, circulated through the connective tissue, and suctioned the body tight. The body never forgot a thing, not until the tension was stretched and rubbed and gone away. She didn't bother asking Mona; if they were capable of sharing, they always ended up telling her. Truths came out while she dug her hands into their muscles for an hour and their minds had nothing to contemplate but the pain they carried. (156)

The rest of the athletes further develop this complicated dichotomy. Callum, a triathlete, struggles with body dysmorphia and disordered eating, and Mona,

another runner, goes through injury rehabilitation only to suffer yet another injury, this time career-ending. At the plot points, when Kit's emotional and physical climates escalate or change, the narrative often flips from her perspective into that of another character. At the end of the first chapter, the image of Mona's surgical scar comes after a passage featuring Kit's idealization of Mona as an indestructible warrior, indicating that all may not be as she believes. As Kit sinks into a depression, Mona's Achilles tendon tears for the second time, while Liv takes dangerous measures to reduce her body weight and perform on the track. Kit internalizes the decay that surrounds her, weaving together their stories:

> [Kit's] hips felt stiff, and her knees wouldn't lift high enough, and the winding stride that was once a glide was now a shuffle on cinder chips. Mona was broken. Jenny was broken. She was broken. Liv was breaking and would be broken soon. Not one of them, ever, would be strong enough, good enough, to get to the shining mirage of their dreams. Their bodies would ultimately fail, would become a prison of confinement, and, inside her cage, Kit lost the pursuit that had made her most free.
>
> She stopped on the trail, waded out into the thicket of ferns and jurassic undergrowth. Rubbing her face, she felt her pulse beating in her neck, her blood coursing into her hands. Her vulva felt stuck, chafing against the lining of her tights. (234)

Athlete characters as minor as Jenny and Chris indicate further mind-body problems—Jenny with her mental health issues and cutting, and Chris with his controlling fixation with leanness. Even Peony, a non-athlete and supporting

character, exhibits a hyperawareness of her body and how she presents herself. Thus, each character reflects aspects of Kit's body conflict and applies it to a host of subtly similar situations.

Further, *Chronic* is specific to the time period in which it was written, and as a result, setting plays a fundamental role. The introductory chapter serves to establish not just a progressive city and cultural climate, but to root the story firmly in the 2010s. Time has to be relatively specific, given that the novel references contemporary awareness of women's sexual health, as well as partially unravelled gender roles, trends in sport, theories of physical therapy, and the holistic recognition of the mind-body connection. Perhaps, with the advancement of societal awareness and medical understanding, one day this work will be considered a period piece.

Despite the bleak life often associated with vulvodynia, the novel's general form is derived from Joseph Campbell's concept of "The Hero's Journey," which emphasizes a confrontation with either literal or symbolic death, and ends with a return to life. Together, Kit's character arc and the scenes from supporting characters form a narrative that maps onto the archetypical character circle. "The Hero's Journey" became a useful structure because vulvodynia symptoms tend to stall, stagnate, or interfere with the natural path towards self-perception; thus, the resolution and denouement often feature a circling back into a state similar to before the condition presented itself. The novel doesn't chronicle a journey from "illness to cure," but instead it depicts an exit from an "ordinary world" to enter the "special world" filled with challenges that ultimately lead to self-acceptance, embodiment, and peace. Ending the narrative in a place of positive enlightenment, as suggested by the Hero's Journey, as opposed to the

illusion of a hopeful cure, emphasizes the fact that, for women with vulvodynia, the real battle is overcoming personal or cultural misconceptions and interpersonal struggles.

chronic

The house squatted on the edges of campus, just a half mile from the start of the trail. A detached stucco side-split with a blue roof and wide, high-set windows, it blended nicely into the folds of suburbia, obscuring, at least for now, its truth as a student dwelling.

It had once belonged to an alumnus of the university men's track team, who ran when the organization began, as just a club of ragtag athletes and a silver stopwatch-clicking coach. The owner purchased it newly box-built after his graduation in the late sixties, in the era of Trudeau Mania and budding nationalism. Victoria was expanding, the

university was cultivating, and developers built the new subdivision directly on top of the remains of the city's first eight-lane track. Relishing in the romance and nostalgia, the new owner asked the landscapers to leave behind the strips of tartan turf, stacked neat against the house like cords of firewood. On a sweltering August afternoon, stripped to the waist and dripping, he heaved the strips of red rubber against his stomach, staggered, and plopped them between the driveway and the back door. He quickly tired, and the white numbers and lines formed a delightfully incongruous puzzle.

The city continued to expand, but urban planners failed to account for a student ghetto, and so the starving undergraduates spilled out into the basements and homes of the station wagon drivers and barbeque scrapers. In the eighties, the original owner sold the house to a young couple emigrating from Poland. That period coincided with the university program's real running success; a long-legged girl became a three-time national cross-country champion. The former owner and his wife moved to a quiet community further up island.

The star cross-country runner quit after her third year, after a concerned member of the staff reported her romantic relationship with the head coach. The coach was sanctimoniously relieved of his position, and the runner fled to a ranch in Alberta and was rumoured to have cut off her hair and changed her name. Decades later, the varsity trackies whispered about whether or not she had been assaulted, but no one dared

to validate the claim. This was, after all, most likely simple lore, a grain of truth treated with the particular alchemy of Sunday morning runs at a tempo a touch too brisk. Plus, their current coach had slipped into the head position as a result, and to question the story seemed to question his validity as an authority figure. Nonetheless, alongside the change of ownership in the house, the university track team's calibre descended to a slump. Gone were the Olympic hopefuls, the national medalist, the big-dream chasers, the gritty gangs who wordlessly endured their interval workouts with the temperance of monks. For the young head coach, the nineties proved a decade of bitch drama, of scheduling workouts around feuds, and of hiding his bafflement at trackside meltdowns.

While gradually renovating the house to suit the popcorn-and-brass, pink-and-valance fashion of the eighties, the Polish couple produced two children, a girl and a boy. On their first birthdays, respectively, the proud parents planted a quince bush and a cherry tree on opposite ends of the front yard. Sitting in their living room at nine-thirty in the morning, the wife would occasionally glance up from her newspaper to see fleet-footed lads and lasses floating across the pavement, always in the direction of the track. Around that time, the city zoned an elementary school and soccer field in behind their house, and during the excavator phase, the Polish couple planted the shoots of what would become a twelve-foot hedge.

Much to their fascination, when their daughter reached high

school, they discovered she possessed a keen interest in running in circles. She won the island championship in grade eleven, beating out a ferocious pack of grade twelves. At the island cross-country championships in the fall of her grade twelve year, she gapped the field by two minutes and drifted across the finish line with little strain, a wide grin on her face. The university's varsity coach, out for a jog around the golf course—Victoria had hosted the championship—had watched a pair of gazelle legs churning into the homestretch and felt his stomach flip.

She had sparked something in him. He wanted that easy stride, that wide chipmunk smile. If an athlete could be a steak then he was a salivating dog—she was raw, uncooked talent. He sent a recruiting letter to her house, invited her to practice with varsity girls. She came out for a few runs, and he offered her as much as the budget would allow, but all those visits revealed was her enthusiasm for other schools. He phoned her coach, the high school gym teacher, who told him that the decision had been reached.

She turned down her hometown university and signed with a school south of the border. He knew why she did it; in those days, the talented Canadians always chased the glamour and the money and the glimmering image of the NCAA.

For the next four years he tracked her results. He brought his own team to meets in Seattle, and when there, he'd watch her gut through 3ks and 1500s. The first year she seemed bright enough, and she ran with that

un-tempered and rickety eagerness of any rookie. But as the years passed, he watched her slump; her legs lifted with the weighted dejection that comes from overtraining. She stalked about with that mix of hope and frustration, the kind that comes when a coach demands too much painful intensity too soon in an athlete's career.

In her fourth year he found himself talking to her parents. They stood to the side of the track, just watching, saying nothing. From the brief exchange, he knew that they no longer recognized this skinny, tired, and sallow bundle of limbs. Her times never improved beyond that first year, but she continued to race. Pain would crease on her face earlier and earlier in the races, and he knew what went on behind the scenes. Her struggle left the physical, passed through the mental, and entered into the emotional. No athlete should go through that.

She was not his athlete, but his heart was breaking. He said nothing, but needed to do something. Instead, he concentrated his efforts on growing his own program, on never letting his girls push their bodies in that harmful way.

She quit running after her final year, and went on to some post-graduate diploma and got a job in Vancouver. Her brother graduated from UVic, his own athletic career culminating in two intramural dodgeball titles. When he finally moved out, the Polish couple boxed or sold or gave away three decades of their lives. They relocated to a two-bedroom condo beside the ocean, and sometimes their daughter visited. She was okay, she

said. Sometimes she jogged along the hard sand beach, her stride clipped and restrained from the hips.

When the Polish couple moved out, they registered the house as a rental property. The absent student ghetto now posed a significant urban issue, and the added income would pad their retirement savings.

The house had seen two kinds of runners. One left the sport and bought the house, choosing to move along in life, despite feeling that he'd never reached his potential. The other came home to float through rooms like a ghost.

When they received a reply to their online ad, the Polish couple bent over the desktop monitor and squinted at the text. The reply was bubbly—friendly enough. But the words *varsity runner* caught their attention.

It seemed only fitting that the next group to inhabit the house's walls would be the proud wearers of worn, rubber-soled shoes.

1

The moving truck had come and gone the day before, and on the morning of September second, the cherry blossom tree's red leaves waved lazily in the thin sunlight. It had been a rainy summer, and the rhododendron bush beside the front stoop looked as though it would bud again. Tiny magenta faces peeped from behind the deep green leaves.

Kit was an early riser by nature. Tucked into a plaid housecoat, she tiptoed down the carpeted stairs, around the stacks of cardboard boxes, and into the kitchen. On her feet she wore blue slippers in the shape of fuzzy monsters. Padding carefully across the linoleum, she hopped over to

the sink and filled the kettle. Upstairs, her roommates, Liv and Mona, were soundless in their rooms.

Six empty bottles of craft beer perched in the centre of the stove. She shifted them to the side and placed the kettle on a wire burner. As the element began to heat, it hissed and frothed, and a finger of smoke curled from beneath the kettle. Something had burnt onto the coil. She made a note to phone home about how to fix it, but left the kettle in its place. She looked at the tile backsplash and noticed, for the first time, the tiny red roosters that hid within the splashy fruit-baskets.

The kitchen connected with the dining room through a widened archway and, in the dining room, a sliding glass door opened to the back yard. Cardboard boxes and reusable grocery store bags were stacked like canyon rock formations; pot handles and wooden spoons stuck out of the open tops. Mona's juicer perched in the centre of the dining room's dingy formica table, surrounded by tufts of packing tissue. Kit leaned against the counter, settling into the solace of the quiet and still morning.

Her full name was Katherine, though she went by the nickname Kit and didn't like to be called anything else.

She was nineteen and five foot six and weighed something around fifty-five kilos. Most of it was muscle. She studied general arts in school, but between classes she dreamt of racing. Ideas of what her body could do over the distance of fifteen hundred metres, across the miles of a cross-country course, centred in most of her gauzy imaginings.

She ran six days a week, sometimes twice a day. She lifted weights and she ate healthy food. She had circled tracks at a pace that pedestrians deemed unsustainable, gutted through workouts to the point of seeing double. She had lain on massage tables and exhaled slowly, slowly, as therapists dug their hands into her abdomen, trigger-pointing the screaming muscles until she felt like fainting. She never once told them to stop. She travelled to races up and down North America, and no she was not the best but one day she would be.

She felt she earned the right to be proud; there couldn't be ego in something if she had suffered for it. She had pushed through the pain of competitive running to get to this long, strong state, one where she knew she could handle any physical duress asked of her. That was the secret ability of the endurance athlete—to keep going, no matter the protesting tissue. It didn't matter if she was pretty, or if she was smart. Her body was her own and she would make it great.

And now, she lived with her best friend, and with the star who was her idol. She sighed, closed her eyes, and leaned the crown of her head into the wooden cupboard door. The morning was quiet and the house was new and everything seemed to promise change. The water in the kettle began to pop and fizzle.

While she listened to the kettle she planned out the day. Breakfast, practice, glance at her course schedule, pack for training camp, and unpack the house. She grimaced, even though there was no one to

complain to yet. The front living room was just as messy and full as the kitchen, and they'd already started procrastinating. Last night, after they'd dropped their boxes and their parents had left, Liv had cracked open the first beer and refused to budge from her spot on the kitchen floor. Kit had squirreled up on the counter and opened a bottle too.

Liv's parents had helped their daughter move by providing most of the second-hand furniture—bookshelves and board games, a coffee table and carpeted throw cushions. Most of the kitchenware and cooking tools belonged to Mona. Kit hadn't realized until the boxes began to stack in the house just how little she had contributed.

She leaned against the counter and loosened the knot of her robe's tie. She did not particularly care about the shittiness of the house—the duct tape on the washing machine, the warped hardwood in the living room, the film on the bathroom ceiling that was probably mildew. It was her first apartment out of residence, her first house, and it carried the magic and romance of anyone's first home.

The kettle began to sing, and Kit quickly pulled it from the burner. She peered into boxes and rummaged through bags until she found the location of Mona's mugs. They were white and cleanly modern, and far too high quality for student living. She retrieved a red marker from a shelf beside the fridge and, in wide looping letters, labeled the box VESSELS FOR HOLDING LIQUIDS. Then, she plopped Liv's tea bags into two mugs, poured over the water, and tiptoed back upstairs.

She knocked once, and without pausing, she opened the door to Liv's room.

Everything was in its place. The beige walls glowed golden from the scarf-draped lamps. A gallery of bright prints clustered on the wall above the fluffy white bed. Air plants hung above the desk. Still in her satin pyjamas, Liv stood on her nightstand, hanging a string of Christmas lights across the back wall. "Dude," she said, without turning her head. "You make so much noise when you walk."

Kit set the steaming mugs onto the dresser. The lacquered surface had been tidied down to single stacks of blank flash cards and printer paper. She took a running step and jumped, spread eagle, on Liv's bed. The bedding caught her in a satisfying swaddle. "This didn't take long," she said, referencing the room. She twisted around to look up at her friend.

Liv adjusted the end of the string and leaned back to look. Blonde bumblebee hair fell in purposeful wisps from the messy topknot, swishing about her face just so. She let her body lean backwards from the wall, balancing in a light C with careful, total-bodied control. Her toes splayed and gripped the chunky wooden nightstand. The pose looked formidable, something an experienced yogi might not even accomplish; Kit knew that the anterior strength came from Liv's gymnastic childhood. If she herself tried to do this, she would topple over and probably fracture a hip.

Liv relaxed, leaned back towards the wall, and adjusted the string.

“Almost. Done.” She pressed a final thumbtack into the end of the looped wire. “There.”

Kit looked about the room. To her, it seemed perfect. The blue record player, which they’d found together in a downtown thrift store, had been stylishly placed to the side of the bookshelf. Colouring books and one-thousand-level biochem course-packs covered the rest of the shelves, interspersed and bookended by Asian medallions and Aztec figurines. The knickknacks were just plastic mock-ups of something authentic, though. A row of tea lights in mason jars had been placed in a perfect line along the windowsill. It was all very self-consciously bohemian. “Your room looks great,” Kit said. “Come help me with mine?”

Liv flopped down beside Kit. “I wanted to get it done before camp and school start.” She toyed with a string of hair and snuggled into her frilly pillow. “Is it too staged though?” She surveyed the space. “I kinda think it might be.” She sat up, adjusting her tank top. When she wore pink, she reminded Kit of a Barbie doll. “It’s definitely so staged. Like, who actually lives here?” She retrieved the tea and passed a mug to Kit.

“No, I don’t think so.” Kit took it by the handle and counted the tea lights – there were ten. “It looks like you. It’s quite sweet.”

“Oh, god,” Liv said. She sat back down on her bed. “Who’s the goody two-shoes now?”

Kit rolled her eyes. “Don’t call her that,” she said.

Mona had gone to bed around nine, citing the morning workout.

Neither of them disagreed with the older girl, but once she was out of earshot, Liv had giggled and scoffed. They had the rest of the semester to settle down to training and schoolwork. Liv had taken a swig of her beer and called Mona a perfectionist. The description didn't sit right with Kit, but she didn't say why. Training camp would start the next day—they'd behave themselves after that. Kit spoke now. "She's the best for a reason."

Liv sipped her tea. "What's the point if you never have any fun?"

Suddenly, the fact that they'd spent an evening just sitting up to drink beer and talk seemed equally grown-up and lame. Kit reached over to the nightstand, the one opposite to where Liv had stood, and picked up the alarm clock. Lying back in the pillows she played with the knob on the back, swivelling the hour hand back and forth across the white, open face.

Liv continued. "You totally have speed goggles for her. She could be a vampire and you'd still worship at her blistered feet."

"Ha," Kit said. She didn't dispute it, though.

The track and field world revolved around numbers. Ability and competence was measured to the one hundredth of a second or to the decimal of a centimetre. The black and white measurements made value stackable. She'd broken the 4:30 barrier, and done it as a freshman. But, she'd also finished fourth at the university indoor championships.

She twisted the clock's hour hand to twelve, to zero. "How fast do you think we'll run this year?" She might as well have asked, "How fast do you think *I* will run this year. Will I medal? Do you think I have talent?

Liv sat up and started braiding her hair. “Dude, you’re my best friend. Of course I’m going to say you’ll crush it.”

Kit harrumphed and plunked the clock back on the nightstand. “That’s not helpful.”

“Sorry.” Liv’s fingers flew through her hair and she arched a manicured eyebrow. “More importantly though—“

“—oh no,” Kit squealed and pushed her face into the thick pillow. Liv always brought up this conversation.

“When are you going to finally *do it?”*

“Nope. Nope.” Kit spoke into the synthetic down, her face reddening by the second. “We’re not having this conversation.”

“You gotta lose it sometime.”

“I don’t have anyone to lose it with.” She couldn’t look at her friend.

“We can get to that.”

Kit pushed her face into the pillow. “I’d rather get faster.”

Liv rolled her eyes. “It’s an important aspect of being young, you know. It’s healthy.”

“I know I know.” She repeated herself, in a hapless sort of way. It was the truth, after all. “But I’d rather be fast.”

“It’s not one or the other, you know.” Liv stood up and opened her closet. “Want to help me organize by colour?”

An hour later, Kit broached the dim mess of her room. Suitcases and

stacks of school supplies filled the floor space between her bed and dresser and desk. She picked her way over a crate of running shoes and fumbled for the blinds.

The blinds zipped up with a snap, and morning light poured across the white walls. Her room faced the front of the house, a wide window taking up most of the back wall. The room was really quite tiny, though it would hopefully feel larger once things were unpacked. Her bed, which she had insisted on setting up herself, butted up against the window wall. Her bright childhood quilt lay in a rumple in the centre of her smoothed duvet. That was something about herself she never understood—she could make her bed, fluff the pillows, and return to still find a mess. She stepped over a crate of shoes and folded the quilt.

Before going to bed, she had at least arranged the furniture; despite the unpacked mess, at least the basics had been done. Her spindle dresser, which she described as "accidentally vintage," stood at the foot of the bed, and perpendicular to it she had squeezed a magenta desk and a hanging shelf. The desk she had found on the side of the road in August, and driven home to paint. She ran a finger across a corner where the paint had globbed. The perfect pink bead bumped against her finger like braille.

A short bookshelf served as a nightstand, and her short lamp perched on a stack of romance novels. Above that space, and above her headboard of pillows, she needed to hang something. The walls were too white, too plain. Maybe she could make a gallery wall like Liv, or hang a

series of geometric posters.

She stepped backwards and her heel bumped into something hard. The empty beer bottle clanged against the hardwood and rolled under her bed. At around one in the morning, Kit had decided that the white dinosaur on the label looked wrong, and so she had coloured it with the red marker. She picked the bottle up off the ground and thumped it on her desk. She liked the pattern of the label, and wondered if she could stick a candle in the bottle's mouth.

The doors to her closet were mirrored and slid on a metal track, and her reflection wavered as she slid it open. It was surprisingly deep. Though the bar and shelf rested just eight inches from the door's pocket, the closet stretched back at least four feet. Already, she was noticing how the house seemed full of hidden corners—under the stairs, the strange pockets above the linen closet, the surprising nooks in the kitchen cupboards. Space in this house seemed to appear from nowhere, as if it extended beyond the outer walls of the house.

What Liv had said was true, though Kit didn't know how to think about it. If she was being honest, she'd say that she'd been too busy, too caught up in trying to get good grades or run fast, even in high school. As embarrassing an excuse as that was.

She should probably start trying to date soon. But that was also embarrassing to think about. She ripped open a garbage bag and started pulling out handfuls of spandex shorts. Her clothes—she would start with

them.

After an hour she had nearly finished; her pants dangled from hangers, and she tossed the last of her socks into the open dresser drawer. From the hallway came the sound of a door opening, of bare feet sticking to and peeling from the floor. She had propped open her door with a block of driftwood, and she looked up as Mona appeared.

"Mind if I take a shower?" Mona spoke with her quick, curt tone.

While Kit and Liv had become friends in residence, they hadn't met Mona until the previous winter, and even then only briefly. They knew she was recovering from surgery, and it seemed natural that someone four years older wouldn't want to spend time amongst the rookies. When they saw the ad for a three-bedroom a block from campus, Kit and Liv had snapped it up immediately. Their coach, Brent, arranged for Mona to fill the vacant space. It had all seemed so simple.

Kit still hadn't gotten used to being around her. The older girl ran faster than anyone she knew, and at one point, faster than anyone in Canada. Even though she was part of why Kit had chosen this university, this program, it was still strange to think that she actually owned a toothbrush and cooked eggs and needed roommates. Roommates that happened to include her, Kit.

Mona's short black bob was scraped into a ponytail, and her square jaw clamped, her almond eyes a flicker away from hardening. Baggy

running clothes hung off her wiry shoulders, and Kit finally noticed the bottle of shampoo that dangled from her forefinger and thumb. While Liv's charisma allowed her to talk to anyone with apparent ease, Kit's stomach clenched. In real life, Mona Thornborough was always shorter than she expected.

Mona's eyes darted about the room, landing on something to Kit's left.

Kit glanced to her side; her collection of rocks, collected from all of the places she'd visited, sunning on her desk. She blushed. Mona's mouth curved up at the edges, and her eyes lighted with a slight smirk. It was not unkind—just distant.

"Yeah, of course. Just let me go pee first," she said, and darted past the older girl, into the hallway. The door to Mona's room was shut tightly.

In the bathroom, Kit plopped down on the toilet and saw a spot of blood in her underwear. She groaned, and reached to the side to fumble through the vanity drawers, in case Liv had brought pads. The drawers were empty, so instead she folded a layer of toilet paper and stuck it on the cotton. Tampons always hurt too much to use; she only suffered through them during runs. She wiped and flushed.

When she opened the door, Mona strode into the washroom, turned on the tap, and lathered her hands with soap.

Before Kit had come to university, the legends of Mona's work ethic permeated even high school locker rooms. This girl snuck out for extra

miles; this girl smashed competitors while sick with food poisoning. This girl trained as smart and hard as possible and proved that grit and toughness can accomplish anything. Kit had pictured her as an erudite Viking.

From the hallway, Kit watched as Mona turned off the tap and glooped toothpaste onto her toothbrush. She was lean like a boxer, and the backs of her calves formed perfect teardrops. Kit wanted to say something, but again, didn't know what, so turned back to her room.

In front of the mirror, Mona shifted her stance. She raised her left foot into a relaxed, weary, eighth position, *un terre*. The ankle sock shifted, and along her Achilles stretched a scratchy red line. An ugly, still-raw scar, peeking from the top of the cotton.

2

Every year the university's track team hosted a training camp at the beginning of the semester. A decade before, Brent had discovered a camp on the edge of a lake, out near Sooke, one surrounded by miles of winding trails and a mountain for climbing. The athletes complained about having to sleep in bunks, eat in a mess hall, and live without Internet or cell connection for an entire weekend. He brought them back each year.

After the hour's drive, the returning veterans and brand new rookies clambered out of cars, un-stuffed sleeping bags from between their legs, and heaved duffel bags from the trunks. There were about forty

of them in total, all skinny, high-energy, bright-eyed, not-quite-grown-up men and women. The team did not include a sprint or field program, just the middle distances and up, and the training camp would help them get to know one another heading into the cross-country season.

The forest was bright and warm, dragging out the remnants of summer heat. As usual, Brent proved terribly inefficient, and the athletes milled about the parking lot for a good twenty minutes before Mona organized the procession. Her arms around her duffel bag, strap around her neck, Kit found herself listening, sandwiched between Hanna, a rakish eighteen-year-old rook-dog, and Jenny Saunders, a surly senior. Kit had been living with Mona, cooking with Mona, for two days, and her tongue still felt thick. She would need to get over that soon. Kit turned to the silent rookie beside her, and formally re-introduced herself.

A collection of bare-board huts and a large dining hall crouched on the edge of the wilderness, at the base of towering Douglas firs. To the side was a small meadow, and at the edge of that, a glimmering lake. The year before, this camp had made Kit fall in love with an individual team sport. At camp they worked hard, training twice a day. But in the in-between they played bocce ball or swam in the lake, and at night, they played a game of glow-in-the-dark Assassin.

It was already obvious who would be voted team captain that year. The dump of sleeping gear, of duffel bags and pillows, of boxes and coolers and bags of food piled at the edge of the meadow. At its centre was Mona,

directing traffic like a drill sergeant. Clifford Peterson, last year's men's team captain, stood sheepishly to the side, echoing her instructions.

Steeplechaser Scott Secco's parents had come along to cook the meals, and they toted rubber bins of cookery. Like a fleet of ants, the athletes and their coach trucked the gear into the mess hall, or into the huts. Gripping corners of the thick paper, Kit and Liv lugged a fifty-pound bag of potatoes, and dropped it on the cement floor of the kitchen.

"Race you," Liv said, and darted out the screen door. Kit watched her strip off her tee-shirt and do a running-dive into the lake.

In his quiet, awkward way, Cliff spoke from behind her. "Ready to work hard?"

Kit grinned.

Within another hour they were warming up through the trails. Shirts cast aside, the two-dozen boys dropped the women, who travelled behind at a slower clip. The girls' feet bounced along the thick bed of pine needles, and their ponytails swung in a syncopated rhythm. Their chirping banter broke the earthy quiet, and to a listener-by the conversation would have been muddled by intermittent laughter and the staccato of quick-landing footsteps.

Everyone in this group had talent, and everyone worked hard. It was not so much an expectation but a requirement so basic it did not need an acknowledgement. The group's spidery legs clipped to the restricted turnover of their slow pace; they barely lifted their knees, but glided along

casually. They wore short spandex shorts and bright, dry-fit sports bras. Stained and battered sneakers tapped over the patches of light dappled on the packed trail. Behind them churned a thin cloud of dust, for a trail that had dried despite the rain, billowing a grainy film over the trampled weeds. Kit chatted with Hanna, and learned she had a twin sister.

"Elbows, kiddo," came Mona's voice. She slapped Kit's upper arm. Kit nodded, and tucked the offender closer to her ribs. "Keep those elbows tucked in."

The conversation moved along to the topic at hand, their upcoming workout; their coach made a rather annoying habit of secrecy.

"Naw, too soon for hills," someone said, rather loudly.

"I'll take that bet," muttered Emily, a Masters of Engineering student and one of the oldest of the group.

As the first practice of base season, longer runs with tempo generally proved the norm, though after last year's disaster at nationals, anything could change. More of something, whether it be speed or over-distance, or maybe the dreaded, ground-out, puking-up both.

After a few miles the forest ended, and the group ran along a cinder road. Heat waves seethed up from the pavement, and Kit wiped the beading droplets from above her lip. Soon, they saw the cluster of bodies. Brent's parked truck was half in the ditch, and the boys were doing leg swings, leaning on each other for balance. The tailgate on Brent's truck was down, and on it lined a row of orange water coolers.

Brent waited for them in front of the cab, his golf shirt baggy on his lanky frame. He nodded to the girls, a dim smile taut between his cheekbones. Most of the team had been back for a month already.

"Good to see you," he said towards Kit, and nodded again. He wore dark sunglasses, the oversized kind meant to cover a pair of regular glasses, and they made him look like a bug. When he smiled, his cheeks creased like whiskers.

Kit squinted and smiled back at him, then reached for a hug. Her chin bumped his clavicle, his palms touched her spine, and she stepped back again.

"Have a good break?" he asked. Kit nodded, knowing the conversation would end there, no matter what she said. They had a meeting scheduled for a few days' time, and she would fill him in on her weeks of base training then.

After their warmup skips, drills, and strides, the girls knew to sort themselves into groups loosely based on target pace. They milled about, passing sips of someone's gel and pairing off. The rookies coagulated in a nervous lump. Kit bent down and tightened her laces. They would be running mile repeats through a mess of lower trails, with a quarter-mile jog back to the start. Kit remembered this workout from the year before. For the sake of the rookies, Brent gestured to another trail, one that cut off the side of the dusty road. Overhead the sky was wide and blue and cloudless.

The boys set off first, and after the last group disappeared, Brent called the girls over.

Mona, Emily, and Jenny, the premier distance trio, set their watches and minced towards the line Brent had toed in the dirt. Kit jittered like a first-time thief, though nobody would call her on it, and slid in behind.

"Ready," someone muttered. The three girls did not quiver, and when Brent said "up" their knees rolled forward and they melded into the task. Mona and Emily ran abreast, with Jenny tucked just in behind. Kit crept up and settled just on Jenny's shoulder. Already the pace was beyond what felt comfortable; Kit's legs were a bit heavy, her shoulders awkward and tight at the effort. She exhaled, and focused on carefully guiding her arm swing to not touch the warm body beside her. Their speed did not lessen; she gripped it like a sheet of metal between her teeth.

The tunnelled vision of their present task made them feel brave. No thought was given to not doing it; since it was assigned to them, they would do it. The low-hanging cedar branches and emerald ferns flicked past like pages in a storybook. They had seen this, done this, a hundred times, the trail springing beneath their fleet toes, sweat dripping down their narrow stomachs, their breaths inaudible, jaws stiff, eyes blank and unwavering. To the squirrels in the trees, they flew.

If they would admit where they wanted to be in a decade, this

front-running group would want to be out running backwoods trails or up some mountain, a safebox chinking with international medals stored under their beds. They, with their rolling strides and relaxed shoulders swish-swish-swishing on pendulums, they ran, ate, lived, as if they possessed a mental indestructability far above that of youth and excellent health. Their cockiness hid in their corner smiles and casual slaps to their digital watches. Born from blasting miles and miles until the realm blurred into a sweet, secluded temporality, they lived as though they could harness the very essence of their souls, and that willpower would conquer whatever they wished.

Kit had been told once that good runners disguise gruelling pain in an effortless float—at least in workouts and long runs. In middle distance track, rigging was inevitable. Yet, to maintain something of a form, to battle and push through lactic acid was the art of the sport. To her, the ability to run despite her body groaning in protest—and not only run, but launch into interval workouts, surge sessions, tempos—outranked the intuitive elegance of a well-run race. This uncomfortable pace only hovered on that sensation, and she needed it to make her stronger. Already the effort scotched her windpipe, and it stung as though raked by a fork.

The trail shifted from dirt to mulch before arcing up the first hill. Kit lifted her weight onto her toes, as her feet struck and sprung off the flora. Four large freckles sat below the top knob of Emily's spine,

pinpricks in her fair skin. Sweat matted her brown baby hairs. Kit exhaled, her calves beginning to burn.

At the end of the last repeat, she flashed past Brent and stopped her watch, slowing quick and grabbing her knees. Her lungs burned and she gulped for air. On this last one, Kit had watched Mona pull ahead of the group, swinging her arms back in a wide, strong rhythm. The sight had stripped away any ego, like peeling bark from a tree. Now, behind the truck, the older girl knelt down and tipped her head beneath the spout of the water cooler. A trickle poured into her mouth and ran down her chin. She stood up, her core solid, seemingly undaunted by the work.

Her face red, still gasping for breath, Kit thought, shit. Mona had made it look easy.

Liv staggered beside Kit, her head down and her still-wet braid brushing Kit's shoulder. "Fucking. Hell," she said and slapped Kit's back. After a moment, they stood up. "Come on," Liv said. "I think they'll have dinner ready soon."

On the way back to the camp, the boys slowed to the girls' pace. The team jogged together, sweaty and grinning like a pack of dogs. With their narrow limbs and hollow chests, the boys were naked except for their thin shorts, and to Kit they seemed like nothing but a pack of fairy-tale Mowglis.

Dinner was indeed ready. Vats of steaming mashed potatoes, long

yellow ears of creamy corn. Buckets and buckets of salad, piles of savoury sausages, baskets of bread and little dishes of butter. Inside the cathedral-ceilinged mess hall, the procession of athletes clanked their cutlery and piled their plates high. Kit balanced a second ear of corn on top of her mountain of food. Hunks of butter slid down the potatoes and pooled on the edges of her plate. A little bit dribbled onto her thumb, and, salivating, she licked it off.

At one of the long picnic tables, the one nearest the door, she sat between Cliff and Thomas –Trivia—Riva and tucked into her meal. Non-blood distance twins Doug and Dylan sat across from her, their heads bent together as they concocted nicknames for the rookies. Trivia traded workout times and mileage stats with Emily, who chewed fast so that she could reply with her own summer accomplishments.

Most of these men were awkward. Engineering or Kinesiology students, they rode on the tropes of nerdy boys, who used their skinniness as an excuse for poor interpersonal skills. The rail-tail social neophytes depended on their buddies, or on beer, to maintain a straight, not-track conversation. It went something like this:

"How was August?"

"Good." Pause. "Got up to a hundred k a week."

"Cool." Pause. "How's the heel—"

"—how was yours?"

Ironically, they bonded over their inability to communicate, over

their attention-deficit obsessiveness, and developed their own easy shorthand.

After dinner came homemade crumble, with blackberries that Scott had picked from the fringes of campus. Liv, who had been sitting a few tables away, shot to the front of the line and brought two bowls towards Kit.

"Thanks!" Kit scraped the last of the spinach onto her fork and shovelled it into her mouth. The hot oatmeal topping and cold ice cream steamed and let off a tantalizing aroma.

Liv cocked her head towards Trivia, her mannerisms anxious. "Budge, would you?" Her eye glinted. Dutifully, Kit moved to the side, smooshing against Cliff's pimpled arm. Liv sat beside her and turned, ever so slightly, to face Thomas.

The screen door opened, and Kit looked up from her crumble and over her shoulder. In walked a short, ginger man carrying a leather satchel. He had a trimmed goatee and wore cotton joggers. A light cheer rose from a few older members of the team, and he raised a hand in a gentle greeting.

"Who's that?" Kit asked Cliff.

Cliff was grinning. "I think it's—"

"It's Geoffrey Walsh." This was Jenny who spoke. "He used to be on the team, the year before my first year."

Brent walked out from the kitchen and seemed to almost move in

for a hug, but stopped short. “Thanks again for coming,” he said instead.

In a low tone, Jenny listed off the credentials: the titles, the times, the national teams… Kit half-listened, keeping her eyes on him as he surveyed the group. How did he see them, as someone who had been in their place sometime long before?

“Not a problem, boss.” Geoffrey stuck out a hand; his fingernails were painted black. “I brought your cargo, too.”

Just then, the door opened again, and in walked another not-quite-man.

Dressed in a tie-dyed hoodie, and woollen socks in leather sandals, he carried himself with a low-shouldered confidence. Immediately, Kit could tell that he *was* somebody. A mop of brown curls rested just above his eyebrows, and his eyes, a light sapphire, caught her attention from twenty feet away. She also knew that he was somebody she wanted to know.

The room was quiet. While some people had recognized the nail polish-wearing runner, no one seemed to know this person.

“Hi,” he said, then paused, and raised his hand as Geoffrey had done. “I’m Callum. Pappas.”

Doug chirped. “Can we call you Cal?”

Callum laughed in a natural, easy way. “Nope, sorry. It’s Callum.”

“He’s new to running, but I think he’ll fit the group well,” Geoffrey said rather loudly, rocking forward on his toes and clapping Brent on the

back. “I’m up for some corn.”

The group looked at Brent; the walk-ons and recruited had been announced the week before. Brent cleared his throat, and continued. “Gang, Callum’s just returned from triathlon worlds in China.” Brent paused, waiting for his words to take effect. “So, be welcoming, okay?”

Kit’s face began to flush, and she thought, Shit. I need to know you.

The next morning, the team worked out again. Still yawning, they struck out to the trails with untendered enthusiasm, their split shorts fluttering with their strides.

Citing the need for less impact on her joints, Mona had zipped herself into a wet suit and dived into the lake. During their jog around the lake, the team watched her head bob along the surface, her nubby black pony stuck up in the air. They were beginning to notice a pattern; Jenny commented that this post-surgery Mona spent a lot of time alone.

After the workout, which had indeed included hills, and after consuming piles of pancakes and eggs, the assumed-captains led the teams towards the meadow. Brent called this a Recovery Workshop. As Trivia stated, it was a glorified stretching session. Kit watched Callum lope to catch up with the boys, noting the cut of his shoulders, the trim of his waist. She walked a little more quickly.

A ring of fir trees enclosed the perimeter, and across the shorn yellow grass, Geoffrey had arranged a wide circle of yoga mats. He began

to lob neon plastic balls at the runners as they arrived. Callum caught two and, turning around, tossed one to Kit. She closed her hand around the stiff plastic, her face straining to break out into a grin. She kept it in check, and eased down on the mat next to his.

"I'm Callum," he said.

"I'm Kit," she said, and sat back on her haunches.

He was nineteen, he said, the same age as her. He was beginning university a year late because he'd taken a year to transition into triathlon. Before that he'd raced as a cyclist in Calgary. He studied mechanical engineering, but hoped to switch into biomedical in his third year.

The athletes stretched back on their mats, rubbing their aching and weary feet. Bright afternoon sun beat down, and Kit tilted her face upwards to soak in its drowzy warmth.

Brent gave a quick speech about Geoffrey's knowledge of recovery techniques, touching on the importance of myofascial release for mobility and overall health. Mona and a few older athletes, mostly those chronically injured, listened with rigid attention. As he spoke, Kit found herself glancing over at Callum. An errant curl stuck out from the back of his head and she wanted to smooth it. Geoffrey strode in front of the group, swung his arms, and then led them through a series of yoga positions. Kit clambered up into downward dog, feeling an uncomfortable pull in her hamstrings.

Callum grunted beside her. “God I’m inflexible,” he said.

“Me too.” He was long like a greyhound, all legs and arms and not much else. She wished she hadn’t answered so quickly.

The poses ended, and she focused back on Geoffrey, who sauntered about the grass. “When I was an undergrad, Greta—is she still there?” Brent must have nodded, because Geoffrey continued. “Anyways, Greta taught me so much about my body, and it made a huge difference in my life.” He added, almost as an afterthought, “In my training, and in my performances, too.”

Brent coughed, and Geoffrey smirked. “And Brentie here did too.”

The group laughed, and Geoffrey continued. “So, who here knows about fascia, the body’s connective tissue?” As if spinning a story by a campfire, he told them of cell memory, of how emotions are stored in the fascia, of how physical tension could stem from a trauma, or even the memory of a trauma. Across the clipped hayfield, Kit saw Liv trying to catch her eye by lasering a devilish glint. She stifled a snigger, and glanced at Callum, whose mouth twitched wryly. Apparently, long-held tension could affect the body in very deep, and very strange ways.

Callum leaned towards her. “Think we’ll get to climb that mountain?”

She whispered back. “Brent’s taken us up there before, but usually on the first day.”

He paused, his head swivelling to the treetops. “I bet we could get

an amazing view of a sunrise or something."

Kit opened her mouth to answer, but Brent shushed them. Sheepishly, they returned their focus to the centre of the circle.

Geoffrey had them lie down on their stomachs, and he bent to his mat and picked up a blue ball. He held it in the air.

"Your diaphragm gets tight, all stuck and gunky, when you're breathing hard, which everyone here does. That's why, sometimes, when you rig at the end of a race, your back arches in that really gross, stiff way, because your diaphragm can't let go." Kit recalled the feeling, of her body contorting, the iron rod of her spine bending back with cramping muscles. "The pressure allows it to relax." Geoffrey pressed the ball to the upper quadrant of his stomach. "I want you to lie on the balls, with them pushing into the diaphragm."

In near-unison, the group rolled onto their balls, and immediately released a collective groan. Kit wedged it under her ribs. Its thick pressure pierced into her stomach and she wanted to vomit.

"…feel the release of tension in your abdomen, just relax and let it happen naturally."

Across the circle, Liv was trying to catch her eye, and Kit knew that if she looked that way again, she'd burst out laughing and roll off the ball. She looked at Callum beside her. His face, pressed against the purple mat, was free from lines, his eyes closed. Clearly, he was handling this awful pain with ease. His lashes were long and blonde.

"The body remembers things," Geoffrey intoned, his voice lowering and growing mystic. Scott sniggered, but the rhythmic speech did not lessen. "It's different than just getting through it, than getting through pain. It's letting go, moving past, whatever it is that bothers you."

"What bothers. Me is. The bruise from. This ball," Doug called from the edge of the circle.

A handful of people chuckled, Geoffrey included. "True, true," he said. "That can be a thing."

Geoffrey lay down on the grass too and folded his arms across his chest. "You can ease off the ball now, and just lay on your back."

With a sigh of relief, the runners rolled off their balls. Kit pushed hers to the side, and her stomach ached with a painful emptiness, as if it had been punched. Groaning, she slowly turned onto her back. She inhaled, and her stomach muscles expanded with a loose elasticity; she hadn't realized how tight they'd been. The sky was very blue. Quite softly, Callum exhaled beside her.

"I don't think we can overemphasize the importance of breath," Geoffrey was saying.

She turned her head towards Callum. He lay with his arms folded across his chest. Veins and muscle crisscrossed down his forearms, and a thin coat of white-blonde hairs rested against his tawny skin.

"Breathe in deep, hold tension, and then exhale, and let it flow out through you. When you exhale let it go. Let your thoughts go, let anything

bothering you go. Just feel your lungs expand, collapse. Expand, collapse."

Kit closed her eyes and wiggled her shoulders into the mat. She needed to think of something interesting to say.

A chorus of rowdy whoops shattered the night silence. A rapid banging came at the hut door, and Kit shot up in her sleeping bag. "Who's there?"

Brent answered. "Rise and shine! Wear something warm!" His voice grew more faint as he spoke, and she knew he had moved on to the next hut. In a moment she heard the rap and the same speech again.

Kit stuffed her arms into her hoodie and rolled off the top bunk. On the bottom bunk, Liv half-cracked an eyelid, her sleeping bag up to her chin. With her index finger, Kit tapped her twice on the forehead. "Let's go!" By the time the rest of the bunkhouse mates had unzipped their sleeping bags, Kit had stepped outside into the chill, pre-dawn air.

The campsite was so dark it seemed blue, the trees more like specters than real beings. The damp forest air permeated her sweater, and she lifted up her hood. Brent continued to rattle on doors. She dragged her hand along the rough edge of the hut, heading towards the mess hall.

"Ready to go?" A flashlight shone in her face.

She jumped to the side. The light lowered, and she saw it was Callum.

"Was this your idea?"

Callum sniggered. "Yeah. Think they'll be mad?"

“Absolutely!” She wanted to say, “I’m not mad though,” but held in the words. They fell into step. Their coach darted onto the trail in front of them, an grin plastered to his face. She said, “Brent seems pretty into this.”

The rest of the campers slowly emerged from the huts, hoods up over their heads, sweatpants swooshing in the quiet darkness. They filed into a slow, reluctant procession. Mona grumbled, and a few responded, but Brent and Callum and Kit’s brusque strides hurried them along.

They hiked up the mountain in near darkness, saved by the pools from the flashlights most of them carried. The damp undergrowth brushed against Kit’s legs, and streaks of light slid over the sub-tropical vegetation. Just behind Callum, she stepped over streams and rocks and mulchy logs, careful not to brush his back but wishing she could. At one point the trail turned to a scramble, and she gripped with her hands to help heave her sleepy legs.

“Alright there?” Callum looked over his shoulder.

“Yes,” she said. The indigo sky was warming to scarlets and pinks.

Within an hour, they neared the summit. “Almost there,” Brent called from up ahead, and disappeared behind a boulder.

This time, she grabbed Callum’s hand and surged around the boulder after Brent.

Once there, she stopped short. The edge of the sun poured over a rolling valley of black trees and hills. Gold and orange and red bled across the sky. It was simple and timeless and pure. “Holy,” she said.

Callum cleared his throat, softly. Brent squatted to the side, unmoving. They found a rock and sat down together, their thighs just a few inches apart.

The rest of the team caught up. Some choked for breath, some half-managed chirps, but they all rested on rocks or fallen logs or just the ground. After a minute, the group settled into silence.

Kit looked out and looked out and looked out. She had seen sunrises before, but not quite like this. Her bum was cold on the rock. She felt Callum shift beside her. With all of the romance of someone who has never loved nor lost, she smiled at the sun, then turned towards him.

3

Word that Kit and Callum were dating spread throughout the rest of the team before either of them decided on anything official. In the locker room, the runner-girls made behind-hands sexual innuendos. In the weight room, the men and women shifted to the sides, as if at a middle school dance, to heavily imply that Kit and Callum should partner at kettle bell swings. On the grass outside the varsity gym, when clustered in plank position for a five-minute circuit, several team members shot knowing looks across the circle. Kit dug her elbows into the hard ground and squeezed her bodyweight up through her bellybutton. Firmly locked in

plank position, Callum waddled a foot closer. She smiled. He occupied most of her thoughts, and she began to think Liv was onto something.

Their first kiss had happened in an everyday kind of encounter. They left the library café after lunch and crossed the central campus's greenspace, toting their books and gym bags and wheeling their bikes, and talking about the unfortunate necessity of championship-season midterm deferrals. When they reached the arts building, Callum leaned over the top of his fixie and quickly pecked her on the lips. She'd been rifling through her backpack for her phone, and it took her by surprise. Face burning, she floated into class. The two weeks since then seemed to engage a unique sphere, one where her world seemed shifted.

The classroom was on the top floor of the building, and was so well lit that the professor kept the fluorescents shut off. Slouched in a desk-chair, Kit gazed out the window at the wavering tree leaves. The professor droned on about whichever early modern poem they were studying, her crisp and ironed shirtsleeves rolled up and buttoned. Her voice rose and fell in an unremarkable academic melody. Between Kit's fingers her pen lay limp, the tip dribbling a blue dot onto the blank lined page. She had done the readings over breakfast that morning, but already any subtext seemed to have floated out of her skull.

In school she didn't know what she was studying but wanted to learn it all. Her parents objected to a general degree, so she enrolled in arts, registering for courses in english, political science, history, sociology,

and philosophy. In first year she'd hated the antiquity of philosophy, despised the lack of originality in history, but hadn't minded the layering of analysis in a creative work. She generally enjoyed the loose accumulation of knowledge, and that enjoyment eased the balance between practice and school. As her father once joked, she was majoring in interval training and minoring in mileage. The professor paused, checked her notes, and continued in the same monotone voice. Fleetingly, Kit hoped the upper-level professors showed a bit more zest in sharing their scholarly expertise.

Her eyes drifted back to the window. Callum had slept over the night before. They'd laid on her bed, kissing, tongues circling the insides of their mouths, hands roving slowly and heatedly, slowly then heatedly. They'd slipped under each other's shirts and gripped each other's skin. She'd felt hot and flushed and electric. In the classroom chair her stomach flipped at the thought of touching him, at the memory. At one point she'd found herself undoing his belt, but he'd closed his hand over hers, and said "not yet." They'd fallen asleep around midnight.

In the front row of the classroom, a dark-haired girl raised her hand to interrupt the speaking professor. The professor adjusted her spectacles—they were not glasses, definitely spectacles—and raised her eyebrows like an owl. Kit sat up straighter.

"Do you have a question?" the professor asked, more surprised than anything.

The soft, choral quality to the dark-haired girl's voice seemed out of place. "Do you think we can attribute Kempe's vehement desire, her desire for celibacy, to a gender or sexual identity?" The girl's hair was swept into a loose bun at the nape of her neck, and a blue ribbon secured it in place. Kit glanced over at the desk beside her; that student had flipped ahead to another section. She thumbed through her own textbook and found the right page. The class had finished the last and reached a work by Margery Kempe. She vaguely remembered from skimming the introduction that Kempe had been illiterate, but paid an educated member of the church to record her memoirs.

"Unfortunately," the professor said, "we don't have the history to read into texts to quite that extent. We know Kempe was an incredibly religious woman, and in this period, a woman's primary value lay in maintaining her virtue. The fact that she married and, and could thus technically engage in sexual activity, did not necessarily mean the act with her husband made her feel virtuous." Her eyes glassed as she rolled back into her monologue. "Clearly she struggled with –"

"—yes, but." The girl's shoulders rested back on her chair. The professor was startled, and the entire class seemed to lean forward, holding their collective breath. "Can't religion be considered a form of understanding, or a vehicle for interpretation? Could her religious qualms be considered a metaphor, or maybe a lens through which she could find expression for a more universal struggle?"

The professor's face regained its owl-like expression. "You raise a valid question." Her specific, deliberate tone conceded the question's value. "If you want, you can take that argument up as your midterm paper." She stepped behind her podium and rifled through her notes. "What's your name?"

If Kit could have seen her face, she was sure the girl would have blinked slowly before speaking. "Peony Shipp." Her voice was warm.

"Peony." The professor said, and adjusted the spectacles again. "Like the flower?" The class tittered and the girl laughed; she was clearly used to the question. The professor swung her arms and stepped back into the centre of the blackboard. "Well, back to the text's religious symbolism…"

Shorts swishing at her hips, Kit skipped down the gym's cement staircase and turned left. The varsity athletic therapy clinic hid in the basement of the gym, and she strode into the windowless and dank cinder-block cave. Four massage tables lined the far wall, bookended by the steel ice baths on one end and the medicine cabinet on the other. Anatomy posters, with sticky notes and permanent marker arrows, were spaced unevenly across the walls, and the stereo rumbled in the corner, beside the piles of cables and heating pads. The window to an adjoining office was dark, and a blue and yellow thank-you poster, hand-drawn and signed by a long-gone generation of athletes, filled most of the glass. A tattered appointment

book sprawled open on the seat of the waiting couch.

A member of the men's basketball team, whom Kit remembered as either Tim or Kim, lounged on one of the tables. Greta, the athletic therapist, grabbed his foot and twisted it side to side. Unlike most therapists Kit knew, Greta eschewed the neutral trousers-and-sneakers uniform. A bright handkerchief was wrapped around her straight blonde hair, and her rumpled blouse fluttered about her wide thighs.

She yanked on the boy's ankle and he jerked an inch down the bed. "Doesn't feel too blocked," she said, and set down the leg. "Be right with you Kit." She crossed the room and snatched a roll of tape.

"Hey," she said to the boy, and hopped up on the table beside him.

"Hey," he said back, and they lapsed into silence while Greta strapped white tape to his foot.

"Alright, you stiff-backed lizard." Greta rubbed the tape smooth and turned towards Kit. "How's the old IT?"

She stepped towards Kit's table, bent down, and straight-planted her arms on the table's corners. "You haven't been running through it, have you?"

Kit blushed. "No."

"Are you sure?" Her green eyes twinkled. Greta was all sun-damaged skin and peeling nail beds.

"Yes." Kit blushed harder. The year before, during cross-country season, her iliotibial band had tightened, pulling on her knee and straining

into inflammation. She'd run through a tearing sort of pain and kept it secret, for fear of not being allowed to train or compete. By the time the Christmas break rolled around, she could hardly put weight on her right leg for the burning pain that shot through her knee. In January, she emailed her coach and finally hobbled into the clinic. Greta had passed her a foam roller and lectured her on honesty.

"You know better than to be stupid." Greta crossed to the side of the table and sunk her hands into Kit's thigh. The fingertips burrowed like a hammer; the muscles were a bundle of rigid knots. Kit winced, and Greta clucked her tongue. Kit lay down and looked up, eyes hardened to foam panels on the ceiling. Greta's hands shifted to the outside of the knee, the old problem region. Her thumbs dug into the tender connective tissue, and it stabbed a little. Kit exhaled to keep from moving or making a sound. Greta harrumphed.

"That's why I'm here," Kit said, playing a tease into her voice. "I'm taking responsibility and getting a checkup."

"You runners." Greta struck a tender spot and looked up as Kit winced. "The body has limits, you know. You need to value them."

"I know. I know." She didn't add, *but we a race in a week!*

Greta continued. "Pay attention. Even when it tells you things you sometimes don't want to hear." Her thumbs kneaded into Kit's quad like she was rolling a ball of dough. The pressure hurt but Kit relaxed into it. "Pain for pain's sake is stupidity, not toughness. It gets you nowhere."

Kit dropped her chin in a sort-of nod, and resisted rolling her eyes. Greta worked on her leg, and she listened to the radio. If Greta had any more questions, she'd ask. As the massage grew painful, Kit picked at the table's ironed-on patch job and held her face in a stiff, expressionless mask. After a bit, the therapist said, "I heard Geoff went to your camp. How was that?"

"He spoke well of you."

Greta smirked and continued to massage. "Well, yes. He learned fast that I'm always right."

From across the room came Liv's laugh. Kit sat up. Liv said, "Forget something?" and tapped her watch. "Greta, she's late for practice, again."

Kit blushed harder and pointed to her leg. Greta dug the heel of her palm in for one more stroke. "Foam roll it tonight," she said, and raised her hands from Kit's leg. "Come back in two days,"

Kit stood up off the table. "Thanks for your healing powers, Greta!"

"You're not fixed yet, kid. It's a process." Her voice faded as the girls jogged down the hallway towards the changing room.

Once firmly out of earshot, Liv grabbed Kit's arm. "Sooo," she said, her whole face alight. Liv had an early class, and had left before Kit and Callum emerged from her room.

"Nothing happened," Kit said, in the same sweet tone she'd used on Greta. Liv gave her a look, and Kit blushed, yet again. "Yet."

4

Cross-country running, Kit once explained to a befuddled academic, is an individualistic team event. Self-interested glory hogs band together for the greater good, and charge around golf courses and clamber up rolling hills for distances between five and ten kilometres. When the going gets rough, cross-country athletes heave a do-it-for-the-gang mentality, and use one another to better their own performances.

At a meet, runners compete together for a team title, and the triumphant team is determined by the simple lowest-score-wins format. Each runner's overall placement is added to that of his or her teammates,

which determines an overall score. A team includes seven athletes: five scorers, whose finishing placement counts towards the score, and two displacers, whose points do not count but whose presence raises an opposing team's numbers.

The format of the Canadian Interuniversity Sport Championship required Brent to select his seven girls from a group of ten or eleven who could argue their worth. Some girls executed better in the cold versus the heat, some raced faster on a hilly course, some processed the stress of championship races with more anxiety than verve. Unlike track racing, times held little value on a cross-country course—what mattered was the specific athlete, versus the elements, versus the geography, versus the pack mentality of two hundred sharp-elbowed girls. Kit liked racing through slop.

While some coaches chose the team based on historical success, performance reliability, or a state of physiological peak, Brent preferred to let them race for it. This tidy strategy reduced drama within the team—for, whether or not their wallets held a plane ticket and their spikes brandished fresh thirteen-millimeter pins, all involved could hold themselves directly responsible for their current predicament. In October, Brent chose a meet in Vancouver, one through the flat and muddy park of Jericho beach. And, so, Kit found herself charging down a narrow forested trail, with a kilometre to go, flitting just off of Emily's damp shoulder.

Mud caked her shoes and coated her calves, and it flecked up to her

chin. Her feet landed in an ankle-deep puddle, and cold water splashed up her churning bare legs. Emily's elbow swung back in a jerky rhythm, her form tightening from fatigue. Weary, her legs heavy, Kit dug in. It did not matter who she beat in this race, except for her teammates.

The trees ended and strings of wet bunting marked the grassy course path. Kit's breath jerked out in ragged gasps and she pumped her arms. Quickly, she glanced over her shoulder. A column of runner-girls rolled down the hill, their singlets coated with mud.

The straight chute of bunting ended and Kit leaned into Emily as they rounded the corner. Their legs churned in sync, their elbows brushing in sharp scrapes. Kit sat in the motion, feeling for Emily, waiting. She waited until she felt Emily give, until she felt that spectral, ghostly, weakening of energy. It had nothing to do with speed, and little to do with cadence; it came from the energy emitted by a runner under trial, a runner faced with the challenge of duress. It's as real as a smell, a touch, a taste, to feel when they're ready for a fight, or when they're finished, crashed, done. The moment she felt Emily give, Kit opened up her stride and charged down the grassy final five hundred metres.

She crossed the finish line and grabbed her knees, bent over in a rig of pain and cold air and hot sweat. She had beaten a senior member of her team, and with that came satisfaction. Her throat was scotched from sucking cold air and she stumbled blindly forward. The figure that had to be Emily bumped against her back; she reached back her open hand, for

the weak palm-slap that came quickly. Standing up, Kit grinned up at the grey sky and stiff-wobbled towards the rest of her team.

Mona kneeled at the end of the finishing route, unstrapping the velcro chip-timer from around her ankle. The front of her blue singlet was mostly clean, from front running. Awkwardly, Brent patted her head twice, and she looked up. Her mouth stayed flat, but Kit watched her smile with her eyes. From the gun, Mona had surged to the lead, and she and two girls from other schools gapped the rest of the field. Kit had settled in mid-pack, and picked off girls as the race strung out. Brent walked away and Mona stood up and sauntered off. Kit bent down.

She unwrapped the duct tape that suctioned round the mid-foot of her spikes, yanking at the raised edges of tape to make a slow ripping sound. Clods of dirt and grass tumbled out. It was an old trick, one to keep shoes from being ripped off by a competitor's foot or suctioned off by the mud. It was a trick used by someone who ran in the fray, who didn't glide ahead of the pack, who wasn't the first to trod the clean, un-churned ground. To race mid-pack had been her plan, and she knew she'd finished third for her team, and in the top ten overall. Mona, though, had won.

"Yeeow," Kit said, and stood back up. She slung a dirty arm around Hanna, who wheezed beside her. "How'd Liv do?" Kit asked the squinting and muddy girl. Hanna gasped with a vicious upward whistle, and so Kit craned her neck and hopped in the air, scanning the fray for a blonde braid.

Later, after jogging a cool down, she meandered down to the beach. She stepped carefully across the loose pebbles and reached the gently lapping shoreline. To the skyline's far right was a row of white skyscrapers, the downtown of Vancouver. They were stark in their appeal, against the graphite sky, against the far off forest and rock. It had begun to mist, a silver haze clouding the lush fall scene. Pleasure boats lazed about the glassy ocean. She wasn't cold, though; she relaxed into the damp, and her body's emanating strength seemed to ward off the cold. The beach was pebbly, strewn with bleached driftwood. Without having to ask she knew that she had made the team, and would fly to nationals in two weeks.

"Hey!"

Kit whipped around. Callum picked his way through the logs, a tartan blanket over his arm. His hoodie covered his head, and he sloshed in purple gumboots. The men had raced first, and he'd clearly already jogged a warmdown and changed. She still hadn't checked the men's results, and should ask him.

"Hi," she said, shyly, and gestured to his feet. "You look toasty,"

"You look cold," he said, and when he reached where she stood, he draped the blanket over her shoulders.

She held up her hands, which were warm but tingled in the mist, from the adrenaline of the race, which hadn't yet worn off. "Thanks," she said, and pulled the corners together into a clenched bundle. The plaid

covered her whole body, the ends brushing about her ankles. He was cute, with his hair sticking out of his hoodie, and her chest grew warm. The sensation dropped lower. There was no real reason to wait. She stretched up on her toes and kissed the stubble of his chin, and then said into his cheek, "Want to come over when we get home?"

Mona dropped her bag in the centre of the house's foyer. "I'm pooped." She said it like an announcement. "Who wants dinner?"

Liv pushed past her and towards the staircase. "Someone's in a good mood for once."

Kit plopped her bag too. Liv tromped up the stairs. "I'd be in," Kit said, "but Callum's coming over in a bit, and I think we're just going to hang out. Just the two of us."

In the staircase, Liv audibly stopped moving. "He is?"

Mona's face tightened, "No worries," she said, "I'm making pasta if you change your mind. Liv, you depleted your energy stores today, and you should eat something." She carried her bag into the kitchen, and loaded her empty tupperware into the dishwasher.

Kit lugged her bag up into her room. Since she'd moved in, the room's appearance had taken on a homemade, lived-in quality. She'd hung postcards from a twine clothesline, and sticky-tacked a row of photos to her mirrored closet doors. Her stones now lined the back of her dresser, and she'd found mismatched candlesticks in a thrift store and placed them

about the room's surfaces, artistically staggering their heights. The evening sun coloured the room a cozy gold, and it made her love the space. She unzipped her bag and began to unpack. Within a minute, Liv arrived and hopped on the bed. Against her stomach she clutched a lighter, her miniature speakers, and a wad of condoms.

She said, "I've got you, girl."

"That's not happening tonight." Kit's voice thickened and her face flushed. She shoved her muddy clothes into the hamper and kicked the duffel under her bed.

"Right." Liv dropped the bundle onto the bed. "You did sex ed, right?"

Kit ignored her, and she continued. "It hurts a bit at first, but it's just because your body's not used to it."

"Oh my god!" Kit picked up the lighter. "Stop!" She glanced at her candles. Liv deserved credit for thinking things through.

Liv hopped off the bed and grabbed Kit by the shoulders. Her mascara residue ran under her eyes like a brush of watercolour, but the blue sparked bright. "Have fun kiddo. It's about fucking time."

Kit shimmied away, blushing harder, "Go away!"

Liv smirked and exited the room. The condoms lay on the rumpled bed, and gingerly, Kit picked one up and traced her finger along the edge. Her stomach flipped.

She messaged Callum to arrive in an hour, quickly showered and,

still in her hoodie and days-of-the-week underwear, scarfed a dinner. Mona glanced at her, mischievously, from across the table, but stayed silent. Liv stayed in her room, despite being offered dinner again.

Kit hurried back to her room and, hands shaking, struggled with the click lighter, finally managing to lower a tiny flame to the wicks of her candles. It was now dark, and rain battened against the black window. She shut the blinds and set the speakers to a romantic playlist. She checked her phone, saw that he would arrive soon, and, from the top shelf of her closet, retrieved her good-butt jeans. When she'd whined about her flat rear the year before, Liv had dragged her to the mall and they'd tried on pair after pair until she found ones with the right cut, with brown-stitched pockets and a wash that created an optical illusion. She fingered the thick denim. It seemed silly to put on pants when they'd come off soon. She pulled them over her legs and zipped the zipper, buttoned the button.

In the mirror, the girl was pretty, presentable. Sharp and angular, maybe, but still feminine in the pink blouse. She turned to the side and checked out her butt. The jeans were tight, and the cut of the pockets emphasized the round cheeks. Her still-wet hair was up in a bun, and Kit pulled out the elastic. Her hair swooshed damply about her shoulders. Was her nose always that beaky?

Her phone dinged. Immediately, she realized she still wore her days-of-the-week underwear—and, that not only that, but it was a Saturday, and this specific pair stated *Tuesday* in blocky red letters. She

yanked open her dresser, and changed into a pink and lacy pair.

The house was dark, so she knew the others were securely in their rooms. She opened the front door, and Callum stepped over the threshold and hugged her. He smelled of rain, of the clean windy outdoors. “Hi,” she said, and kissed him again, sliding her hands under his jacket.

Callum asked, “Where is everyone?”

In a stab of boldness, she said, “Not relevant. Want to come upstairs?”

He smirked, and kissed her hard.

The flames in the candles undulated and cast layers of light and shadow against the wall. The music played low.

“Your room looks great,” he said, and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Very romantic. Do you have rose petals too?”

Her face burned. “No.” It seemed she would be perpetually blushing tonight. She scratched her head, suddenly awkward, jerky and out of place in her body. It was probably all too much, but it had seemed the right thing to do, the way it happened in books and movies.

“Hey,” he said. She met his eyes, and his expression told her he was just joking, or else didn’t care. They kept looking, neither of them moving, his expression intense. Her stomach flipped, and her palms sweated. They’d come so close so many times by now. Nearly buzzing, she strode towards him and held his face and kissed him.

She lifted his shirt over his head and he picked her up and set her

down on the bed. He took off her shirt and fumbled with the clasp on her bra, and she chuckled. “So,” she said, “are sure you don’t mind that I’ve never done this before?” He managed the bra and kissed the bone between her breasts.

“No,” he said, “I don’t mind. Do you mind that I have?”

She had known that already, and found it comforting. “Yes. I mean, no.”

For a breath neither of them spoke. He was looking at her intensely.

“Is that an issue?”

“No, no,” she blurted out, “I just think one of us should know what they’re doing.”

He laughed and kissed her.

They clambered under the covers, their bodies pressed tight and grinding. Through their thick denim she felt him harden against her thigh. They laughed, struggling to pull off their pants, finally shaking their legs free. When she pulled down his pants and underwear his penis leapt out and wobbled like a spring. She stroked the smooth shaft and he moaned. His fingers trailed between her legs and slid against the wet of her and she shivered and grabbed his shoulders.

“Hey, Kit,” he said. “I really like you.”

“I like you too,” she said, and kissed the mole on his neck. His weight pushed her deep into the bed. After fumbling at the nightstand, she unwrapped a condom and he slid the ring down the shaft of his cock.

He was warm and sweaty and she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Okay,” he said, “you ready?”

“Fuck yes!” She pushed her face into his.

At that moment she exhaled and closed her eyes, and held the back of his head, his face to her neck. She thought *finally finally* and expected pleasure and that fantastic thing and instead it came in like a charge that burned and stabbed in a way that didn’t make sense, like a scalding curling iron and she cried out and pushed back at his chest.

He slowly eased backwards, out of her.

“Are you okay?” He asked, slowly.

“That really hurt,” she said. His legs were heavy on hers.

“It wasn’t really even in,” he said.

“It’s supposed to hurt the first time,” she said. She crunched upward and kissed him on the mouth.

“Maybe it’s the angle,” he said. “Let’s try a pillow under your hips?”

They shifted and shoved a pillow under her rear, and she felt suspended, oddly convex. He bent down and kissed and licked her and that hurt a bit, too, but not in such a way that felt terrible. His tongue teased her and she began to sink back, to let go and stir. “Let’s try it again,” she said, and he kissed his way back up her stomach.

They both exhaled. His scruff of curls fell just to his eyebrows and she locked into his blue eyes, wary and watching her back. His penis entered her vagina and it dug like a trowel. She pulled his head into her

neck and held still and bit her lip. “Keep going,” she said, and rotated her hips as he thrust; she felt sick. She pushed her face into his shoulder and noticed his pleasure in the tensing of his body but to her it was nothing but hot, sharp, burning pain. After a moment it dialled up to a nauseating intensity and she couldn’t move for making it worse and it scared her and she juddered “I can’t do this I can’t do this I can’t do this.”

He pulled out and the pain lessened and involuntary tears leaked in the corners of her eyes. After a moment she realized her face was screwed tight shut, that her teeth pierced her tongue. She didn’t know what to do, but she didn’t move. She opened her eyes. He looked down at her with an awful, confused, hurting expression. He didn’t say anything. Her vagina dripped cold and the dripping hurt too.

“Can we try again tomorrow?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said. He lay down beside her. His mouth opened, and his tongue unstuck from the roof of his mouth. “We probably just need to take it slower.”

“Yes,” she said. “I think you’re right.”

They lay in silence, both of them staring up at the ceiling, their heads on the pillows, their chests bare, the duvet pulled up to their waists. The candles flickered shadow dances onto the plaster walls. “I’m sure you’re right,” she said.

5

"Morning Wednesday Addams." Greta scribbled something into her day planner and snapped it shut. Mona hopped up on the table, and Greta's hands curled around her ankle. "How's the sunshine?"

"It's overcast today," Mona said. "And today I need a bit of help with the old classic. The cuboid's blocked, and the fascial attachment points are pulling a bit, and the tissue under the scar feels thick and doesn't have full range of motion. It handled the race pretty well, but it stiffened after the long run yesterday, and this morning it's getting angrier. I stuck it in a bucket of hot water this morning, but it only helped

for a few minutes."

Greta harrumphed, pulled up a chair, and grabbed Mona's ankle. She rotated and twisted, pulled and flexed the foot to test its mobility. Strings of wooden beads clanked down her chest, and Mona noticed the bareness of her left ring finger. A smooth Celtic ring had been there a week before, and throughout the four years Mona had spent visiting the school's clinic. Greta set the leg down, and moved up to check the hips.

"Your hips are out," she said, and Mona nodded. She had figured as much.

"How was the race?" Greta asked, with a high lilt at the end, a falsetto crackling in her tone. Back at the end of the table, she pulled up a chair and dug her knuckle into the plantar fascia.

"It was good," Mona said. "I won."

"I saw that online," Greta said. "And how did you feel?"

"Great," she said. "Finally feeling fit again."

Standing up, Greta shifted up to the ankle joint. One hand clamped on the arch of the foot, the other rounded the heel. Again she twisted and rotated the joint, moving it side to side. "That's good," Greta said.

"Yes. It's been slow going." Mona closed her eyes and breathed through her belly, allowing the air to push up into her ribs. She felt her shoulders give, tension pop and slide from her sinuses, as her body relaxed. Greta's hands worked on.

In the hallway, a group of students passed the open door, talking

loudly. Someone darted into the room, muttered a “Hey, Greta!” clanked open the ice machine, shived in a scoop, and slammed shut the lid.

Greta asked. “Meet any new girls?”

Mona rolled her eyes. “No,” she said, and wiggled her toes. “This mistress keeps me busy enough.” Mona didn’t talk about this sort of thing with many people but to Greta she felt she could say anything. “My roommates are pretty hot to trot though. Kit’s gotten in thick with the new triathlete.”

“So I heard. What do you think of that?”

“I think.” Mona paused to consider. “I think he’s nice enough. Focused. Narrow.” She meant narrow in the sense of worldview, of his black and white approach to things. In the singular way he approached conversations, in the way he engaged with one thing and attacked it. She knew Greta understood her meaning and didn’t explain further.

“Kit’s pretty narrow, too.”

“Yeah. No one’s more narrow than Kit.” Mona sighed. How could she explain this. “But her switch is to go inward, or turn off. And I think his might be to lash out.”

“Flip,” Greta said, and Mona rolled onto her stomach. Gently, Greta prodded the tissue at the back of her Achilles, pinching the tender, ribbed tissue. It burned a bit, and in one sharp moment Greta’s thumb pinched the hot spot and Mona jumped.

“Fuck,” she said.

Greta said simply, “It actually doesn’t feel that bad. Mostly stiff.”

“I’m doing my best to keep it that way.” Mona’s cheek pressed into the rubbery foam, which smelled of chlorine cleaner. It’d been over a year since her surgery, and over a year since it ruptured, and only eight months since she returned the air boot to the clinic and began to walk-jog.

The fibres in her Achilles felt thick, gummed up with inflammation. Greta’s knuckle worked around the edge of the scar, grating along the sides to add friction and break down the scar tissue. “It’s stiff,” she said. “And it’s sore in the mornings.” She spoke slowly, “And there are limits to how much I can push it, before I can feel it creeping up, the ridge starting to give.”

Greta’s hands continued to twist and work, and Mona closed her eyes and breathed, expanding and collapsing her rib cage, feeling the calmness wash out through her limbs. The expression of emotion always comes through breath. From laughing, from crying, from holding it in. She could help control her emotions through breathing. It was subtle and beautiful and remarkable.

Sometimes, when she stilled, she swore she could feel food gurgling and digesting in her intestines, or the oxygen seeping into her capillaries. She said, “Greta, does everyone feel this way?”

“What way?”

“That they just feel everything. The movement they record, that they can tell if something’s off. That they can tell their calf hurts because

the fascia cases the muscle like a tight sleeve and needs friction and heat to release it. That they can tell the vertebrae in their lower back needs adjustment, that their mid-foot hurts because their toe needs cracking." This awareness seemed to her to be a precious gift.

"You know more now," Greta said. "You listen better. Brent tells me that you do."

She waited to answer. "I don't have a choice. If I don't, it'll get worse," she said, drowsy, nearly under water. A ruptured Achilles would not be her downfall. "I'm just glad to be out of that fucking boot."

"Keep cross-training when you can," Greta said. "Bodies heal."

"Bodies heal," Mona repeated.

Mona swung by the locker room to grab her books for class. The varsity track teams shared locker rooms with the basketball teams of the same gender, and upon entering, one never knew which drama to expect.

Kit and Liv huddled in the corner, their heads bent together. The lockers were painted in blue and yellow school colours, and homemade banners, motivational quotes, and rows of roster photos crammed the room. On the basketball half of the room, towels hung from corners and across benches, and on the track side, battered sneakers and spikes lined the uneven tops of the lockers.

"I've been googling," Kit was saying. "And I think it might be something."

Mona wrenched open her banged and dented locker, pulled out her laptop and engineering texts, and slid her arms into her leather jacket.

"It really hurt," Kit was saying. "I didn't know what to do."

"It's supposed to hurt at first," Liv said. "It's probably nothing."

Mona shut her locker. "What's supposed to hurt?"

"Nothing," they said in near-unison.

"Doesn't sound like it." Mona propped her stack of books on her hip. She knew Liv was an expert at concealing things, and Kit had blatantly lied about an injury the year before. She was the team captain, and nationals took place in less than two weeks. "Come on. Tell me."

"It's nothing," Kit said again.

"Kit had sex for the first time and it was really painful and she's being a baby." Liv twisted the dial on her lock.

Mona swallowed and jerked back. "Oh," she said. "That's, well," she adjusted her books. "Congratulations." She was surprised, given Kit's age, but decided that it was none of her business.

Liv rifled through her box of toiletries, but Mona looked at Kit. Her eyes were dark, and even standing still she seemed stiffer, more wired than usual. Immediately, Mona knew this was real, something to be concerned about, though *what* it could possibly be she could not fathom. "If something hurts," she said, "you check it out. Always. Maybe go to a doctor?"

"Yeah," Kit said. "Maybe."

On her phone, Mona pulled up the number for the university clinic. She passed it to Kit, who took it gingerly. “Make an appointment,” she said. “It can’t hurt to ask questions.”

6

In the university clinic's waiting room, Kit sat in a hard-backed chair, one hot thigh crossed over the other. She tucked a strand behind her ear, jiggled her knee, and snapped a hair elastic against her wrist. The band stung. The tender skin stretched across bird-like bones and purple vessels; she rubbed the tip of her thumb between the crevices.

An Asian girl sat two rows away, the only other person in the room. The girl pulled a pink-cased phone from her purse and kept her head lowered; her draped black hair glossed around her crown like a painted halo.

Trays and wheelchairs had scuffed the rubber trim. Kit could very well be overreacting, and she knew it. Mona had made a habit of over-precautions; she was fine. Sex hurt for everyone at first. Well, it hurt girls at first. Kit snapped the band again. Well, actually, it hurt when girls had sex with boys. But only at first.

A nurse in yellow scrubs called her name, and Kit followed her down the lucent white hall. But if it was something, they could tell her what it was and how to fix it.

The walls in the exam room were soft pink, and a beige curtain partially covered the forest green exam table. Kit stepped in and peered behind the curtain; stirrups jutted up at the end of the paper runner.

On the counter, beside the computer and printer, waited the sterile instruments in clear, sealed bags. The venetian blinds were folded shut in the narrow window. Kit sat in a chair beside the door. Her nostrils flared at the ammonia and lemon.

She, who must be the doctor, strode into the room, closed the door behind her. A starched salmon blouse poked out from under her lab coat, and her stringy blonde hair waved back from her be-speckled, round face. The doctor smiled at Kit. She had soft hips and a cozy waist, the huggable kind. The horn-rimmed glasses hid deep bags. Kit decided she was a mom, but a somewhat cool mom.

"I'm Doctor Hayes. You must be Katherine?" She spoke with an unexpected severity.

Kit tucked her hands under her thighs and nodded. “I usually go by Kit.”

“And what brought you in today, Kit.” A statement, rather than a question. Hayes squatted down on the stool beside the computer and began typing.

“Well, um.” Kit inhaled, tugged on the elastic band and let it snap. “I’m just wondering, well, it’s kind of, awkward.”

“It’s okay.” The doctor swivelled back towards Kit and rested her elbows on her knees. “Why don’t you tell me what you’re studying?”

The gesture was kind, but the answer brief, and severe. Deep purple bags creased underneath Dr. Hayes’ glasses. The most obvious answer came to Kit’s lips, yet introducing herself as a student-athlete suggested what Kit hoped was an inaccurate stereotype; often people mistook her for a dumb jock. “English, I think. I’m still deciding.” The doctor nodded with the *I see, I see,* look beneath her glasses. “I also run track.”

“Good for you!” Dr. Hayes smiled. “I’m a runner myself. I try and get out a few times a week, when I can.”

Kit nodded, and groaned inwardly, waiting for the inevitable question. After hardly a beaming beat, it came.

“Have you ever run a marathon?”

Kit could hardly keep the annoyance from her voice. “No, what I do is different than that.” How could she convey the depth of it all, of what

she tried to accomplish—national teams, international recognition, speed that eclipsed most pedestrians' perception of possible. "I run varsity," she said, even though that was barely a component. She would never say that out loud, though; it wasn't worth the hostility.

And besides, it didn't mean she was better than this well-educated medical-doctor-mom; it simply meant she knew a truth most people would never begin to understand. But, anyways, that had nothing to do with why she sat in a plastic chair.

"Okay," Kit said. "Here goes. I, um…" She hitched the band again. "I, um, well, I had sex for the first time, and it, well, it hurt. And I think something's wrong."

"Alright, what do you mean, it hurt?"

"I didn't know anything could hurt like that," she said. "I wasn't drunk and I passed out."

"Alright, can you describe it to me, please?" the doctor pulled up a new file and began typing, occasionally glancing back at Kit. "For example, did it hurt at the opening, or more towards the back?"

"The opening I guess," she said, her voice beginning to shake.

"Okay, and, how would you describe it?"

She spoke quietly. "Like a knife."

"And you say you've never had sex before? Have you ever experienced this before?"

"No." Kit shifted in her seat. "Well, maybe. I think. I mean, tampons

and bikes, but this is a lot worse." Her eyes pricked, and she willed herself not to cry. She was tough. What was a hard workout for most of these runners was simply her warmup; not in the sense that she made it look easy, but in the sense that what she attempted on a weekly basis was so much more demanding, exhausting, all-encompassing than this woman had ever accomplished, med school all-nighters included. She should be able to handle this pain too.

"Okay, okay." Hayes adjusted her glasses, crossed her knees, and then uncrossed them. "Kit, that amount of pain on intercourse is not normal. You were right to come in. I want to do an exam, if you are comfortable with that." She spoke with practiced measure, her voice low and calm, kind but not too friendly, the sort that parallels mastering social situations. "It's called a Q-tip test. It might hurt, but we will only do what you are comfortable with, okay?"

Kit nodded, her tongue thickening too quickly to speak.

"Are you okay if we do this?"

She nodded again.

Hayes stepped out of the room. Kit pulled off her jeans and underwear, and then piled them on top of her cloth shoes. The sheet crinkled under her bum like rice paper. She pulled another sheet over her lap, flattened it like paper against the folds in her knees.

After a minute, the metal curtain rings screeched across the bar, and Hayes dragged her stool across the room. She plopped down, rolled

up her sleeves, and snapped on a pair of blue latex gloves.

"Okay, can you scooch your bottom a bit further down?"

Kit slid forward, the paper crinkling beneath her back, tearing a little. She closed her eyes and breathed through her nose. The table smelled of cleaning product, and strangely, sand.

"Can you put your feet up in the stirrups, too?"

She slowly raised her legs, settled her bare heels into the cold plastic cups.

"I'm going to give you a mirror, so you can see exactly what I am doing, okay? If you are ever uncomfortable, just let me know and I will stop."

Kit sat up and reached under her knee. She curled her fingers around the hand mirror, avoiding the doctor's gaze.

"It's so weird, showing someone my vagina," she deadpanned, as if it would relieve some of the tension pulling at the back of her neck.

"Well, right now I can't see your vagina. That's the inside. What we're going to test is your vulva, the outside part." The doctor's smile was kind.

Kit gulped. She had seen herself naked, and could even call herself comfortable—or rather, she wasn't prude enough to wrap herself in a towel to avoid reflective surfaces. She had looked in the mirror and knew the smooth lines of her stomach, the cut of her hips, the perceptible bud that was her clitoris. But, gripping the mirror in her sweaty palm, she had

never seen herself quite like this. It was how Callum must have seen her. Her vulva was like a fleshy growth of lettuce coral, the folds coloured wine red. To the sides, skin swelled like peach angelwing shells. Dark hair sprouted in irregular patches from her attempt to give herself a bikini wax. She cringed and willed the doctor not to notice.

"So, you run track? What is your specialty?"

"The fifteen hundred," she said, then added, "metres."

"Unhunh, hunhunh," the doctor pulled a box down from a shelf. "How fast can you do it?"

Kit couldn't help the small smile. "Four-twenty-six-point eight one."

"That's four minutes and twenty six seconds? For a mile?"

It was suddenly ridiculous, her predicament. She was telling someone her PB, someone who knew painfully little about the event, while her lower half was bare and splayed for all the world to see. Kit said, "I probably need to be tougher, to handle it better. It's probably not a big deal."

"All right, well, we'll see," Dr. Hayes said. "I'm going to take this probe"—she held up an oversized Q-tip—"and gently touch it to your pelvic floor. Is that alright?"

Kit nodded, focused on the mirror. The Q-tip brushed the crevice where her leg began. She would have hardly felt it if she hadn't known it was coming. The Q-tip touched a finger width over, and then again, just on the edge of the fleshy mound, which stung a little. With her gloved hand,

the doctor spread apart the lips, the gentle pressure a light burn. Kit exhaled. The inside of her vulva was blood purple and damp. The Q-tip hovered, then lowered and the cotton felt like a hot stab. Kit cried out and smacked her palm against the wall. Hayes jolted backwards.

Kit bit onto her knuckle and jerked her knees to her chest. Her eyes blinded and stung with tears, not dissimilar to when hit in the nose. "That really hurts," she said, as steadily as she could.

"Alright, we don't do any more today. I don't want to hurt you any more." The doctor stood up and tossed her gloves into the garbage bin.

"But do you know what's wrong?"

She hesitated, before saying, "you can get dressed, and I'll be back in a minute."

Kit pulled on her underwear and jeans, settling the fabric carefully over her stinging privates. She fumbled with the heel of her shoes, then made herself small in the chair by the door. Something was definitely wrong with her.

Hayes returned, her heels clacking on the floor. She sat again beside the computer and clasped her hands in her lap. Kit tightened her elbows to her sides and pressed her knees together.

"Kit, have you ever heard of vulvodynia?"

"No." Her voice was low.

"Well, it essentially means chronic pain in the vulva. And I think yours may be rather severe."

"Oh." Kit leaned against the back of her chair.

The doctor adjusted her glasses, and spoke again in that measured tone. "It isn't very regular, but not abnormal. I'm going to refer you to a specialist." Kit nodded along with her, digging her nails into her palms. "You should probably only be wearing cotton underwear and stretchy, breathable pants, or maybe dresses if you like them. Have you ever noticed how jeans hurt? I promise, that isn't in your head, and it isn't normal."

Her thoughts beginning to slow, a fog settled over Kit's limbs. She asked the doctor to repeat herself. Hayes did, elaborating, explaining kindly again.

"There are lots of things you can do to help with it. You should switch to a sensitive skin detergent and soap, and there are medications I can prescribe you to help. Some women find physiotherapy helpful, too."

Kit held a pause, closed her eyes to collect herself. "What is this. What causes this."

"I don't know. Sometimes some women just start hurting, and sometimes it's after something traumatic, or after having children and their hormones change, or sometimes they're just born that way."

Opening her eyes, Kit slid her palms beneath her thighs. The fluorescent light bounced against the pink walls. She pressed her nails up through her jeans, a calm little prick into her skin.

"This isn't my specialty," Hayes continued. "Doctor Blough, that's

her name, she will be able to tell you more." She scribbled on her prescription pad, tore off a page, and held it out. "This is lidocaine. It's a numbing cream. You can put it on the painful parts and it might help."

Kit folded the page and set it on her knee. She exhaled slowly. The doctor continued: "But, I am very, very, glad you came in today. To be honest, most women aren't brave enough to admit to this, so you should be proud of yourself."

It was hardly much to be proud of, going to a doctor for answers, on a friend's prodding.

"I don't know how I never knew something was wrong before." The statement came out meeker, weaker, than Kit would have preferred. She wanted to say it again, more forcefully, but her throat thickened and her lips couldn't open.

Hayes's expression crinkled, her eyes tender behind her glasses. "Most women don't get diagnosed at first. A lot of doctors don't know about it."

"How come you know, then?"

The older woman sighed, then after a hesitation, answered, "I went to med school with Doctor Blough, and this is her passion." She blinked slowly, her shoulders stiff beneath the ridges of her white coat. "Kit, I really wish I could tell you more."

Kit almost said "me too." She almost reached out and embraced the kind eyed woman, almost let tears spill down her cheeks. But instead, she

tucked the prescription into her purse, stood, thanked the doctor, and left.

Only a few miles from the university churned the Pacific Ocean. Further south, the town's salt-softened boardwalk butted the waves, and the small bistros, bakeries, and banks looked out to the sunset's horizon. But between the campus hub and the water, a ritzy neighbourhood instituted its fairy-tale presence, with its oak trees, Narnia lampposts, and white-pillared homes. After her appointment, Kit left her bike on campus and found herself striding down those sidewalks, her heels slapping into the manicured cement.

She hadn't asked the doctor what she should say to Callum. She hadn't asked about the recovery timeline, or about other cases.

The trees peeled back to low rhododendron bushes, bare of their bright petals but evergreen the same. The ocean stretched ahead, a grey tarpaulin beneath a heather sky. The team often took their runs here, in both group jogs and solo jaunts.

Across the pebbled shores lay petrified, salted corpses of trees long fallen. It was not unlike Jericho from a distance, but, up close, the sand was softer, darker.

Like most beaches in the area, a faded signpost named the ancient strip of coast after some old, white councilman, but a generation back, the men's team captain romantically dubbed it Driftwood Skip. Kit stepped from one log to the next, careful not to dirty her leather shoes.

What, did she just wait for another doctor, a referral to go through? And when that would be she had no idea.

Waves foamed at an encampment of rocks. Fingers of black water swirled in and churned into froth, then spewed back out with the undertow. A doctor had prescribed her drugs for her vagina. She was going to need physiotherapy, not for a strained muscle, but for sex. She was being referred to a vagina specialist. Somewhere overhead a seagull squawked.

Kit planted her feet in the grey, wet sand. Her jeans rubbed into her crotch, causing that burning sensation. She picked at the waist-folds, but couldn't quite rearrange the tight denim. Her lace underwear stuck to her skin like a membrane; she did a squat and it felt like it tore a bit of her flesh away. This she had always thought normal.

She plopped down onto the log. Sitting singed her vulva like a cigarette. She leaned forward to take the pressure off but it didn't help, so she stood back up. Cold seeped up through her shoes to her feet. She wished for her running shoes and a thin pair of split shorts.

After removing her shoes and stacking them on the log, she pulled her phone from her bag and a stream of messages blinked on the screen. Skimming the lot, she gathered that the pre-drink and after party for the upcoming Halloween bash would now be hosted at the Track Shack, due to either a busted pipe or dirty toilet water situation at the original location. Liv posted a row of smiley faces, and Emily confirmed that yes,

she would now be in charge of the keg. Kit tucked her phone back in her bag and stared back out at the ocean, her shoulders sinking; she hardly felt like drinking, yet also wanted to sit on a couch and get wasted.

This was not fair to Callum. It wasn't what he had expected, and hardly what he could have wanted. The tide swooshed in; smooth like concrete it spread over the grey sand, almost reaching her toes. A tiny bubble of hope swelled in her chest, the thought that he would declare his love for her and they could find a way to overcome this, but she knew the scenario would be impossible. They were undergraduates, and both too young to make that great of a sacrifice for the sake of a relationship, to give up anything in any form.

The undertow recoiled to the break of a new wave, then rushed forward and spilled over her ankles. Underwater, her feet were veiny and white, their colour magnified as if seen through a glass. Her toes tingled pins with cold. Anyways, no boy would want to be in a sexless relationship. No person.

The water sucked back, and Kit hopped up on the log. The wood was smooth as a stone under her numb soles. He deserved someone who could give him more. She would tell him when she saw him that night.

Callum lived a kilometre from her house, in another grungy student rental. She walked her beater bike there, taking slow steps along the pavement. He'd subleased the room last-minute, after his return from worlds at the

end of August, and didn't like to spend much time there, so she rarely visited.

It was dark by the time she arrived, stowing her bike key in her back pocket and raking her hand through her swoop of hair. He opened the door, wearing his square glasses, and she tros into the living room. His road bike lay in pieces across the bare floorboards, the wheels propped against a folded-up futon.

"Hey," he said, from beside her. "You alright?"

"Of course."

"You should keep your phone's sound turned on. I texted you earlier. I'm working on my bike tonight."

"Okay." She thought, *I want to be held*.

She stood awkwardly, and then moved the wheels and unfolded the futon. He wiped his hands on the grease rag. She sat down, and then stood back up. She said, "Callum something happened today."

"Is everything okay?" he asked, and tucked the rag into his front pocket.

"I went to see a doctor. I have this thing. It's called vulvodynia."

"Okay,'" he said. "What's that?"

"Last night. Sex hurt. Mona told me to go, so I did, and I have this thing called vulvodynia."

"Okay," he said. He hadn't moved. She stood facing him.

"Yeah." She sat down again, her calf against the bike wheel. She

plucked at a spoke like a banjo.

"Is it a problem?"

"I don't know," she said. "I think maybe."

He sighed. "So, what is it?"

"It's a chronic pain condition."

"Oh." He crossed the room and sat down next to her.

For a moment neither moved. Their breath was suspended in the air, a moment of stillness that seemed to take longer than it ought.

And then he was pushing the hair from her face, their lips together, then apart, then together again. He ran his hand up the inside of her thigh.

She pulled back. "Look, um, about that…."

He leaned over her and she fell back on the futon. She felt numb. He kissed her stomach. "Well, there are other things we can do…" Before she could speak he slid his hand between her legs.

Not that he hardly knew what he was doing, and maybe it was because of the pain at the appointment or the denim of her jeans but when his finger touched the blood coloured skin she sucked in a whimper of pain. She shifted to the side and crossed one leg over the other. He looked up at her, his eyes wide. She shook her head. Most girls did not hurt like this. She hunched forward onto her knees and stared at the dark mouth of the sooty fireplace.

She chose her words with care. "Callum, I don't know what this is. I don't know what any of this means."

“Okay,” he said.

She screwed up her face. “I don’t want to drag you into this. I think it’s probably something I need to figure out by myself.”

She felt him lean back into the futon, sit up straight and then hunch forward. “It can’t be that big of a deal.” The pieces of his bike lay in a purposeful formation; the gears, the cranks, the pedals, the handlebars, were all lined up, waiting to be cleaned and put back together.

She said, “I have a sinking feeling that it is.”

“So.” He paused. They were both speaking very quietly now. “Is this it, then?”

She leaned back too. Their shoulders brushed. “Maybe. I think so.”

7

She biked home from Callum's. She'd started out walking beside her bike, her helmet dangling from the handlebars, but the fall air grew damp and cold, and the thought of being inside invigorated her with more energy than she'd experienced all day. She swung a leg over and eased onto the seat. To sit on the hard leather gouged her vagina, her *vulva,* in its usual way, but at least now she knew why. She stood up in the pedals, pumping harder with her thighs and racing underneath the streetlamps. Her backpack jostled with her strides, striking against her spine.

At home she wrapped herself in her quilt and brewed a cup of tea.

Liv's bedroom light cracked under her door and spilled into the hall, and Mona had an evening lab. She carried the tea into the living room. Four days ago her biggest wish was to win a cross-country race at Jericho beach.

The living room was painted a pale pink, but in the shadow of the evening lamps it looked more like a dusty rose. A wide, beige rug covered the floor, between the cushy corduroy couch and loveseat. Mona had stacked her books on the shelves on either side of the dining room door—rows and rows of pristine technical manuals. A painting of a bearded conquistador hung above the fireplace; Kit had found it at a thrift store and decided it was too hilarious to leave behind. She sat down cross-legged in the centre of the rug, and placed the mug on the floor, between her calves.

Liv rumbled down the stairs. "How was it?" she shot over her shoulder, passing into the kitchen.

Kit didn't answer, but sipped at her tea.

Liv came back. "What's wrong?"

In a long, monotone rush, she said, "I have a chronic pain condition called vulvodynia which means chronic pain in the vulva."

"Oh." Liv said. "Shit. It's a real thing then." She crossed the room and sat down in front of Kit. She crossed her legs too. Blonde wisps fell about her high cheeks, and she looked at Kit with mild concern.

The brown tea rimmed half way up the blue mug. "Yeah." The ring

on Kit's forefinger pinched her skin against the hot pottery. The tiny bit of pain was comforting.

"So, does this mean you can't have sex?" Her voice was incredulous.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Did you tell Callum?"

"Yes."

"At least he didn't break up with you."

"I think I just broke up with him."

The front door opened and closed, and the hall closet creaked open. Liv leaned across the space and wrapped her arms around Kit's shoulders. "I'm sure the doctors can figure something out," she said.

Kit nodded. Her throat felt thick.

"Can you do other stuff in the meantime? Until you can have real sex?"

Mona called in from the hallway. "Did you go to the doctor today?"

Kit answered in the same voice. "I have a chronic pain condition called vulvodynia which means chronic pain in the vulva."

"Shit." Mona came and sat on the couch, before inching onto the floor. She held her leg extended in a dorsi flex, a crew-length sock pulled up over her jeans and covering her ankle.

Facing her mug, with the ring of brown tea, Kit said, "and I don't know if I can have real sex."

"Why not?" Mona's tone was sharp.

Kit paused, and considered the answer. She decided she was too far beyond feeling, too far into it, to feel embarrassed. “Because P in the V hurts really bad.”

“The doctors will tell you how to fix it,” Liv said, and rubbed her hand on Kit’s knee.

“Well, that’s bullshit,” Mona said. “That’s actually bullshit. Penises are not necessary for sex.”

Liv laughed. Kit smiled. Mona rolled her eyes.

Mona asked, “This can’t be the first time you’ve noticed this. How come you didn’t know before?”

The question had haunted her all day, the answer rambling on and on without taking concrete form. Finally, something that seemed close to the truth hardened on the tip of her tongue. It was as if she had been finally given permission to feel something she had always felt. “It’s as if,” she began, “It’s as if I finally admitted to it. It’s as if I always knew but ignored it.”

Her friends’ blank faces betrayed their incomprehension. She didn’t know if she could explain. “I always hated tampons and bikes because they hurt. I thought jeans hurt everyone, and that everyone was like me, and no one said anything because it was normal and you weren’t supposed to say anything.”

Her tea was cold. She should eat dinner soon. She had skipped her second run that day, because she had to go to the appointment. She

needed to get to bed soon. She wondered if Callum would still message her goodnight. She sat on the floor, her calves touching a cold mug, her friends looking at her with unease, and she didn't know what else to say. She had a chronic pain condition in an awkward body part, a place she was still learning to figure out. And, because of it, she was now, in a strange new way, an odd kind of broken.

8

Dr. Blough was a tall, reedy woman, with a stiff red comb of hair and chrome glasses. Her office was halfway between the university and the downtown core, stuck in a tower at the corner of a busy intersection. After medical school she had specialized in gynecology, gradually pursuing an interest in pelvic floor health. Perched behind her messy desk, she rustled through the papers like a worm in hay, stiltedly taking Kit's history.

"When did you become sexually active?" she began, scribbling on a clipboard.

Kit swivelled and glanced around the cluttered office; the filing

cabinets and surfaces were covered with stacks of paperwork and littered with frames or travel mementos. This was her first appointment without a parent present, save the varsity doctor at UVic, but that had been in the style of a general checkup—throat swabs and reflex tests etc. A few feet behind her chair stood an exam table, its curtain swagged up against the ceiling. She didn't look at it. "Recently." She looked at her knees. "Last week."

The doctor's nose drooped between the nostrils. "You began to experience a sexual lifestyle just last week?"

"Or, well, maybe, over the last few months. Depends on how you look at it. Last week I did everything. For the first time."

Dr. Blough returned to her clipboard. She knew she was equipped to handle this kind of patient—she attended conferences up and down the western seaboard, and updated her understanding with yearly refresher courses. She also knew, though, from online reviews, that her brusque demeanour often turned away clients. Once, when drunk at Oona Hayes's house, she had let herself cry over this, but she never seemed to know how to affect her demeanour. She tried again. "Have you ever experimented sexually before this painful incident?" Kit answered much in the same manner, and the doctor immediately asked, "Have you felt these sensations in any other context?"

Kit's mouth was dry. She repeated what she had said to Liv and Mona. The doctor blinked at her, but made no comment.

The questions continued. “Do you have any allergies to food, pollens, pollutants, scents? Do you have sensitive skin? Do you bathe regularly and with what kind of soap? Do you douche? Have you ever had a yeast infection, and if yes, when, and how long? Have you ever had a urinary tract infection? Do you have a sexually transmitted disease?” All of her answers no, Kit grew increasingly uncomfortable, wavering into the single syllable response.

“What is your partner’s race? Can you describe the size of your partner? Do you know your partner’s sexual history? Does their appendage have anything attached to it?” This last Kit asked the doctor to repeat, and, reddening, confirmed that, no, Callum did not have any piercings. The doctor’s pronouns stayed gender-neutral, and in a stuttering adjunct, Kit clarified that she was heterosexual. It was as if she were in discussion with not a person but a brain, with a thousand questions weeding through a thousand answers yet searching for something that would prove obvious.

“Were you able to tolerate the pain? Would you describe yourself as having a high or low pain tolerance? Were you able to reach an orgasmic state? Have you ever reached as orgasmic state with this partner?” Here, Kit stared blankly, answering a wide, confused yes too all. Dr. Blough asked again “Have you ever had an orgasm?”

Kit mumbled that yes, she had done that, at least on her own, and had come close already with Callum. She thanked her stars that she had

attended this appointment alone.

Once the questioning ceased, from a shelf of anatomical figures Dr. Blough retrieved a three-dimensional plastic model, one of the female genitalia. It was coloured more brightly than reality and had detachable parts. Holding it out, she had Kit identify the anatomy: the clitoris, the urethra, the major and minor labia, the vestibular opening, the fossa, the frenulum. It was a basic understanding check, but when she stumbled over frenulum, she realized how little she knew; Sex Ed in high school had been vague at best, and too embarrassing to show any interest in studying. When asked to point to the painful spots, Kit pointed to the inner rim of the labia. The doctor nodded, sharply, and said they would need to perform a physical examination.

When the door closed, Kit removed her pants and underwear, and folded them neatly over her shoes. She sat on the exam table, pulling the paper sheet over her bare lower half and tucking her knees to her chest. The stirrups stuck out of the table's end like the antennae of a bug. The room was a medium temperature and, half-naked, she was not exactly cold.

Despite her frantic energy, Dr. Blough's exam was gentler than even Dr. Hayes. She moved carefully, slowly, asking for explicit permission before each dab of the Q-tip. Kit found that reassuring, and for a brief moment, relaxed onto the table.

The examination went slightly deeper into the vestibule, and since

she knew what was coming, the pain didn't take her off guard as it had before. Fleetingly, she thought of the breathing lesson at training camp. She expanded and collapsed, expanded, collapsed her ribs, the whistle of air dragging between her lips. When asked, she articulated the specific point that hurt—the rim, closer to the base of the vestibular opening.

"How does it look to you," she asked, finally.

"It's quite red and inflamed." The way the doctor said it suggested more, but she stayed silent.

Eyes hot, Kit blinked up at the ceiling. She wanted to ask, what's wrong with me, please tell me it's something obvious, something easy to fix. Please tell me it's all in my head, or that this is normal, and just a normal part of starting to have sex. She swallowed, loud enough that the doctor couldn't help but hear.

Dr. Blough tossed the Q-tip into the bin and snapped off her gloves. "I think I will give you a minute."

After the doctor stepped out, Kit slowly pulled on her clothes. She wasn't sure what to think, or wasn't particularly sure what to ask. She wanted to be told what to do, told how to fix this. Dr. Blough was clearly smart, she realized, with a sink. It was the brilliance of certain professors, the worst kind of professors, the kind whose minds could skip steps in physics equations or whose critical thinking extracted textual references far beyond the mental scope of an undergraduate. Such people often could not relay their understanding to their students.

"It will be alright," the doctor said, sitting back to at her desk. "I agree with my colleague that this appears to be vulvodynia, though we should start to rule out other causes. These include sensitivities, irritations, or other factors." Kit shifted in the stiff chair, wrapping her feet around the base of the legs and willing herself to be still.

The doctor rushed onward, her voice rising with either nerves or enthusiasm, and she rifled through the pages on her desk, picking up one document and placing it down for another, only to do the same again. "There are many different philosophies surrounding vulvodynia treatment." From a drawer she pulled out an artificial inseminator, the long tube dangling from her fist. "I have women come in who want to get pregnant, but they cannot experience penetration, so we find ways to work around that."

She dropped it on her desk, and from another drawer procured a box, which she opened with a flourish. Nine sticks nestled in foam casings; they were rounded at the top and ranged from pencil thin to the width of a man's fist. "You'll need to order a set of these. I recommend them to most patients."

She closed the box and tossed it on the desk. From another drawer she removed a lumpy, flesh-coloured rubber plate. With a jolt Kit realized it was a pelvic floor, complete with a vaginal opening. "Some couples find this helpful," the doctor was saying, "Male partners can use this to simulate penetration. You place it in between the thighs." She held it out

to Kit, as if she wanted her to touch it, handle it. “In the meantime, you and your partner could—“

“Wait, wait,” Kit cried. “Please stop. Please stop.”

The doctor retracted the model vulva and lifted her glasses above her head. “Yes?”

Kit blurted out. “What is vulvodynia? I still feel like I don’t even know.”

The doctor placed the model on top of a stack, and folded her hands. Her voice wasn’t unkind, “It’s a chronic pain condition.”

“Yes, yes, I know that. But is it normal? How many people have it?”

“It’s not uncommon. Around fifteen percent of women experience it in their lifetime.”

“So, there must be a way to fix it then. If it’s that common.”

There was a long pause, one that seemed to indicate more than anything the doctor had offered yet. “We diagnose vulvodynia,” she began, “when it’s apparent that there are no known causes to the symptoms, or solution. It’s pain left inexplicable.”

“Oh,” Kit said.

“I could be wrong. We haven’t run the tests yet.”

“Okay.”

“You never know.”

Kit said nothing.

“Well,” the doctor snapped onward. “There are treatments we can

try." She opened another drawer, and Kit sank back into the chair, her entire body heavy. She listened to the rant of medications, of numbing creams, of possibilities, of names of physical therapists. Kit sat still and listened.

Liv picked her up after the appointment.

"How was it," she asked, as Kit opened the car door.

"Fine."

Liv started the engine. "Well, what did she say? Did she tell you how to fix it?"

Kit buckled her seatbelt. "Can we just go home?" She stared out the windshield, and said no more. After a minute, Liv switched on the radio.

The club was hot and dark and packed with runners from schools across the country. Electronic music blasted from speakers as the crowd shouted and danced, the rainbow spotlights highlighting the pulsing silhouettes. Kit pushed through the hardened, sweaty bodies. Faces blurred and her head spun deliciously. The cross-country championship after party was athletes-only, and, there, everyone got out-of-their-minds hammered.

She found Liv at the bar, scrolling through her phone. Kit grabbed a wad of her yellow hair and yanked. "Put that away. Let's do shots!" After passing over her credit card she gathered a group of girls and the bartender lined up a row of tequila. They shot them back, and sucking on

her lime Kit wrapped her arms around Liv's waist. "Proud of you baby." The music pounded.

Liv laughed, "Fuck you. I ran like goddamn shit."

A Toronto girl dropped the lime into her glass. Out of running gear and with a full face of makeup, Kit barely recognized her, vaguely recognizing her as some sort of competitor. "Congrats on today!" the girl said, and wiped the corners of her mouth. Kit had crossed the line in fourteenth, just barely making all-Canadian status. "Thornborough fucking carried you guys."

Liv said, "Mona's a fucking boss."

"Ya. She was on my shoulder with five hundred to go and all I could think was fuck me, fuck me, fuck me." She ran her fingers through her hair. "Kit, you ran gritty too, what with that massive kick."

Through the dark blur that was her vision, Kit realized that underneath that thick makeup was the silver medalist. "Thanks!" Kit grabbed her credit card and tucked it into her bra.

In behind her, a cluster of Quebecois athletes bumped and shoved and hollered. "And I tell the owner," said a girl with a thick accent, "we don't need couches! We dance!" The cry erupted into a cheer. The deejay in the corner faded into a remix of a chart-topping pop song.

"Fuck yeah!" Liv shouted. "Let's go."

Kit grabbed Liv's hand and they weeded into the tight, dark throng. The girls' hair matted with sweat and boys unbuttoned their shirts to

their waists, the fabric flopping about their hollow chests. Glowsticks circled people's necks and when the beat dropped the crowd jumped up, alcohol flying from their open bottles. Exhausted from the race, caged in from the long season, and thirsty from three dry months, no one wanted anything except to drink and dance and drink and fuck. Hands clawed from runner to runner, groping each other and grinding hard with the nearest person, their bodies screaming from the explosion of manic energy. Their aerobic systems primed them to go all night, and they swayed their heads to a beat they would have forgotten by the time they boarded the flight home.

A sticky hand grabbed the back of her neck, and dazedly, Kit spun around. Jenny clonked her forehead against Kit's. "Have you seen Mona?" she shouted into Kit's face. She leaned onto Kit's shoulders, a bottle of champagne clutched in her fist.

"No!" Kit shouted back, "I'm drunk as fuck!"

"What?! You wanna fuck someone?"

"Yes!" She shouted. "I fucking really do. Where's Callum?"

"Right here."

Kit spun around again and bumped into his chest. She grabbed his back and his hips ground into hers. They hadn't spoken much over the past few weeks, both of them openly blaming school, tapering, the upcoming championships. His button-down was soaked with hot sweat and she slid her hands up against his slippery skin.

He'd knotted his tie around his head like a headband, and the tail dangled down his neck. "How've you been?" She read his lips more than heard his words.

"You ran like shit!" she shouted into his glinting collarbone. "Come on triathlon boy, you're better than that."

He threw his head back. "Fuck, I like you." He brushed the wet hair from her face and she grew hot between her legs. "Way too much."

"Good," she said, and planted her mouth on his. The beat dropped again and they jumped with the crowd, their hair and sweat and alcohol flying up and glinting in the frisson of the strobe.

"And, by the way," he said. "I want us. I want to try and make us happen." He kissed her back, and then shouted "Fucking shit!"

Her mouth open and laughing, she cried "Callum, dammit all to hell!" She grabbed his shoulder, stood up on her toes. He was wiry and sticky and she could feel him breathing from his chest, feel the pulse in his throat. She pushed her hips harder into his, and arched back to look at him. He was so fucking hot. "So, this doctor gave me this medication," she shouted. "I think it might work."

9

"I am going to figure this out," Kit said to Liv, one morning over breakfast. "There has got to be a way to cure vulvodynia. I just haven't found it yet." The skirt of her dress swooshed about her tights, and she hurried around the kitchen, packing her lunch. She'd gotten up early to run, and her hair was still damp from her shower. She piled it up into a stringy, haphazard bun, and looked to her roommate for confirmation. Liv was bent over her training log, adding up the week's figures for mileage and time.

"Exactly," Liv said, without looking up. "You're tough. You'll figure it out. And that's fine."

Callum nodded from the kitchen table, where he sat, hand-grinding his coffee beans. Like most triathletes and cyclists, he ascribed to a culture of snobbishly precise coffee, and when he spent the night he brought his own aeropress, grinder, and mug. “Go get ’em tiger. You look great by the way.”

Kit shoved her books and lunch into her backpack, and then crammed in a change of running gear. “I’m off!” she shouted, zipping it closed and dashing out to the bus stop.

She sprinted down the street, backpack bouncing against her spine. Previously, she had coordinated her class schedule with daily practices and second runs, balanced weekends away at meets with the piles of assignments. Now, within a month of her diagnosis, these doctor appointments seemed to take up the most time. She saw Dr. Blough every week, and Dr. Hayes had wanted a follow up, just to check in. During the latter, she’d waited at the clinic for over an hour just to confirm she’d seen the specialist, and to hear the doctor loosely state that she believed this condition to be vulvodynia. Kit had smiled, thanked her, and left, mildly annoyed.

The wind carried under her skirt and seeped through the thin layer of her leggings. To reduce irritation, she’d donated most of her pants to Liv and refilled her wardrobe with skirts, keeping only her good-butt jeans, with the secret hope of one day wearing them again. So far, the lack of irritation meant her vulva was less prominent during everyday

activities, but, when prodded, the severity of pain had yet to lessen. The bus pulled to a stop and she dashed inside, out of breath. She swiped her card and nodded to the driver.

During the second appointment with Dr. Blough, they'd gotten into the meat of things. They'd run several tests, and the next week she'd returned to rule out any infections, cysts, sexually transmitted disease, and pregnancy. At the end of the first appointment, Dr. Blough prescribed lidocaine cream, a medication used to block nerve endings, and theoretically, numb the area. This Kit had first tried on her own, sliming the white coating onto the red of her vulva and letting it soak in for four minutes, before probing the area. It had little effect, but Callum had embraced it.

"Let me rub it in," he'd say, sliding his hand down her stomach. She'd kiss him while he rubbed her clitoris, but hold in the wince as his finger dipped into the tender flesh. It was easier to stay positive if he was happy.

She plunked into a seat and, unearthing her agenda, checked the week's schedule. For this appointment she would miss a morning class, but hopefully the skip would be worth it. On another, more recent appointment, Dr. Blough had referred her to a pelvic floor physical therapist. "She'll teach you how to manage your pelvic floor muscles. Sometimes, the muscles just don't know how to relax properly."

Physical therapy was something she'd grown accustomed to over

her athletic career. By now the poking and prodding, the shaking and stretching, of various body parts became an expected facet of her life. There was no strangeness in that sort of touch, and the idea of internal work seemed intense but not scary.

At the clinic, this new physical therapist greeted Kit personally. She was a short woman, her hair pulled back into a severe clip, her black shirt stretched over her very pregnant belly. Kit shook her hand and her grasp was firm. "Good to meet you, Dr. Keeling," she said.

The therapist smiled, in a homely, flashing way. "I'm not a doctor, but thanks."

Kit blushed and repressed the urge to slap her palm to her forehead.

Much like the doctors, though, Keeling took a detailed history. She wanted to know everything Kit had tried since meeting Dr. Blough. Kit told her about the lidocaine, the change to sensitive detergent, the new cotton undies, the wardrobe change, the bus pass instead of the bike, and the reduced sitting. "Have you ordered the dilators yet?"

"Yes. They're shipping."

"Excellent. If you don't mind, I tend to begin with a physical assessment."

"Of course." Kit had been expecting this.

Keeling had her stand, bend to each direction, and perform a series of single-leg exercises, watching for her patterns of movement. "You're

strong, stable," she said.

Kit smirked. "I'm an athlete."

"It shows." Strong hands swivelled Kit's hips. "Would you say that you have a high pain tolerance?

"Yes." Kit was firm, as she balanced on one foot. "Yes I do."

"Good. Good for you."

Kit lowered her foot back to the floor and turned to face the therapist.

She was already by the door. "Okay, well, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to perform an internal exam."

Kit agreed, and the therapist stepped out. She undressed to her lower half, and hopped up on the table. The only difference between this and seeing Greta was a pair of split shorts.

Keeling returned and checked Kit's hips again by tugging on her ankles, then tested the socket by rolling the legs side to side.

"We're doing hills right now," she found herself telling Keeling. "In a mileage building phase."

Keeling squeezed up her legs, then pressed her hands into Kit's abdomen. Her own stomach butted against the table and Kit wondered if she was at all uncomfortable. "Do you have any races coming up?"

"Nothing until the new year," she said. "We race indoors then."

"Alright," Keeling said. "If you don't mind, just bend your knees and relax." She snapped on a pair of gloves, and trailed a line of lubricant over

her index finger.

The slide of another person's fingers still caught Kit off guard. Keeling moved much more quickly than the two doctors, and with the smooth glide of a practiced hand, slipped a gloved finger into Kit's vagina. The touch twisted with the usual hot burn and the canal strained at the fullness. She was growing accustomed to tolerating the pain.

Keeling's finger pushed against the walls of the canal, and as it moved the tissue began to rip. Kit exhaled, wrapping her mind around the pain, discarding the paradox of the situation. She knew it wasn't ripping, that the tissue wasn't actually on fire –she was being touched by a hand and not a lit candle—but if she had to explain it she didn't think she could find other words.

To lay on a table with a therapist's hands in her vagina was an eerily asexual experience. In the last month four people had palpated her, something she and Callum did sparingly, for fear of wearing *it* out too quickly. The clinic walls were beige, and a plant stood in the corner. There was no window, so the plant must be fake. In this bland, dry space, with no heated frenzy of lust, these practitioners could study her with their undivided attention and skill. Already, they probably knew her body better than she did, perhaps as much as Callum did.

"It's feeling okay," she said, more to start conversation than anything.

"You mean your vulva?"

"Yes."

"That's good. Your pelvic floor is quite tight," Keeling said. "My finger's losing circulation."

"Okay," Kit said.

Keeling asked, "Do you know what a Kegel is?"

"Yes!" Kit shot up and her body tensed, which resulted in a shock of pain. Immediately, she lay back down. Once, as a joke, Liv had gone through a phase and taught Kegels to the entire cross-country team. Keeling asked her to demonstrate, and Kit did, squeezing the muscles. It didn't hurt much more than when she was still, and that didn't make sense. She said nothing.

The finger swivelled in different directions. The movement burned in that awful, awful curling iron way and white spots dotted her vision. Kit closed her eyes and exhaled and bit at her lip. The finger found a line of tension, a single hot burning spot, and pressed down on it. The air exchanger hummed. She could talk through this now. "So," Kit said. "I have a question."

"Ask away."

It was the question that plagued her the most, the one she was too afraid to utter aloud. But this woman dealt with bodies and injuries and would surely know. "Is this all in my head? Or is this a real thing? A real physical thing."

Keeling quipped, "All pain is real."

"Yes, but is this in my head."

"No. Well. Technically, neurologically, yes. But it's coming from a real issue in your body."

"Okay." It was obvious enough of an answer, and she hadn't really believed this everyday kind of pain came from tricking herself, or from a psychosomatic experience. It had been there too long for that, though she either hadn't dealt with it or perhaps even recognized it until recently. She didn't want to ask the question that came next, and so, she settled into the long pause. If this wasn't in her head, though, that meant that somewhere, something was broken, damaged, or simply not strong enough.

"Well, the good news is, you have pretty good muscular awareness," Keeling said, and withdrew her finger, drawing out a line of fluid. Kit relaxed and sat up. "You have a lot of muscular tension, and I think we need to take a more global approach. That, combined with the dilators, should help."

Kit nodded. "Okay."

"It's a good thing you're an athlete. Your sport teaches you how to get through pain."

"Okay."

"I'll leave you to get changed, and be right back to give you your homework."

"Okay."

Kit watched the therapist sashay out. She was an athlete, and she

was tough. Even if it hurt, she could take it. Vulvodynia could be something of a test. She put her clothes back on and opened the door.

"Alright, homework time." Keeling re-entered the room and dropped to a squat. Her belly pushed up into her breasts, which almost reached her chin. "Do you know this adductor stretch?"

Kit copied her. They cycled through a series of lateral stretches for the hips and abductors. "That's good, good," Keeling said. "Do this routine every day, and book back for two weeks."

"That's it?" Kit asked.

Her smile was tight. "I don't want to overwhelm you."

"I can handle more."

Keeling stood up. "When you get the dilators, you can use them to let the area grow accustomed to stretching."

"Can I use my fingers until then?"

"Of course. But that's it for now," she said. "We're out of time." As if by reflex, Kit fleetingly wished for Greta. "Book again and we'll take another step forward." The door shut behind her.

She would be tough. She would be tough and strong and she would work through this. No one could handle pain quite like her, quite like the people in her sport. If anyone was going to have this condition it might as well be her because of anyone she would find a way to beat it. Or, she would be strong enough, tough enough, gritty enough, to live with the pain of it.

She dressed, settling her new cotton underwear over her stinging vulva, and re-entered the waiting room. A row of women sat silently against the wall.

In the elevator, she dialled her phone, and after a few rings, her mother

picked up. “Hey honey! What a lovely surprise.” Kit pressed the ground floor button.

“Mom,” she said. “I have to tell you something.”

“Oh.” The tone shifted. “Okay, dear.”

“It’s this thing,” she said, and then paused, listening to the light humming that was her mother at the end of a landline. For whatever reason, she couldn’t bring herself to say it. Finally, she blurted, “I had sex and it really hurt.” Her eyes pricked. “Like, a lot.”

Her mother laughed. “Oh, honey, I knew it!” She laughed again, and the sound made Kit’s heart hurt. “And don’t worry, that’s normal. All very normal. It gets better, I promise.”

“No, no.” Kit crammed the phone against her face as a wave of emotion crashed down over her. She pinched the bridge of her nose. Her vulva stung. “No, Mom, it’s this thing. It’s called vulvodynia, and I think it’s actually real and I need to explain it to you.”

10

With the edge of her blue-painted nail, Liv pressed the corners of the last of the sparkly nametags onto the locker door. She stepped back, into the centre of the room, and appreciated the changes she had made.

Each locker now bore a picture of the athlete, a smile-for-the-website photo, pasted on top of a gold matte, and circled by their name in swirly glitter glue. The rattiest of homemade banners were stuffed in the bin beside the door, and she'd straightened the abandoned shoe collection into a neat line at the back of the lockers. With the locker doors shut tight, the floor swept, the room now bore a sense of purpose and polish—at

least on the track-half of the space. Thank god. Towels and socks still were strewn about the basketball side, but the teams practiced at different times and she never saw the tall girls enough to stake them on it.

The locker room was her territory. She opened her locker, dropped her jeans to the floor, and stepped into her running tights. Mona was the captain and therefore responsible for building team spirit. However, the older girl did little more than what could barely be construed as "leading by example,"—occasionally, she made demands which she attempted to pass along as advice. She hardly knew what was going on with anyone but a few members of the team; she spoke only to her former roommates, Emily and Jenny, and sometimes she was silent with even them. By instinct Liv knew that real leaders bent down to the level of those they led. She might not be as fast as the star, but, next year, she would replace her in at least this way. Liv folded her jeans and heard the rumble of arriving runners.

The team began to filter in, exclaiming over her decorations, stopping before their lockers to admire her handiwork before getting changed for practice. Within a few minutes the room was full of hastily changing girls, and the decorations were forgotten. Dear god, they had short attention spans. Liv picked the bits of white lint from her dark tights.

Though some members of the team aimed for high performance, there was a mix of body types amongst the varsity athletes. To the trained

eye, the locker room scene classified the athletes: from their bodies, it was evident which girls ran for medals, and which girls ran for books. All were long-limbed and tight-muscled, but some were stronger than others, some raw and sinewy. Where Sarah's stomach was merely flat, Emily's eight abdominal muscles popped when she reclined on the bench. Kendra pulled her blouse over her head, and in her upper back, muscle and bone rustled and slid like a jaguar. Jenny's skin looked as if it were suctioned tight, especially around her eyes; it crinkled into fine lines whenever she moved her mouth. And, of course, Mona and Kit were flat enough to never really need a bra. Fast girls were never soft girls.

Without having to weigh herself or check her measurements, Liv knew she sat somewhere along the middle of the scale; there was a strength to her limbs, but a suppleness to her abdomen and thighs. Added mileage, though, was gradually taking care of that.

Hailey asked about Kit's whereabouts, and Liv replied that she had an appointment, and hung her bra on a hook. She didn't say it was for vulvodynia—Kit hadn't asked for secrecy, but it was clear that she didn't want anyone else to know about the condition. A bobby pin between her lips, she spritzed a body mist over her bare chest and pulled on her sports bra.

"Agh. My fucking hamstring's being a bitch. And I'm dying of starvation." Jenny tossed her backpack and it clanged against her locker.

Mona strode in, in her usual jaw-set, eyes-ahead intensity. Subtly, fingers not-quite outstretched, she nipped Jenny's back as she passed. Liv watched Jenny watch Mona unzip her pants.

Sarah ripped open a granola bar, nibbled at a corner, and held it out to Jenny. Jenny waved her hand to decline.

"You just said you were hungry!"

"Food does not comfort you. The pain of hunger does." There was humour in the way she said it, but also the undeniable sharp tinge of truth. She continued to get dressed.

"Eat something." Mona said. Liv rolled her eyes—she was starting to sound like a broken record and had a knack for killing the mood. "Your blood sugar's probably low."

"Thank you for your opinion. I do apologize; I will not be taking it into consideration."

Mona sighed, but in a nearly-happy kind of way, and Liv watched her turn back to her task. Emily and Sarah started complaining about schoolwork and their busy schedules, and Liv didn't care to listen; every varsity runner in the country had the same problem as them—what was the point in complaining?

Inside her locker, Mona had tacked photos from her years on the team, her bib number from the day she qualified for the national team. Though she never referenced it directly, never shared her experiences outside university track with the rest of the girls, it was always there,

always on the edge of conversations. Blood sugar levels to hell. Liv watched Hailey flatten her hands to her stomach and pinch at the skin.

They all knew Mona worked harder than any of them, and as unpleasant as extra core workouts and surgery sounded, Liv knew they all wanted to be like her, to live her life. How could they not, when she smashed onto the scene with heartbreaking ease, showing a despicable amount of potential for long-term international success? When she won nationals out of nowhere every runner in the country knew her name. Liv would never admit to it, but she wanted that life, wanted that short, hard body, and wanted it with a menace that was sometimes surprising. She couched resentment with sunny smiles.

"Hey Mona," Liv said. "How's your Achilles? Your knee?"

"Fine," came the answer. "Knee warms up well."

That was Mona-speak for "it hurts all the time but doesn't feel restricted when I run." Liv popped a hip. "So, you're not pushing injury, are you?"

"No. And I did forty-five minutes in the pool this morning, in case you're also wondering about that."

Liv smiled at her, sweetly. Mona's gaze narrowed.

Jenny slammed her door shut and yanked tight her laces. "We heading out anytime soon?" She frowned at the floor. Liv turned away from Mona.

Emily said, probably to Jenny, “You gonn bitch, you gonn run on yo own.”

“Can we wait a minute?” Maureen piled her curly hair into a bun and darted into the bathroom, calling, “I gotta go first.”

The girls tromped up the staircase, into the carpeted foyer of the athletic building, and eased down onto the floor to stretch. The men’s team emerged and joined them. Conversation picked back up.

Trivia sauntered past. Liv controlled her expression and turned her gaze to the already darkening outdoors, waiting until he passed before she could look back over. He’d made it clear nothing was going to happen.

“Hey Liv.” Mona was cool. “How’s Thomas?”

11

The silver alarm clock rang, its high, shrill bell breaking the quiet of the morning. Kit jumped over her nest of pillows and slapped the tiny darting pendulum. The sliver of a mallet drilled against her finger until, with the other hand, she flicked the switch on the clock's back. She flopped back into her bed and started kneading at the insides of her thighs.

Each morning now began with a series of exercises, one Kit understood in the context of athletics. On her recruiting trip, she'd been introduced to the concept of "activation"—a series of small movements that prime the body to perform proper patterns of movement. On the

concrete floor of the gym, crowded around the base of the staircase and spilling into the mouth of the athletic therapy clinic, the varsity athletes moved through a series of mini-exercises as they prepared for the day's hard workout. They rolled their thighs and calves on foam rollers. They mobilized out their backs in cat-cow movements, and they stretched out their adductors in a short lunge progression. Wide elastic bands around their knees, they squatted and walked forwards and backwards, the pull of the band providing resistance. Once completed, the runners finally assembled for their warmup run.

Kit had never seen anything like it. Plain and simple, she had thought it was stupid. She still thought it was stupid. Ever since she joined the team, Kit dreaded the pre-run activation, considering it a constant waste of time, despite Mona's preaching. But, as she told Brent, she did it. She always did it.

Finished lifting and warming the gracilis and pectineus muscles—she had googled their names—she moved on to the pelvic floor. She pressed into the pads of muscle, the levitator ani on the left side. She felt along the thick ridges of the pelvic bone, pinched at the tissue and pulled. Her vulva burned and twisted, and she prodded until she found the most painful spot, the tight mass of a trigger point. She dug her knuckle into its sharp centre and counted to thirty. Her eyes fixed on the nothingness of her room.

Then, she released her hands, and moved on to the right side.

When she was finished, she stuck two fingers into her vagina and twisted and pulled, much in the same way as Keeling now did each week.

This new morning routine she tried to reconcile as an activation, a mobilization for her day, for her life. She told herself it was necessary, that it would make her better; these muscles needed to be taught what to do, and she would work to cure vulvodynia. In that way, though, each day began with a small dose of torture.

After she finished working on herself, after the half hour ended and she got dressed and went down to the kitchen, her vulva would sear and she wouldn't be able to bear the pressure of a chair. The cupboard doors she let bang shut, she left a pile of dirty dishes in the sink, and she didn't seem to notice a trail of toast crumbs scattered down the otherwise wiped counter. She'd carry her coffee around with her and say little to Liv and Mona. The settling ache wrapped round her mind, sequestering her in an incoherent fog, and it drew her into her body in a new, consuming way. To them she seemed detached.

She began to see pain everywhere. On campus she watched some poor sop crutch along, boot raised in the air. In the changing room she stared at the scars along the inside of Jenny's arms, the healed white lines of a razor or knife. None of these things she had noticed before, and now the prevalence of acute physical misery became a pillar of how people moved through the world.

"Suffering was a form of Kempe's religious devotion, and it was a

key component of her spirituality," the owl-eyed professor said. Thick cursive was scribbled over the blackboard behind her, at the front of the room. "Her desire to return to a celibate life, despite her marriage status, will feature on the exam. So, take note." She turned around, bent to the side, and added another element to the yellow chalk list. In the margins of her notebook, Kit doodled a curved-blade knife.

The dark-haired girl at the front of the class spoke. "Are we certain Kempe's emphasis on suffering only comes from her religious beliefs?"

Kit glanced up. The professor placed the chalk in the tray and turned back to face the room. They were revising for the upcoming exam, perusing through the works studied over the semester and sorting out the key components. The girl continued. "Well, are we allowed to do a reading that suggests something else?"

Something clicked in Kit's brain. The language was so explosive, so full of suffering and yet so bodily in its descriptions, for it to only come from an existential crisis. The pain in the writing felt almost visceral.

"I don't know that we can extrapolate sexual identity," the professor was saying. "But—"

"There's a desperate anger to Kempe's writing." Kit realized after a moment that it was she herself who had spoken.

The class turned in their seats to face her. The professor was looking at her strangely.

Kit blushed, and flipped to the passage that had caught her

attention, and read aloud, tracing her finger under the lines like a child. "She lay beside her husband, and to have intercourse with him was so abominable to her that she could not bear it, and yet it was permissible for her at a rightful time if she wished it." She closed the book for emphasis and immediately wished she had left it open. "Sometimes she can do it, and sometimes she can't. Like she wants it but she doesn't. Later on the text talks about how it's painful."

The professor said, "Painful, yes, as in emotional pain."

"I don't think so. I mean, what if she thinks she's sinning because she's in pain."

"I'm not sure if I understand you."

Kit rushed on. "What if sex was really painful, and that's why she thought it was bad or sinful or against god or whatever. I mean, what if it's actually about her body. What if this pain she experienced was physical, and being forced to have sex with her husband felt like some kind of physical torture. Which is why her writing is so, well, explosive."

There was an awkward moment where nobody spoke, and where Kit suddenly felt naked, as if every person in the room would know she had a chronic pain condition in her vagina—no, her vulva—and that she too had a complicated relationship with sex. And, she hadn't articulated the argument well, either.

"That's an interesting theory," the professor said. "That would have made an interesting final paper."

They moved on to review the remaining texts, and for the rest of the class Kit kept her opinions to herself.

After class the dark-haired girl stood in the hall, the belt of her peacoat knotted stylishly and her keys in her hand. The other students rushed in or out in a thick stream. Kit hadn't bothered to really look at her before, always rushing off to the gym or to run or to meet Callum, but immediately she saw this girl was strikingly beautiful, the kind of perfect, golden-mean features that make you happy to learn she struggles with acne.

"I just realized," the girl said, as Kit drew near. "She didn't write it herself. So your argument for angry tone doesn't work."

"Well, it was kind of a whim, anyway," Kit replied, zipping up her rain jacket. "I didn't think it through enough."

"You're right in a way, though." The girl's smile was genuine. "I'm Peony."

She remembered the interlude with the professor a month before. "I'm Kit." They had just completed the classwork for a second-year course, but this girl was clearly older than nineteen, more like mid-twenties.

Peony Shipp asked, "Do you want to go get tea?"

They took Peony's car down the hill to Cadborough Bay, the village on the edge of the beach where the team often extended their tempos and long runs. At the end of the café was a wide, circular window, lined with a

wooden bench, from which they could see the rest of the village and the hints of ocean in behind. They ordered, and Peony sat with her back to the window, carefully placing her tea on the rickety table. A stick of gluten-free biscotti between her teeth, Kit plunked down opposite her. Rain dripped down the outside of the fogging glass.

Peony unwound her thick scarf, shaking the water droplets from the cable wool. "She was probably illiterate. She didn't have a voice to write it herself," Peony was saying. "I guess we'll never know." Her hands were slender, but strong and self-assured in their movements. With an unconscious grace, she spread her fingers on the tabletop, her nails trimmed to perfect ovals. She wrapped them round her mug, and then folded and dropped them to her lap.

"So, you run track?"

"Yeah!" The biscotti broke in her mouth and Kit caught the crumbs in her palm. "How'd you know?"

"You look like it." Peony picked up her mug and sipped.

Kit raised her eyebrow. She knew she was skinny—a wiry, hardened kind of thin, the kind that only comes from years of work—but she was wearing a cable-knit sweater, and didn't realize that even clothed her body could convey so much. That someone could tell that about her irked her.

Peony's shoulders drooped low and long, her neck a graceful parabola topped with a dangling earring; a lock of hair fell from her braid

in a perfect wave. This girl was used to being watched, to carrying herself in a certain way. Kit wondered if she'd ever been a ballerina. Her hands suggested a pianist.

"I really think you're onto something," Peony was saying. "About the pain."

"How so?" Kit crunched her molars as if chewing her dessert, but really grinding enamel on enamel. "It just struck a chord with me."

"It," Peony said, "it strikes a nerve with me too."

There was something this girl wasn't saying. Kit realized she knew this because there was something she wanted to say, too. They stared at one another, Peony's brown eyes beginning to waver in their dark-lashed sockets. Kit said, "I have this thing called vulvodynia."

She might as well have not spoken. Neither of them moved. But then, again, she had spoken. It was out there, in the world, for another person to see and judge and know.

Her voice low, clipped, as if dealing a paid-for secret, Peony replied. "I do as well."

Relief flooded through her body and Kit felt her shoulders sink. Her chest buzzed. "If," Kit leaned forward, "if you don't mind me asking, how long have you had it?"

Peony closed her mouth. Then she opened it. "Definitely high school. But I didn't get diagnosed until about two years ago." She added, "I'm twenty four."

Kit was shocked. “Why’d it take so long?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you not wonder what was wrong?”

It was as if her whole body changed. Peony hardened, looking at her like a parent might. “No.”

Knowing it was selfish to be glad that another person had this condition, or to be reassured that som

eone with it could be smart and pretty and well-dressed, she swallowed the buzzing happiness in her chest. “I never thought I’d meet anyone else with it,” she said.

“You haven’t?”

“No?”

“I’ve met a few. It’s pretty common.”

So, there were others, then.

Peony set down the mug. “You can call me Pea. So, what’s your major again?”

12

"So, find out how she cured it." Callum dropped the dumbbell back onto the rack with a clank. On weight days the team was given free rein to schedule their own morning gym sessions and meet only for the afternoon team run. At seven am, Kit and Callum were the only ones in the room.

"Callum, I don't think she has." Kit carefully loaded a ten-pound plate onto a bar and clipped shut the safety.

"You didn't ask her what kind of treatments she's tried?"

"No," she said. "You can't just ask someone things like that."

Callum heaved a kettle bell in front of a mirror and dropped it on

the mat with a muted thud. “Why the fuck not?”

The track team’s weight room was inside of an old squash court, an abandoned corner of the varsity gym. The twenty-foot ceilings gave the feeling of being at the bottom of a well, and the small, square door swung shut on its own weight, trapping in any sound. Scuffs and dents pockmarked the walls, marks from battles long since waged. It was a safe space. “Because,” Kit said, “this is a personal thing. It’s the most personal. There’s probably a bunch of things about it that are personal. If she wants to share she can but it isn’t my place to ask.”

“It’s a medical condition,” Callum retorted. “Doctors. The ones you’ve met are useless and haven’t given you anything that’s worked yet. Maybe she knows a better one.”

It was difficult to articulate why she couldn’t talk about this, even with someone who had it too. She said nothing, secretly hating herself for that choice but not knowing what else to do.

He’d been harping on a cure for the past week, him and her mother. Kit sighed. Her mother emailed her scavenges from the Internet, some scholarly, some more general, some whose mystical tone suggested they peddled nothing but nonsense. She just wanted to help. Everyone wanted to help. “Dr. Blough is one of the experts in the city. And research shows that most doctors don’t even know what this condition is.” And, she didn’t want to add, she didn’t want to share this with more people.

“So, you met another person with it. What are you going to do,

then? Make some sort of support group?"

She didn't answer, but wrapped her hands around the bar and jerked it up under her chin. She squatted down, and then pushed up, the weight of the bar pressing her into the floor. Her shoes were getting thin and she needed to buy a new pair. "It's sex," he said.

She squatted down again.

"I don't see why you can't just ask her."

She stood up, pressing out sound in a flat exhale. "Because." Kit dropped the bar and it crashed and rattled on the ground. "Because maybe she doesn't know something that works for a reason. Because maybe she can't find one."

Whereas Peony's eyes had looked at her with wavering vulnerability, Callum's were steely and unflinching, his jaw hard. "Then what are we even doing."

She went cold. "What do you mean."

"I mean, what are *we* doing."

As she had with Peony, neither of them moved. The more appointments Kit had with her doctor and therapist, and the more articles she read, the more the literature skirted around the idea of a solution. The endgame they had never stated, but just left to float. His shoulders rose and fell, his lycra shirt staying smooth on his flat chest.

"It's defined as having no known cause or cure," she said. "You know this."

He turned, picked up his jacket and water bottle, and left.

Kit slid more weight onto the bar. She jerked it up and it dug into her collarbone. She squatted down and pushed up, squatted down and pushed up, until her body shook with the enormous weight of it. It crashed when she dropped it, and she left it in the centre of the mat.

In her shorts and t-shirt, she struck out into the cold December morning. In this city there was no snow but it was a damp, heavy kind of cold, and she didn't care to return for more layers. The campus was still dark, a few taillights occasionally flashing through the streets. Past the edges of the gardens and the residences and the parking lots she ran on, down to the beach, through the uplands and into another residential neighbourhood, weaving senselessly through the streets as the crashing of the breaths drowned out the noise of the waking-up city. The sky began to lighten but she didn't watch the colours change.

Her knees grew weary, and her feet stung from the impact of the cement. Within the first few minutes her arms had frozen, and by the time she returned to the gym they tingled with needles. In the early light the brick looked more orange than usual. Dead leaves blew about the steps. The glass door was heavy. Inside wasn't much warmer. The clock in the foyer suggested she'd been gone over ninety minutes. It hadn't felt that long.

Her sweat dried, coating her in damp cold, and she grabbed her backpack from the locker room and ran home. Once there she crashed

onto the couch, pulling a blanket up to her chin and curling into a ball. She was motionless and tense and couldn't relax. She stared at the black screen of her phone, which she propped against the armrest.

"I'm sorry," she texted Callum.

He didn't message her throughout the entire day, and from the inside out she felt a slow, sinking dread.

At noon she got up and made lunch. She sat back down in the living room and stared at her phone. The room was dusty. On her laptop she scrolled through the articles her mother had sent, finding nothing of note, nothing a doctor hadn't told her before. This was still a condition with no known cause or cure. Nothing said that this could be expected to change in a week.

By two-thirty he hadn't answered her and she texted Liv to say she wasn't going to go in to practice, citing fever chills and a sore throat. The first indoor race was only six weeks away but at the present moment she did not give a shit. The thought of seeing him or having to run again made her want to throw up. The thought of not seeing him, potentially ever again, made her want to throw up more.

Because, really, what boy would stick around through this. What young and fit and attractive man wants to spend time with a girl with a painful vagina that he must navigate like a minefield? What healthy person wants a broken girl, a girl who can't give him what any other girl could? Kit's mind spun and spun in circles, and eventually she thought, if

he did leave, would she ever find someone who would be okay with her, would still want her, when she's damaged like this?

She wondered if Liv would know the sickness was a lie, and so she blew her nose into a handful of tissues and placed them in the garbage can, and opened up a can of soup, of which she took a few thick bites before dumping it down the drain. She rinsed the can and left it in the sink. She took her computer back up to her room and streamed a mindless movie. When the credits rolled, she stuck her hands in her pants and felt around the inside of her vulva, to the tender part that seared. Today was a painful day. She moved up to her clitoris, and even though he might be out, even though he might be gone, the thought of Callum stirred her. She rubbed in circles, the tiny bud hardening under her damp fingertip. She stopped just shy of orgasm, wishing for his tongue. It was unfair and confusing how some parts of it hurt and others didn't.

In the early evening, she heard Liv and Mona arrive in from practice, laughing and talking and breaking the silence. After a minute, someone knocked on the door. Kit got up, walked over, and opened it.

Mona held up a packing box, wrapped in brown tape and bearing a shipping label. "This came for you."

Kit took it from her. "Thanks."

Mona left and Kit ripped open the packing box, to find another box, this one white, fitted snug inside. Without the prescription tacked to the side, it could have been a shoebox. When she was a child she had filled

such things with rocks and seaglass, with paper dolls and scraps of ribbon. This one held the dilators.

She contemplated opening it, but instead, placed it up onto her closet shelf, between folded jeans and cable sweaters. She couldn't look at it. It felt like too much too soon.

"What's wrong?" Mona was back at the door. Maybe she hadn't really left.

She answered plainly. "Callum and I got into a fight."

"Hunh." Mona played with the doorknob. "Which one of you is wrong?"

Kit didn't answer.

Mona gave her a questioning look.

Kit said, "I'm going to go see him."

Callum's bungalow bordered a busy main drag, a fact reflected by the dirt and grime of the front elevation. On the crooked front walk, Kit stepped over red solo cups and joint butts. His roommates belonged to the university's only frat.

"I'm sorry," she said, the second he let her inside.

He was in his cozy sweats, his square reading glasses making him look adorably studious. They passed through the grease-drenched kitchen and into his bedroom. His bikes were mounted on the wall above his bed, which was messily made, and the aeropress and grinder and bags of

coffee sat on his desk. He was too paranoid to keep them in the kitchen, because the roommates might steal them.

He said, "I'm sorry too."

Tentatively she kissed him. He kissed her back, then stopped, to say "Do you just not want me?"

His sadness made her ache. "Of course not. I want you." She put her face against his chest and they wrapped their arms around each other. "I want you so, so badly," she said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm aching for it." She knew the next part sounded strange, even to her, but it was true and she said it. "Sometimes it's like the rest of my body forgets that I have vulvodynia. And this spot, this spot inside me aches to be touched. And I want you there. But then my, my *vulva* hurts before I can ever get to that spot."

"How does it feel today."

She didn't want to lie again. It was impossible to tell him that earlier she had touched her clitoris and felt no pain but gone lower and had it hurt. The difference he never seemed to understand. "Today it hurts a lot."

"Oh," he said.

"That doesn't mean we can't do you," she said, as she slid her hand down his pants, her tone coy. Kissing him on the mouth she found him hard, and undid his belt. On her knees she licked and kissed and took him in her mouth. His hands slid into her hair and he gently pulled her mouth

further onto him. The shaft filled to the back of her throat. Sucking and rubbing with her hands she worked him and he came in a shudder. She swallowed his cum, then stood up and wiped her mouth. He kissed her.

Later, she lay beside him in bed, listening to the slow cadence of his breaths. The room was completely dark, and she put her chin on his shoulder.

"You awake?" she whispered.

He continued to breathe in that low, slow rhythm. She shifted a few inches to the side, settling the comforter between their bodies, to create space so her movement wouldn't bother him.

Again, she slid her hands between her legs. Palm pressed against her pubic bone she circled her finger into the hardening bud of her clitoris. She grew wet and her back stiffened, and from the point of her finger she drew out filaments of delicious, tender pleasure. She bit on her mouth to stay silent but her body spasmed and she came in a heady, light rush, a tiny whine escaping her throat.

Beside her, Callum breathed on. She lifted the bedding and sidled up against him, resting her cheek on his warm falling chest.

13

The back of Mona's hamstring was tight.

Running down the frostbitten straightaway, she quickened her stride to a near full effort and held the pace for a few seconds, before slowing back down. The bitter air stung her cheeks.

Cliff jogged past her, a headband over his ears, his breaths puffing out in silvery clouds. It was a cold December morning; the temperature hovered around zero, but with the ocean climate it felt more like minus twelve. She had grown up in Vancouver and, for her, this was frigid.

A thick pole of tension ran from her glute and down the back of her

leg. It tugged at the back of her knee, at the inside right of the socket. She glided to a stop. Biting off her gloves, she felt along the back of her right leg, checking for knots and massaging her hand into the hard line of muscle. She found no specific spots, and the muscle gave to her touch; it was just an adaptation kind of tension, nothing to be concerned about. She sat down on the track and checked her Achilles, too.

Inside her calf, what felt like two thick rubber bands ran down each side of the fragile tendon. When she flexed her foot and fired the calf muscles, the netted fascial grafting burned at the attachment points along the inside of her heel. She slid off her shoe. Between her forefinger and thumb she gripped her heel. Holding her ankle stiff with the other hand, she shifted the joint back and forth, mobilizing the tissues. It loosened quickly.

She knew she was different from the rest of the team in this way. Yes, she was faster than them, more successful than them. Unfortunately, yes, she had more natural talent than any of them. These weren't things she took pride in, but lucky gifts bestowed upon her by genetics and good timing. She was different from the team, though, in that she had learned to listen to her body. She felt the rustle of bones, the shifting of ligaments, the tenderest ranges of movement. When she'd returned from surgery, she spent months re-learning basic movements. She learned to stand tall and feel the alignment of her hips, to step with proper weight distribution on her toes, to run with spring from precisely the midfoot. With her career

on the line she'd had no choice but to learn this new language.

On Saturday mornings the team warmed up on the backstretch, piling their gear under the stacks of hurdles and whizzing past the metal bleachers.

Mona launched into another stride, relishing the speed and the whirl of her legs in the cold. She dodged a trio of 800m runners, slowed to a trundle, and then circled back to towards the startline. Bundled in their neon layers, Kit and Liv and Emily waited for her, their heads down, preparing their watches.

Even though this group specialized in the 1500m distance, their training involved running at different sorts of paces. They dropped down to run intervals at 800m pace, or up to 10k pace, to strengthen the different systems required for middle-distance racing. On this day they would be running a progression: sets of 800m intervals, beginning at 5k pace and quickening down to 3k pace.

Mona stopped beside Kit. The younger girl was rigid and wild-eyed in a rickety sort of way, fidgeting with her fuzzy wool mittens, bouncing on her spiked-up toes. "I'll get the first, and we'll rotate through?"

The group agreed, and once Brent placed himself beside the line, they took off.

Mona settled onto the rail, feeling the movement of the girls behind her, their energy pushing her forward. Someone was on her shoulder, she could feel it—without moving her head she ticked her eyes to the side and

saw Kit's bulky nose. She relaxed into the pressure, into the repetitive lift-feather-drive of her knees, and let her internal metronome guide the pace. They flashed through 200m, and Mona checked her watch; 37.9 seconds—only one tenth of a second off the designated pace. The interval leader was responsible for hitting the pace; too slow and they wouldn't work hard enough, too fast and they'd strain the wrong physiological systems. They'd all been training long enough, together enough, to understand pace and rhythm, to feel the difference between a sixty-second 400m and the same distance travelled in sixty-one point five.

They finished the interval in perfect time, still breathing fairly easy, jogging about and rubbing their hands to keep warm. "I've got this one," Kit said, an edge to her voice.

Mona let her. Off the line she tucked in behind, watching the ends of Kit's ponytail tuft out of the bottom of her fuzzy red hat. They were slotted to run the same pace as the previous interval, but immediately she knew it was too fast. She gave the girl a chance to slow down; they hit 200m in 35 seconds, which was closer to 1500m speed. For the remaining 600m Mona ran behind her, waiting for the pace to lessen, but Kit continued to drive forward, a hardened menace to her cadence. When they crossed the finish line, short of breath and legs heavy, Mona said, "too fast." Liv and Emily crossed the line, their presence waning as they stumbled in.

Across the lush infield—the game-day turf of the soccer and rugby

teams—stood the empty stadium. School logos were painted on the cement staircases and the floodlights were shut off. Kit asked to take the next one and, already jogging again, no one disputed it.

This is what Mona hated most about training in groups—secretly, young athletes liked going too fast, faster than necessary. It made them feel strong, brave, tough. They would gladly exhaust themselves before finishing the workout.

Kit's back was stiff, her head was down, expression drawn. To go out this hard was to self-sabotage, to disarm. To harm. There was no fire in her movement, and this wasn't toughness. This was fear.

The two minutes of rest drained out on Mona's watch, and they began the third.

Kit took it out in the same manner, and Mona tucked in, again, allowing her the opportunity to slow down. Already her legs felt heavy, her core weary, as she hung on to the back of Kit's angry stride. At 200m she saw the girl glance at her watch, but the pace didn't slow. Already the repeat was trashed.

Fuelled with anger, with frustration, for her own need to execute with perfection, she decided to take control. Mona threw down a surge and muscled Kit onto the rail, cutting down the frenzied pace with her body as a blockade. They bumped arms and hips, their spikes clipped their calves and heels. Kit stumbled, her breathing raggedy and laboured. Mona settled into the peace she had learned to find, the sphere schooled in

repeats of rhythm. They finished the interval at the correct speed.

When it was done and away the four girls grabbed their knees, palls of steam clouding their faces, heat wafting off their necks and from under their pushed-back sleeves.

Kit gasped. “What. The fuck.”

Mona stood up and, in doing so, left her peaceful state and re-entered reality. She was angry. “You. Fucked up.”

Kit stood up too, dragging up from the hips, but didn’t look at her. She began to jog. Mona proceeded in the opposite direction, round the corner and out in lane four. Emily shuffled along in tandem, and her presence quieted Mona’s bubbling frustration. She exhaled in a single, short burst. A group of boys ran past them on the inside of the track.

With twenty seconds left on her watch, Mona stopped in lane one and waited behind the thin white line, watching the numbers run out on her watch. Her hands were frozen and she rubbed them. To her left, Kit nudged along the inside of the rail, the starting position, her jaw and back a rigid line.

Mona was steely. “I’ve got this one.”

“Guys, it’s just intervals.” This came from Liv.

In an attempted calm manner, but what really came out in a nastiness she couldn’t control, Mona ignored the comment and said to Kit, “This isn’t a joke. This is your job.”

Kit glared straight ahead. Brent said, “Ten seconds, girls.”

They minced to the startline, and took off at the go.

Mona's eyes felt sunken, like they were flecked with desert sand. Her body was dehydrated.

The beginnings of homemade hummus coated the clear basin of the food processor. She pinched salt from the jar and sprinkled it in.

The blade whirred, she shut it off, then snapped open the lid. She dipped a spoon and tasted the thick paste. When she swallowed her throat felt a touch fuller than it had that morning. She set the spoon on the counter and peeled a clove from a head of garlic, picking free the mothwing skin. She popped the smooth clove onto her tongue and chewed fast, her mouth burning and eyes watering at the spice. Garlic killed bacteria, and she was not about to get a cold. She swallowed, and resumed chopping her bush of cilantro.

Mona was neat by trade, a fact that applied most specifically in the kitchen. Meal prep occupied a maximum of two feet of counter space, squared. Specifically the space between the sink and stove. Chopped carrots and celery sticks piled in cords on a cutting board, and she kept her knife rag folded, clean side up, to the edge of her workspace.

Kit, on the other hand, sprawled. Across the kitchen she was finishing some sort of peanut sauce, clanging metal against metal and swearing under her breath as she splattered the oily, gloopy soup. Bits of severed chicken fat and driblets of tamari sauce peppered the kitchen's

long peninsula, and a stack of greasy smeared bowls and utensils, including a potato masher and, for whatever reason, a sieve, mounded against the length of the backsplash. Mona grimaced.

She asked, "What're you making there?"

The answer was quick, in a light, happy manner. "Thai stir-fry."

"And, what are you doing now?"

"Well, I'm chopping this here broccoli. And, well, I'm going to take it from there."

Mona glanced over. It looked more like international hash than stir-fry. Brown rice clumped on a plate. "I see." She spiralled a line of hot sauce onto her hummus and strew across a handful of the chopped herb. She clicked down the lid and blended it again. She watched the green and red whirr into the beige; it became chunks, then flecks, and then coloured the beige to a warm, highly edible hue. When it was finished again she tasted it—it was mealy and fresh and spicy and perfect.

Kit retrieved her severed chicken pieces from the stove, where they had grown cold, and dumped them on her rice. She topped the mess with raw broccoli, and drizzled on the peanut-tamari mixture.

Mona said, "Want me to teach you how to dice an onion, the French way?"

14

After exams ended, after Mona and Liv drove to the ferry, it was time to be brave. She had not yet touched the dilators.

But her room needed to be cleaned before she too flew home for Christmas. Dirty spandex tights huddled in the corner between her desk and the sloping eave, and most of the clean clothes that belonged in her closet were cloistered in tumbled-down stacks across her desk. The heavy quilt and pillows puddled on the floor, the mattress bare except for the fitted sheet. Bottles of pills and tubes of creams now scattered from the nightstand onto the floor; smudged white fingerprints shone from the

empty plastic water bottle, remnants of this morning's application of the glaxal base. Kit picked up a hanger and slipped it through a cotton t-shirt. She opened the mirrored closet door and hung it on the otherwise bare bar; the grey fabric swayed in its spot.

The box of dilators still sat on the top shelf between folded jeans and cable sweaters. She looked at it for a moment, a rimple deepening between her eyebrows, before she gingerly lifted it from the shelf and set it on her bed. With her index fingers she removed the lid.

The set of nine lay in their styrofoam cut-outs, the same round-tipped cylinders that Dr. Blough had shown her. They were translucent and petal pink.

Apparently a former patient had bought a bag of carrots and shaved them down to size, as needed. Kit rolled the smallest between her palms, its residue clinging like crayon. They could be sexy, maybe, or at least sexier than vegetables.

She untied her sweatpants and pushed down her underwear, letting them pool on the floor. Her navy sweatshirt ballooned just past her hips, and from it her veiny legs protruded like a heron's stick limbs. She pulled it over her head and tossed it onto the pile of running clothes in the corner. The previous summer's tan lines had finally faded, or rather, the once darkened stretches of skin had greyed and dulled to the same sour pallor.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, naked, still twirling the wax stick

between her fingers. Stubby hairs on her calf prickled the backs of her thighs. She leaned over the bed, pulled the quilt up to her navel, and reclined against the wall. Her shoulder blades dug into the plaster.

She uncrossed her legs, closed her eyes, and counted deep, slow breaths. The sounds of the old house permeated the silence; the siding creaked, hot water surged through a pipe, the refrigerator hummed.

Kit sat up, pulled her laptop from under her bed, and hit play on the first classical composer in her music files. Glenn Gould's Bach warbled delicately from the speakers. She leaned back and slid her hands under the quilt, down her stomach and between her legs, fingers toying with the sharp bud of her clitoris, until she exhaled and a smile bunted at the edges of her mouth. At the thought of Callum's tongue she picked up that narrowest stick of pink wax.

It burned like a curling iron. She pulled it out, covered in slime. Her vulva seared and stung. She stood up out of bed and shambled over to the wall.

Her neck bent, she rammed the top of her forehead into the plaster wall. It hurt and her ears popped and she pushed harder, harder until she couldn't open her eyes, until the pain on her crown seeped into her skull. Her head drilled into the wall until this hot pain matched the other, until it drowned out the pain between her legs. Then she eased off.

She circled about her room, picking up the clothes, hanging shirts in the closet, tucking in sheets and smoothing out the quilt. She fished in

the sheets for the dilator, wiped it clean on her robe, and returned it to the box. The piano piece's heavy, low notes bleated through the melody, clomping down over the high trills. Dial the music loud, dial the thermostat high, dial the girl wide. Her hands felt watery-weak so she pumped the pillows with her fists.

Her phone dinged on the nightstand. A text from Callum flashed across the screen; just a nonchalant greeting, a how-was-your-day sort of introductory text.

She turned back to the box, and lifted the lid once more.

Back on her bed, chin jutted out, she clamped an incisor into her tongue and inserted the fourth size. The vitreous inner skin seared, and she hit start on her phone's timer. She held still for ten minutes.

15

Liv dumped the final pail into the tub, the cascade of ice cubes crashing down. She set the hotel bucket onto the tile; ice bobbed along the surface. Holy fucking madness.

The team had raced earlier that day, and everyone competed again the following morning. Icing their legs would help flush the lactic acid and reduce inflammation, and between events it was necessary. Everyone knew that.

She heard Hanna whistle low, and watched as Kit, wearing shorts and a sports bra, stepped into the tub. Without flinching she sat down

smoothly, the water gushing over her cabled legs. The ice clunked about her flat stomach and she started a timer on her watch. Above, on the shower curtain's rod, hung four sets of racing singlets and briefs, dripping dry.

"God." Liv shook her hair free from the braid. "Your pain tolerance is stupid."

Kit flashed her wolfish grin. "Fuck yeah."

"I'm going to bed," Jenny called from the hotel bedroom. "Try and be quiet, okay?"

Liv wrapped her towel around her head like a turban, to trap heat, squeezed her eyes shut, and dipped in a painted toe. The cold stung like a bee. "Yeeow!"

"Baby," Hanna said, from her slump on the toilet seat, flannel sweats pooled at her ankles. Around competition, her digestive system ran a bit too intensely, and her shit gushed out in watery spurts, sometimes confining her to the nearest throne. Her milky round face free from expression, she was using her fingernails to unscrew the pins from the bottom of her racing shoes.

Liv half-scowled at her, saying, "I don't see you doing this." Kit laughed.

Gripping the edges of the tub, Liv counted down and lowered herself into the bath, opposite Kit. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," she chanted as the cold leached into her skin. "Distract me distract me distract me!"

Hanna placed a freed pin on the back of the toilet. “When was your first kiss?”

“—fourteen. Dax Baxter.” Liv pushed her shaking legs against Kit, for warmth.

“How was it?”

Through chattering teeth, she stuttered, “S-s-lobbery.”

Hanna placed another pin on the porcelain. It clicked. “Kit?”

Kit blushed and wrapped her arms around her chest. “Eighteen. My prom date.”

Hanna smirked. “You’re really friggin cute, you know that?”

Kit shot at her. “Yours?”

“A random guy at a high school party. It was like a chicken. Peck peck.”

Her whole body quaking, Liv barked out a laugh. The movement disturbed the water, and freezing fissures wrapped around her submerged body like tentacles. “First sex!” she cried.

“Grade eleven, with my first boyfriend,” Hanna said.

Mona called languidly from the main room. “Keep it down. Jenny’s trying to sleep.”

“I’m done,” Kit said, and stood up. Water ran down her legs, draining from her black dry-fit shorts, which stuck to her skin. Despite the speed, despite how quickly Kit hopped out and wrapped herself in a towel, Liv noticed the faint traces of bruises on the insides of her thighs. She

picked at the ends of her hair, weaving a tiny, tight braid.

After announcing she had finally finished, Hanna flushed the toilet and bid the girls goodnight, before returning to the room she shared with three others. Wobbling on her numb legs, Liv drained the tub and got ready for bed.

In the far bed, the lump that was Jenny lay still, turned away to face the drawn curtains. On the floor, Mona stretched out on her back, eyes closed, green earplugs protruding from her ears. She was probably meditating or mentally rehearsing the next race. It was dark except for a single lamp.

Racing season meant they spent hours together, crammed into busses and planes and hotel beds. Tonight they were in Seattle and in two weeks they would be in Winnipeg, but really they could be anywhere, in any city, existing in their own secluded, travelling globe. They no longer felt discomfort in the close physical presences, nor in the silences that sometimes ensued. Unfazed by the mess, the scattering of water bottles and running shoes and energy bar wrappers, they settled into the rhythms of each other.

In her neon pyjama set, Kit crept about, preparing for the next day. After stacking her warmup clothes on her closed suitcase, she stood over the bed and smoothed her racing top onto the duvet. Carefully, she began pinning the paper number to the front.

They'd been friends for long enough that Liv felt she could ask her

anything. But sometimes those things needed a segue. “Hey,” she said. “Do you think I should get a tattoo?”

“Yes,” Kit said. “If you want to.”

“Okay,” Liv said. She pretended to straighten her already laid-out piles of gear. “Hey, Kit.”

“Yup.” Kit folded her singlet and tossed it on top of the suitcase.

“How are you and Callum?”

“We’re fine.” Kit didn’t look up. There were dark bags under her eyes.

“How’s, well, sex?” She hadn’t asked for a while.

“It’s fine,” Kit said.

Liv sat down, by a blanket bulge that was Jenny’s feet. “Have you found anything that helps?”

“I’m trying a new cream, with steroids. Amitriptyline.”

“Does it work?”

Kit paused. “Yup.”

Liv tried a different tactic. “I think Charlotte on *Sex and the City* had something like what you have. She tried anti-depressants—do you think that could work for you?”

Kit didn’t answer.

“Do you think it could be the way you’re built?”

“I have no idea.”

“I heard once that outies are more sensitive than innies,” she

continued.

Kit unfolded and refolded her singlet, and placed her racing briefs on top. “They, like, like sex more, or something, too.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” This came from Mona. Placing her earplugs on the nightstand, she stood up and shuffled to the bathroom.

“I have an innie,” Liv said. “You?”

Kit said, “I guess it’s an outie.”

Turning to the washroom, Liv called, “Mona?”

The answer was terse. “Mine is none of your business.”

Liv laughed but watched as Kit faked a smirk. She didn’t know what else to say, or what could be said. Her friend had drawn so firmly into herself, and it was like she’d become a different person. “Look, I—”

“I don’t really think about it that much,” Kit said. “Okay?” She dragged off her socks and pulled back the covers of the empty bed. “Let’s just get some sleep.”

“Alright,” Liv said.

Bypassing a yawning Mona, Liv returned to the bathroom and closed the door. Makeup and travel-sized hair products covered the vanity; most of them were hers, though Kit was probably the reason they lay knocked over. Mona and Jenny’s travel toiletry bags were zipped up, side by side, on the back of the toilet.

Liv brushed her teeth and then scrubbed her face with a cloth. Black and beige streaked on the wet white cotton, the dregs of her simple,

race-day makeup routine. Liv dragged her hands over her dry skin, rubbing under her eyes.

She wasn't supposed to know it, but she was pretty. She tugged at the blotchy skin of her cheeks, pulling it from the jaw, blowing air to make herself into a puffer fish. It was a heart-shaped kind of pretty, an ordinary kind of pretty, the kind that everyone was supposed to want. She dropped the skin, then angled her face at the mirror, flashing her eyes at herself.

She twisted her hair into pigtail braids, twirling the silky locks around her fingers just for the feeling. She didn't know what to do about Kit. Maybe everything was fine.

Taking a hair elastic from her makeup bag, she tied off the ends and swiped on her lip balm. She returned to the main room. It was dark, and everyone was asleep.

The mist rose off the duck pond in a thin, dissipating film. Thick cattails and wispy reeds grew between the edge of the trail and the marsh. It would be buzzing with dragonflies in the summer months, but in this coastal winter it was frostbitten and dismal. The sky was the colour of tin. Kit jogged along the water's edge, headphones covering her ears. She had forty-five minutes until her race started, and ten minutes left in the first phase of her warmup.

Today was about time, not about placement. By running a fast enough time, she'd automatically qualify for the national championships

at the end of the season. Without that mark she'd have to rely on winning a medal at the conference championships, which would get dicey given the competition. She passed the marina, the moored empty boats. Her limbs felt heavy and she surged into thirty seconds of steady state, to flush her legs.

Sometimes, in the stress of competition, or in the repetitiveness of a workout, a loose thought would ricochet about the brain, bouncing like a seal with a beach ball. She settled back down into the cadence, and switched songs, grabbing her thoughts and turning them to the race. A seagull squawked overhead. She would sit on Mona, and be dragged along to a fast time.

Inside the field house she stepped onto the blue track. Athletes in various stages of warmup whooshed past her in all directions. Noise and noise from cheering and talking and screaming and a booming announcer rattled in her eardrums. She darted to the bathroom for a final pee.

When she pulled down her pants she groaned. Spots of blood pooled in her blue racing briefs. She wiped herself clean, then folded a length of toilet paper and stuck it between her vulva and the fabric.

The field house noise droned on. She ducked under a string of bunting and hurried to the centre of the infield, where her team camped amongst the mass of bags and foam rollers and reclining athletes. A pole-vaulter launched himself over the bar, and a shot-putter jettisoned her ball of lead, which spun high into the air. Snatching a tampon from the

team medical kit, she thought, Fuck. I have vulvodynia.

She waited in line at the bathroom, checking her watch, watching the clock run down. Finally in a stall, she tore down her pants and briefs and shoved the tampon inside. The force stabbed and she swore aloud.

In an outside lane she hopped and skipped through her series of drills; she shortened her arm swings, high knees, butt kicks, and lunges, rushing through the choreographed routine she had done a hundred instances before, making up for lost time. A heat of men's 400m exploded from the blocks. The men charged down the straight. Vomit rose in her throat and she swallowed it back down; that was normal before a race, the product of adrenaline and nerves, nothing to worry about. The tampon string singed in her vulva.

Twelve minutes before her scheduled gun, she took off her runners and stuck her feet into her spikes. She yanked tight the laces, casing her foot as an immobile block of sinew and bone.

On the track she launched into a stride, winding up to top speed, leaning into the turn, and rolling back down to a jog. A few girls she recognized, and knew would be in her race, whizzed past her, going the other direction. She thought, I have vulvodynia. Vomit surged into her mouth. She swallowed and jogged on.

Mona stood by the start line, unzipping the sides of her warmup pants. Her jaw was set, and her quick movement emanated a bold power. Kit remembered her race plan.

An official handed them their hip numbers, and she peeled off the paper backing. Half onto the skin of her hip and half onto her brief, she smoothed the sticky side flat, the black and white stark against her blue bottoms.

When instructed, she filed in between number four and number six. Her throat was thick and she felt as if she were underwater. Heat rising off their skin, number four and number six's shoulders grazed against hers. They were probably healthy, probably fine. At the cue the runners bent over the line. She thought, I have vulvodynia.

The gun fired and she got off the line and onto the rail and the pack swarmed about her. Bodies tightened into a knot of flying knees and spiked feet. Elbows struck at her sides and someone clipped her heel. Kit stutter-stepped and watched the girls close in around her. Mona surged to the front, but there were too many bodies in between them, three in front and two wide. The pack needed to break up if she was going to move. She thought, I have vulvodynia.

The field passed through the halfway mark quick, and when they turned into the straight, Mona drew a gap on the field. The pace began to slow. After another lap Kit realized she was still in a blockade. She did not fight for room to pass the girls in front.

Racing has a way of making you honest. It demands that you leave not one drop of strength unused, and when you throw yourself into it, you strip down any barriers you may have. You confront the edges of who you

are; you see, plain as day, the emotional state you occupy.

More than injury, more than lack of fitness, and more than fear of losing, the baring of bald-faced truths is why people drop out of races. They balk at the pain because it whispers to them the things they don't want to know, the things they can't stand to hear. You are not who you think you are. You are not who you pretend to be.

Kit crossed the line fifty metres back and in a stupor. She wrenched to a stop and grabbed her knees and spat out white clods of fluff. She thought, I have vulvodynia.

When she did stand up straight, she saw Brent looking at her. He was to the side of the electronic scoreboard, unmoving. Beside him flashed her name in orange bulbs and she saw the time had been somehow fast enough. By some miracle she had gotten what she'd come for.

Sweat pooled down her hairline, and her legs were tired but not broken down, and she saw in his face that he knew what had really happened. There was a familiarity to his expression, and she knew he'd seen this before. He glanced down at his watch and she turned around, away from him.

Kit walked into the washroom, her spikes clicking on the cement floor. The thick smell of feces and chemical cleaner filled the room. She pushed open a stall door and vomited electric yellow into the open toilet bowl.

16

The hot tub needed to be cleaned.

Greta dropped the rolls of white tape back into the box and folded the flaps shut. The rugby boys had tromped in off the field, muck and grass dripping down their thighs. Forgoing the icy outdoor hose, they had crammed into the tub waist-deep, taking turns and sloshing the water to the floor. She peered over the edge. Dirt stuck to the white tiled rim and thickened the remaining half-inch of water to carob mud. She plunged her hand into the lukewarm sludge and felt for the drain, bits of grass clinging to her fingers. The mouth of the tub gurgled and belched, and she wiped

her hand on her dark jeans. She could always just take care of it in the morning.

The fluorescent bulbs cast dull grey light across the room, and in the quiet evening hours, the clinic felt more like a deserted hospital floor.

Mona, the only athlete left in the clinic, reclined against the concrete wall, ultrasound cables taped to either side of her knee. On the massage table and between her feet she had propped the portable, its yellow and orange wires in a tangle up her legs. Her finger rested on the dial that controlled the electric current. Break up scar tissue, increase blood flow, reduce inflammation—all well and good for one such a knee, at least in theory. Greta clucked her tongue. It had been the ankle first, and now a knee had flared. She could try and fix these kids, she could always at least try. From her own soccer days in the States, she knew that, for these kids, it sometimes felt like the worries of the world could be resolved with a warm hamstring flush and a cracked back.

Mona did not speak, but assumed a glaze-eyed slump at the back of the massage table. In front of the rest of the world she was Mona Thornborough, the resilient warrior, but inside the walls of this clinic, she became sinew and flesh, emotion and girl.

Though Mona's alignment and stability seemed fine, good even, the knee's fascia continually globed in lumpy rivets, tightening and restricting movement. Fair skin stretched taut over knobs and crevices, and looked healthy enough, but inside, right where the lateral patellar

attached to the joint, inflammation spiked hot pain with anything more pressing than a walk. The rugby boys could at least compensate, whereas with the runners, their primary training—pavement pounding—only compounded the issue. And it was the connective tissue that got them in the end.

Propped on her knees, Mona's arms flared at the bicep, waned at the elbow. She was healthy, at least, one of the few. Even hunched, her tight tank top settled in the dip of her flat abdomen, whereas Greta's own stomach still sank with baby fat. In the darkened window, reflection-Greta bustled in the parallel world, picking up errant water bottles and sweeping the floor. Real Greta closed her eyes; God almighty, get some sleep. Tomorrow she would run. Or skip out on the pitch and boot a few soccer balls. Greta locked her office door and smirked in spite of the mess.

"What?" Mona said from across the room. The girl's finger still touched the dial; Greta knew without having to ask, the girl would have turned the wattage up to a neck-sweating intensity. She might cross train as much as possible, to spare her body, but like the rest of them this girl craved her share of pain.

"Just a fleeting thought." Greta waited for the runner to ask her a favour, but thankfully none came. She picked up the broom. If no more trickled in during the next fifteen minutes, she would get home on time for once.

Boxes of tape, massage oils, and trigger point balls still in

unopened plastic bundles covered the floor beneath the tables. She also had to fill out the insurance paperwork for the morning. Greta had signed her contract after working with a few decent hockey teams, thinking she wanted projects a bit more diverse without dipping into the civilian masses. So many therapists start off believing they could only ever work with athletes; the dedication and serious approach to their bodies made them engaging clients. But they expected her to put just as much in, and at eight hours a day, five days a week, plus roading for championships . . . the job exhausted her quickly.

Greta, fix my hip, Greta fix my back, fix my knee, my Achilles, my metatarsal. The track team took up the majority of her clinic hours, or at least, collectively far more than any other team. A footballer she'd let back on the field with anything less than a tear, a break, or a sprain, but with these runners, a badly stubbed toe meant a day on the couch. Far from weak, they were fragile like openwork machinery; a complex system of simple pulleys and gears, they were unprotected by body mass and easily flicked off kilter. The linearity, the singularity, of their task made them most susceptible to harm, as counterintuitive as it seemed. They were excellent at moving in one direction, but anything that challenged their form caused a problem—an indoor track's tight corners positively destroyed hip alignment.

Natural vices, too, created problems throughout the whole body; a foot arch that won't engage could work up the chain and manifest in the

lower back. They all knew it. Mona was learning it. Greta always told the hamstring-torn field hockey girls not to be jealous of the no-contact sport: you may get blindsided with a body check, but they experience the total breakdown within their bodies.

Greta strode over and unplugged the ultrasound. Mona looked up, her hardened stare just shy of challenging. The skin of the leg was smeared with blue and yellow bruises. Greta rubbed her thumbs down the girl's IT band, over the taut fascia, down to the knee, which she knew to be chock-full of unexplained, yet-to-be-diagnosed pain. Mona ground her teeth to keep from wincing. With this one, there was no use in saying the words. Her body needed a break, but Mona would argue that she'd already taken one.

Greta squeezed the ankle, the one with the scar. "You mind closing up?"

Mona nodded and rested her head back against the cement wall, eyes shut. She taped her knee to the machine often enough that the electrodes would have stopped helping by now.

Maybe not with this one, but most of their injuries came from outside a specific exertion, especially with the endurance sports. Not many therapists subscribed to the belief, deeming it folly and impossible to prove, but she saw in these athletes the inseparability of mind and body. The stress of an external situation made their bodies react far more severely to what could have been a minor aggravation. Stress lived in the

muscles, circulated through the connective tissue,, and suctioned the body tight. The body never forgot a thing, not until the tension was stretched and rubbed and gone away. She didn't bother asking Mona; if they were capable of sharing, they always ended up telling her. Truths came out while she dug her hands into their muscles for an hour and their minds had nothing to contemplate but the pain they carried.

The men's rowing captain twisted his knee while skiing a few Christmases back, and as she massaged the inflamed issue, he had whispered it to her, begged her not to make him face the coach's anger. The lanky kid needed the break mentally, from one or maybe all of his life's pinpointed conflicts. The skiing came in reaction to the near-injuries, the just-missed medal at conference, the girlfriend who cheated on him, the sliding school grades. She kept their secrets, always. Later, she had looked the head rowing coach in the eye and said the odd injury must have come from an imbalance, from sitting on a plane or at a desk or from that hip thing a year ago. She put the truth in the online database connected to the athlete's training program, and the coach could check if he liked; even if he knew the truth, it hardly mattered. He might have already known what had happened, from social media, warmup time gossiping, his straight-up knowledge of the kid's body, or, his intuition. What did matter was that he knew that her choice to set the story in a certain direction made no difference to the athlete's condition or recovery, and that for probably a good reason she had seen it fit to tell the

bold faced lie. She pulled on her hat and mitts, fumbled in her pockets for her keys. It would be cold outside.

The sound of bare feet padding down the concrete hall grew louder. A shadow filled the doorframe. Shoulders high and tense, elbows tight to her sides, in hobbled Katherine Andrews. Kit Andrews. She said, tenderly, "Greta, can you fix me?"

Greta sighed and set down her keys. "What's up?"

The girl stepped into the room, wide-eyed; it was not quite fear, not quite desperation, but something more guarded than that. "My hip again."

Greta couldn't help the second sigh. "Hop up." If she admitted it, which she wouldn't aloud, she hadn't wanted to go home to the man and the mess just yet anyways.

The girls said quiet hellos, then both stared at the ceiling. Greta checked Kit's hips, tugged on each ankle of each straightened leg to feel the give in the socket. The right hardly budged. "On your left side." The girl flipped over.

Greta looked down at Kit, at the tangled web of lean muscle mass, and thought, this one. These runner girls, these almost-adults, they seemed a certain size in motion. With their bursting limbs slicing through air, the motion's blur made them seem larger, or stretched out and wider. They always thought they were bigger than their measurements. But under her hands, they were tiny.

Mona looked over at Kit, knowing she should say something, something about the rakish limbs, the purple forearm veins, the feathered lines about the mouth and eyes. Something about the broken voice. Mona reached into the tub for an ice cube and slipped out towards the showers.

Greta lifted Kit's t-shirt and pushed against the abdominal muscles, listening to the girl's lowdown on the week, the shorthand of mileage, splits, and times. Underneath her fingers the muscles coagulated to rocks, a gummy tissue filamenting between. These two, these two, the coach had said a week ago of Kit and Mona. These two could go one-two. A coach's dream, Greta knew. Kit prattled on, her voice pitching high and picking up speed. Greta gently reminded her to breathe and asked about her boyfriend.

Kit said it was good, going fine. He was stressed, busy with training, school. Greta had only met the boy once, at cross-country nationals. Nice enough, intense. He probably had a bit of an ego, a Spartan complex; most triathletes did, even more than runners. Wake up, swim, then go for a four-hour bike ride, then run later in the day, and then try to feel anything *but* invincible. Kit's stomach began to tremble with the releasing tension. "Just hang in there for another minute kiddo. Doing great."

Athletes dating athletes either worked or it didn't. The tan line had not quite faded from her own wedding band. Her son, who had just started throwing a ball, was still at her mother's, the unclean dishes in her own house that she would probably leave unwashed. The abdomen began

to soften under her fingers, the flesh becoming malleable. She slowly pushed deeper, until she could feel the ridges of the organs, the flat of the table. The shaking spread through to the girl's legs and up to her shoulders, spasming like a small seizure.

Kit had her knuckles in her mouth, red-eyed with tears gliding down to her ears. She tried to speak but her tongue was thick with dehydration, a slug in her mouth. Greta gently eased up her hands. "You okay?"

Kit nodded, opened her mouth and giggled, a high, perverted sound that didn't stop. She laughed and she shook and she laughed, her mouth open wide, tears pouring from her eyes, her hands shaking about her stomach.

Greta grabbed a blanket from the couch and threw it over the girl, climbed up on the table and hugged her from behind. The girl's skinny shoulders pressed into the softness of her chest. She pealed with laughter again, and Greta braced tight against the vibrating convulsions. God almighty. This one, this one.

17

Kit sat at her desk, the stupid history textbook propped open against the wall. She would look towards it to read, but her eyes would glaze over. After five or so attempts she realized she was still stuck on the same line. She closed her eyes and tried to visualize herself hunched over the text, rapidly highlighting and taking notes with what her prof referred to as *intellectual zeal.*

She opened her eyes. The thin font of the black and grey print began to meld into even rows of indistinguishable characters. She did not bother to squint and see if the words could manifest in her brain with any

sort of meaning.

The moments seemed suspended, as if belonging to fragments stolen from the lives of many others. Too quickly it seemed, the remaining glow of the late afternoon sunlight slunk beyond the horizon, and with its disappearance came the darkening of her room. She did not move to turn on the light, but sat as if tethered to her chair, slumped against invisible bindings. She did not notice the minutes sliding past, nor look down to the gold-faced watch still on her wrist. The streak of light from the streetlamp glazed the black windowpane like a sheet of rime. Maybe Callum would come by, maybe he'd text her. She slipped a finger between the strap of the watch and her wrist, tracing the pad of her finger along the cords of bone and vein. Maybe Liv would knock on her bedroom door and suggest they paint their nails and braid each other's hair and take those stupid personality quizzes. Maybe Mona would walk in, take a quick scope of her sitting here mope-a-dope, and tell her to move or to get her shit together.

Slowly Kit flipped the red book cover closed, and imagined pressing her face into the worn cloth, imagined inhaling the musty cardboard and glue bindings. Maybe the ethereal and timeless scent could ground her, somehow. But she did not do that either, and instead, just held the heavy book slack in her hands, its weight somehow dually comforting and moribund. A pipe rushed with water, the whoosh only slightly muffled by the wall. It likely came up from the toilet in the

basement bathroom. With its gentle ubiquity, loneliness set in like the cooling of a room. Kit flipped over her phone; the blue glare of the backlight broke the darkness and cast a ghostly shadow over her hands and stripes of her sweater. There were no messages.

She stood up, her hips and knees cracking in unison. Maybe she should try to laugh at the crack, but by then it would be too odd, even alone. Maybe all it warranted anyways was an inward chuckle, and though her mouth stayed heavy and closed, the thought stayed pressed at the forefront of her mind. She put her hands on her stomach and thought, I am a rack of bones. Her eyes readjusted to the darkness, and she undressed, dropping her clothes to her feet, to where she could not see them, and crawled between the cool sheets.

Kit showed up at the track for the usual Saturday workout, to find the rest of the team milling about, chatting in their usual banter. She dropped her spikebag and it landed with a thud. Torn up in places, the mondo track bubbled, age and dirt scuffing up the red surface. Still dripping from the night before, the bars and the bleachers of the stadium were empty and grimy. She listened to the chatter, the crunching of shoes, the dry whistling of the wind.

Liv called from the gate, where the rest of the women's team waited, fiddling with their watches, adjusting their ponytails inside their toques, the same scene as every other workout. "Ready to go?" Kit jogged

to catch up, settling into the back of the group.

Jenny was gone. In a short, simple email, she had sent a message to the team saying that she had decided to quit, mid-season. Everyone knew why, but no one came out to say it. The cuts on the insides of her arms had long since scarred over, but deeply rooted demons don't fully disappear. Mona was quiet, in a shut-down, hide-from-the-world sort of way. Throughout the warmup jog she ran at the back too, her stride in sync with Kit's.

The 1500m girls—Mona and Kit and Emily and Liv—were running two sets of four 400m intervals, at 1500m race pace. It wasn't a particularly difficult workout, but not a particularly easy one either. The focus was rhythm, riding a strained line but not jumping into a precipice.

In a single file they ran through the intervals. Kit watched the smooth glide of Mona's upper back, the jilty bob of her nubby ponytail. They traded off leads, taking pulls to the front to share the work and drag each other along in a perfectly connected string. Kit thought, we are good at this. We made ourselves good at this.

Coughing up phlegm and spitting, they shuffled along between repeats. As they worked through the set they stripped down their thermal layers, until, finally, in the last repeat of the first set they rolled over the startline in just sports bras and shorts, gloves and hats. The winter air swished at Kit's bare skin but it was better to feel light and cold than weighted and warm. Mona monitored the precious seconds of rest, and

when the first set was done they slapped palms and minced through their ten minutes of resting jog.

Mona took the lead and Kit filed in behind her, the same as before, the same as so many other Saturdays and so many other workouts. Kit settled into the hard fast rhythm of the pack—Mona in front and Liv in behind—striding in sync and bleating out a perfect cadence. Their knees drove sharply down, their heels float-lifted high, their elbows swung in clipped sort of treads. Kit's lungs began to burn at the cold, escalate at the fatigue, and she thought, I am good at this. I can take this.

In their training they did things few people ever set out to accomplish, especially running behind Mona. Her callused resilience might allow her to relax into the pain of the work, and she might make intelligent choices in her training. She might begrudgingly teach this to the younger athletes. But when it came down to it she'd willingly run herself into the ground, red line it hard.

Just before three hundred metres, Mona jolted and cried out and Kit crashed against her back. Mona crumpled to the inside of the track, over the silver bar of the infield and onto the grass. Kit stumbled a step forward and then stopped.

Curled in the fetal position, Mona clutched her calf and foot. Liv dropped to her knees and touched Mona's hands, rubbed at her forearms. Hyperventilating, Mona swore in a steady stream. Blades of grass and flakes of dried leaves stuck to her cheek and to the side on which she had

landed. Pain creased deep into her eyes.

"You're okay," Liv said, forcing her own voice calm. "Just breathe. Just breathe." Kit stood there, watching.

"No, no." Mona swore again.

Emily bent down beside her, touched her face.

"No, no,"

"You're okay," Liv said again. Brent was sprinting across the infield.

"I popped it again." She could barely get out the words. "I popped it again."

Kit didn't move. Sweat was beginning to freeze onto her skin. Her watch was still running.

Brent drove Mona to the hospital. Emily tried to join but from the back seat Mona said no. Kit watched the truck leave the parking lot, and as he left, Brent called to the rest of the men's and women's teams, forty-some athletes, to finish the workout. And, after standing in silence, they did.

Kit took the lead in the final three repeats, the energy of Liv hanging off her shoulder. Feeling the limits of her body, the lead, dead weight of the lactic fatigue, she carved through the rest of the workout, running into a painful, blind, thoughtless refuge.

No matter how schooled in beatings, no matter how callused and tough, the accumulation of such a load, such a willingness to suffer, gradually wears on the body, on the heart. Runners seek to find the edges

of themselves, to crest indestructible. And because they make that choice every day, twice a day, they sometimes find the breaking point.

Crossing the finish line, slapping her watch, Kit knew that she was fit. She'd hit the time dead on—last weekend's race was a mental anomaly. She spat out a glob of white fluff and grabbed her knees. She also knew, though, that none of it would ever be enough.

18

The fan whirred in the corner. Its subtle click reverberated across the sticky living room. Rotating from side to side, it blew a glaze of stale and saturated air.

The futons had been folded up and pushed back against the plaster walls, and the blackout curtains had been drawn aside. The window was painted shut, so that the afternoon light but no breeze fell into the room. Callum wheeled his bike towards the window, and with his foot, spaced apart the two bike trainers. Today would be a suffer fest and already it was fucking warm.

The hard soles of bike shoes crunched on the linoleum; a wheel slowly clicked to a stop. Chris leaned against the thickly painted doorframe, his wiry limbs making him appear taller. “Your girl,” he said. “She coming after?” A beige water stain seemed to drip from the ceiling; the bright blue, purple, and green of Chris’s pro team’s race kit painted him a peacock in a dirty dustbowl. The spandex was tight, highlighting the bulge at his crotch.

“Kit?” Callum sidled between Chris and the bike. He wore his own ratty kit, the one from his high school team; it dug into his abdomen and strained at his shoulders, and he regretted the choice. He adjusted the fan, and now it blew in one steady direction, towards the trainers. “Yeah, man. For dinner and stuff.” Kit had been away racing, but her flight would get in that night.

“Don’t let me cockblock you,” Chris said, and walked towards the stereo. As he brushed past he pinched Callum’s waist, his fingers sharp as incisors.

“How’s that skin fold score?” Chris pulled his phone from his waistband and scrolled. “So I finally get to meet this meat.”

Callum hesitated. Skin fold tests were a way to measure body fat. With a set of calipers, an examiner would pinch the skin of specific body parts, and then plug the data into an equation to determine the subject’s overall body fat. Callum hadn’t had a test since before worlds, and Chris knew that. Callum said, “Yeah dude.” Tearing Kleenex from the box on the

mantle, he balled a wad, bent down, and stuffed it under the raised corner of his trainer. “Wanna grab your bike? I’m set.”

Chris put away his phone. “She’s sexy as fuck.”

“Yeah,” Callum said. “She runs and stuff.” He knew that the explanation didn’t do the truth justice, but he didn’t want to give Chris more ammunition. He shoved his foot into the pedal clips. The crooked strips of ancient hardwood had raised and settled like tectonic plates; the bike trainer rocked just a little. This house was a shithole.

“She runs? I should borrow some earplugs?” Chris stuck out his tongue and, eyes flashing, lobbed a small black box in a wide arc. Callum caught the SRM and clipped it to his bike.

“You eaten yet?” Chris was unwrapping an energy bar as he spoke.

Callum had, in fact, skipped breakfast. And lunch. “Nah, dude, gonna ride the fumes.”

Chris bit into the bar and spoke with his mouth full. “Ya. Probs a good call.”

Callum adjusted the SRM on his bike handle. The gauge measured the power produced on the attached bike. Power, reduced to digital figures on a backlit, square screen. He would upload the data onto his computer and email it to Greg, his coach. Between that and his heartrate monitor, Greg could reconstruct the happenings of the workout—the cadence, the output, and the wattage. He would know the inside and outside of Callum’s body—or, at least, he’d know the important parts. The

breakdown of his muscles, the catalogue of his toughness, and the ability to withstand suffering and *work*; these quantifiable traits would all be represented in a clean and clear numerical transcript. "Thanks, man."

Chris had moved on to setting his own SRM. "You sure you wanna see your chick after today?"

Callum smoothed his face. "Dude, let's just focus, okay?"

"Trouble in paradise?"

Callum didn't answer, and thankfully, Chris shut up. They eased onto their bikes. Callum began to spin. If Chris knew about Kit's problem, he would advise him to dump her.

It had been awesome having Chris visit. They'd hung out. Gone for beers, played pool, rode in the mornings. He needed to go back to who he used to be; when Chris asked about the hip, Callum ended up admitting he still couldn't run on it, and after another few beers, added that he'd fallen off the swim wagon, too. Chris had slammed his bottle, leaned back in his chair, spread his arms, and offered to join in on Saturday's long ride. Blind solidarity, anything to help out his bro. And here he was again, helping out on the Sunday.

Chris rose out of the saddle for a few grinding strides, bent over the frame, and then settled back down. The concave line of his stomach barely puckered when he curled forward. Callum felt his own stomach bulge into the high waist of his bib shorts, a single roll of churning fat.

Chris didn't even need to do this test; he was visiting during a

down week, a pre-training camp respite. From the time they had been teenagers, Chris had basically lived at race weight. Less than four percent body fat, his skin wrapped round his wired musculature like brown cellophane. Callum sat straighter in the saddle, for the moment very conscious of his own middling bulk. His last test showed him at eight percent; not bad, but not close to low enough. Already his legs felt heavy, muscles as weak as an overstretched rubber band. Chris flicked his gear lever and Callum heard the subtle clunk as the chain shifted on the cogs. "Easy there stickboy."

Chris leaned back in the saddle and swigged a gulp of Perrier, his knees churning in the pedals, stabilized by his pared down core. It was an old trick. In his own cycling days, Callum had used Perrier to feel full, to make himself eat less. And, it worked. Before he started triathlon, before the hip went, he used to sit on bikes with that easy grace.

The screens of their SRMs lit up and blinked zeros.

Today's task tested their FTP, or functional threshold power. Chris stretched his long arms out over the handlebars and cracked a cocky grin. Callum knew that Chris had always been a workhorse, and now, the years of grinding through toil left him unfazed by the thought of incoming pain.

The test would measure power output as the riders' ability to metabolize lactate decreased with fatigue. After a few minutes of low resistance spinning, they broke into a customary light sweat. Callum unzipped his shirt and tossed it to the futon. Bare chested except for the

thin strap of his heartrate monitor, he leaned back on the bike and blew through his lips. This was going to suck. “Up in ten.”

Chris winked. “Get ready to suffer.”

Callum dropped his head. Tape wrapped round the curved grips of his handlebars, folded in places, the edges uneven. A brief gust of warm air brushed over his chest like a glance. The fan clicked, but continued to whir.

“Four. Three. Two, and up.” They bent forward, rested their hands on the centre of the bars, and cranked their gears high. The sound of whirring tires filled the room.

Power is the energy generated per second. Callum knew that what matters is how hard you can hit the pedals, how much you can generate within a set period. This would not directly make him stronger, but it would make him smarter. It would help build a better program, provide a snapshot of his current fitness. He snorted to the side and wiped his nose. The white glob of snot stuck to the brown fireplace brick. He had done this enough times.

The first few minutes always rushed past, and after three minutes they upped into a harder gear. Focus, he thought, and he settled into the push-pull, push-pull, of each consecutive stride. He listened to the drone of the wheels on trainers, the gritty click-hum of the gears. For years this had been his life.

Callum ran his hand through his dripping hair. He gripped at the

roots and pulled up so the curls wouldn't stick down on his forehead. After another three minutes he upped the gear again.

Slowly, the pain began to set in. With each increase in wattage his body began to flobber, to fail. His thighs grew dense, as if the tissue were hardening like clay. The lack of movement grew and strained at his joints. Spinning in place, pushing down, pulling up, as hard as he could.

Chris spoke. "Sure. You Can. Handle. It. After. Yesterday?"

Callum chose not to answer. He was breathing too hard already. He should be equally unfazed, able to chomp his molars and get through it.

Whether it was body language or pheromones, Callum's lack of speech seemed only to egg Chris onwards. "You didn't forget, did you big boy?"

Callum grunted.

Chris scrunched his nose. "Cycling. Is pain."

In that moment, his quads on fire, Callum longed to jump off the bike and punch Chris square in the jaw. But he didn't. His neck strained, his head felt heavy. He should be able to keep his head up, sit up and take the pain. Good cyclists always kept their heads up; it was a sign of strength, of dominance, and he knew that. But in a race dominance didn't matter if you got beaten in the end. He dropped his head closer to the bars and bore down bore down.

Yesterday's long ride had gone to shit. He had fucking bonked, and they'd had to slow down. He'd been watching Chris pull ahead, and finally,

finally, the growing distance had forced him to call out in pathetic retirement. Chris had glanced over his shoulder, his fucking smug face delighted at once again being the winner.

On the stationary bike, Callum's shoulders began to rig, his biceps taut and clenched. Be better, be fucking better, he thought. Be fucking better be fucking better. He began to choke on his breath, his mouth twisting into a frozen sneer.

The two tight figures hunched on spindly carbon frames. Their legs stroked back with their quads, pulled up with their thighs, all in one continuous, fluid circulation. With their revolution the tires blurred. Sweat siphoned down their necks, drooled onto the frames, puddled on the floor. They pedaled fast, hard, but travelled nowhere. His vision began to waver and in came that foggy lightness. His legs felt faint, and his gasps he could no longer control. Seeing stars, feeling the tread of strength that comes before the crash. A single thought bounced in Callum's thick fucking skull—why am I so terrible, why am I so terrible, why am I so terrible. The top of his dripping hair brushed against the handlebar tape and left a streak of dark, damp sweat. Stationary bikes in the middle of a bleak and bare living room.

And then it was over. Their SRMs blinked 19:59, 20:00, and Chris muttered "down," and sat tall. Callum still hunched over the bars, his arms dangling limply. A lactic pain coursed throughout his body. He did not think he could move.

After a minute, Chris spoke in a weakened and breathy tone. “You gonna cool down there?”

Gazing up at the grimy ceiling, Callum answered. “Fuck. That.” He unclipped from the pedals and wobbled to a stand. He ripped the SRM from the handlebars, and with it clutched in his fist, he staggered into the kitchen. Chris said nothing, but started to spin again.

Callum scraped out a kitchen chair and plunked down on his butt. It was over.

For a measure he did not move. The blank authority of space and time blinded him from his thoughts. He slipped into that blissful, post-pain nothing, the secluded space only cyclists, only cyclists, know. It was the heady place between exhaustion and starvation. He weakly knew that his body needed fuel, but that he had conquered its limits by pushing through today. That, too, felt like a win.

Inside the cavity of his chest his heartbeat, a double-tap pound, began to very gradually, very gently, slow its cadence. The mesh straps of his bib shorts stuck to his skin, and the top of the shorts rode flush against his pucker of fat. After a while he began to feel the weight of something in his palm, and he realized that his hand still curled around the SRM.

The black wires stuck between his damp fingers and the grey screen was now blank. Sweat dripped down every orifice of his body. It pooled on the seat of the chair, dripped onto the floor in a steady plink, plink. He realized he sat in a puddle. The squish against his ass kind of felt

good.

He had gotten through the pain; he had conquered his mind and his body and now it was over and he would be better.

The sound of Chris's light spinning wafted in from the other room. In the kitchen, his body began to relax, to settle, and his stomach began to gurgle. Soon it tightened into a fist. He knew that Chris would spin for a few more minutes at the most, and that he needed to be quick.

His heart beat once, hard.

It started to pick up its rhythm and he stood and opened the cupboard and rummaged in the back for the bag of marshmallows. He ripped open the package with his teeth, glanced to the vacant doorframe, and popped two in his mouth. His teeth sank into the fluffy cylinders and he closed his eyes as the starchy sugar filled his mouth. His face felt warm and wet and he swallowed. He glanced to the door again, then popped another two—his body needed sugar. He had suffered for this, ground through pain for this. Chris would be done soon, so he reached into the sticky bag again and put two more in his mouth and chewed quickly. He ate two more, then two more after that, his lips smacking frothy sugar. He kept chewing and swallowing the thick globs until the bag was empty, until his temples ached and his jaw was tired.

"Yo dude."

Callum spun around and thrust the bag behind his back, like a child. The gooey lasts slid down his throat.

Chris's eyes were aimed at his bike, which he had wheeled in from the living room. Callum hadn't heard anything; not the crunching shoes, not the gentle tread of tires over crooked hardwood. "Man I'm crusted." Chris growled through his lips, then glanced up with his truculent grin. "When's your girl get here again?"

Callum stuffed the bag into the top of his bib shorts, just above his butt, and sidled to the counter. Keeping his movements casual, deliberate, he retrieved two glasses and filled them at the sink. Steadying a shaking hand, he passed one to Chris, who took it gratefully.

"I dunno, dude. Later."

19

Shortly after seven, Kit tapped on the rusty screen door. No one answered, so she swung it open and let herself in.

"Hello!" she called, and kicked off her shoes onto the pile of boots and sneakers at the end of the foyer. She turned into the kitchen.

Callum and a tall, skinny boy slouched at the table, twirling water glasses. An empty bottle of sparkling water sat in the middle of the table like a centrepiece. They had both showered recently; their hair was damp and their faces shone clean. Callum wore trousers and a freshly pressed shirt, the cuffs rolled up to his elbows.

“Ya, I think it’s doable,” Chris was saying as he raised his knees and tipped backwards, so that the chair rested on its back legs. Two carbon roadbikes leaned against the fridge.

“Ya,” Callum answered, and took a swig from his glass. “I think I can hit up to 400 watts again, I just gotta drop a few—“

“Hey.” Kit let the door swing shut behind her, the hinges grinding in a low squeal. Callum looked up. There was a hardness there that she didn’t like.

“Hey,” he said, and seemed to recover. “Chris, this is my girlfriend, Kit. Kit, this is my buddy Chris.”

Chris stood up and held out his hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” A cotton web belt dangled from his waist, and the long end reached halfway down his thigh. She wanted to roll her eyes and say *Really?* But this was her boyfriend’s childhood best friend. She answered, “Good things, I hope?”

Callum stood up too, and retrieved a cutting board and a paper bag full of fresh vegetables. Chris’s eyes gleamed and he chuckled. “Is there anything bad to say?” She forced a smile, and he continued. “Skinny runner chick. Student. Cute. Is there more?”

She hesitated, and then decided to go with it. “Your belt. Do you always wear it like that?” She meant to sound teasing but it came out weaker than she’d intended.

“Yeah.” He smirked and sauntered over to the cupboard, pulled out

a glass, “Can I get you anything?”

Kit’s insides squirmed and she glanced over at Callum. He didn’t meet her eye, but sliced down the middle of a cucumber. “She’s fine,” he said.

Chris filled the glass under the tap, drank it back deep, and then gave her a look.

She swallowed, her jaw rocking forward. “You need any help, babe?” She never called him babe, and instantly hated herself for doing it. She could already tell that Callum was the subordinate in this relationship; he had been and probably always would be. That had made her want to help him.

“Yeah, come chop these.” Callum set the knife down and picked up a box of quinoa.

“Alright.” Kit stepped forward to the sink, and Chris shifted out of the way. While she washed her hands she asked, in a light voice, “So, what were you talking about earlier?”

Chris answered. “Power output on bikes.”

“Cool,” she said, drying her hands on the stale teatowel. “Mind filling me in?”

“It’s a bit complicated, Kittie, pretty sciencey. You wouldn’t be interested.”

This came from Callum. She looked over; his eyes dropped down, focused on the instructions on the back of the quinoa box.

Wordlessly, she picked up the knife and a handful of arugula from the bag. She didn't remember ever saying he could call her that.

They were making quinoa-stuffed bell peppers. Except, Callum said, they would cut out the cheese topping—too fattening. She knew he'd gone sugar-free and gluten-free, and expected any day he'd cut out dairy too.

"Ya, so, last week, Evan totally bonked himself in the six-hour," Chris was saying. "He ate four fucking honey crullers after. Stopped at the drive-through on the way home." Kit heard a cruel edge in their laugh and her face burned for the distant Evan. Chris was continuing. "Only premium gasoline for that engine."

Kit picked up a jalapeno and started slicing it into fine squares. Callum's hand closed over her knife hand. She stiffened.

"No, julienne them," he said.

For the second time, she decided it wasn't worth it. She picked up another pepper. Callum turned back to Chris, beside the sink. He didn't ask about the workout. She didn't tell him about Mona.

Chris went to bed at nine, and shortly after, Kit followed Callum into his room. They took off their clothes and got into bed. After twenty minutes of perfunctory kissing, he slid down the bed and lowered his tongue to her clitoris. She stared up at the ceiling, counting dots of stucco smear. She interjected the necessary moan when appropriate, grinding her teeth into

her cheek and willing her pelvic floor to relax, to expand. His tongue didn't hurt, at least.

After a minute of steady licking, he surfaced, wiped his mouth, and said, "I don't want to wear you out."

She thought he was trying to be sexy, knew that he was trying to make this work. He sat on the edge of her bed, perched like a dog—waiting to be told what to do.

"Okay," she said. Callum leaned back on his elbow. His warmth seemed to leave her skin, as if a window had been opened.

She leaned over the side of his bed, unzipped her backpack, and pulled out the large blue dildo, the one Keeling had recommended.

"Okay," she said again. "Just a sec."

Callum sat up on the bed. She pulled the sheets up to her breasts, and rested her head on the pillow. With the fingers of her left hand she separated her labia, then inserted the dildo with her right. She pushed it in slowly, more of an infusion than an implantation. The sinews burned around the silicone but it was bearable, not that bad. She closed her eyes and willed herself into mindlessness, willed herself to forget about the stick that scorched and just float in a sphere without it.

She relaxed her jaw and her teeth let go of the inside of her cheek. The flesh tingled as blood flooded back into the cheek; the glutinous derma thickened like a slug, ready to be bitten again.

She adjusted her grip on the slimy end of the dildo and slowly

angled it to the bottom left corner of her vulva. The twinge broadened a blaze and she exhaled through pursed lips. Always, always, she pursed the mouth; that was important, Dr. Blough had said.

Kit held still and felt a numbing begin to spread—not the dissipation of pain, but as if the flesh itself barred any further misery. A rock wall had been reached. She unstuck her chapped lips and said over her dry tongue, "Get a condom ready."

The sheets tightened over her leg and she felt the bed shift. Callum hunched to the edge of the bed. He sighed.

She waited for him to speak, waited for him to say what he so clearly needed to say. Then, when he did not speak, did not even move, she began to feel afraid for what might be on his mind.

"Callum?"

He did not immediately answer, but waited for a moment, that tell-tale breath of spacetime, the preposition to a lie. She swallowed and closed her eyes.

Finally, he spoke. "I don't want to waste one."

Kit opened her eyes. She chose her response with care. "Pardon?"

"I…I just don't see the point."

"Oh." Her voice was quiet. "Well, I do."

Callum paused, and her stomach filled with heavy dread. He spoke, careening out the words with callous trepidation. "I don't understand. Why you can't just get through it. It isn't like it's that hard."

She felt pinned to the mattress. The stick was cold inside her but she couldn't remove it. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

"I just don't get it," he said. "I thought you were supposed to be tough." She watched his back, the long line of his spine, and the loose skin over his bum. "If it hurts I get it. But it's just in your head."

She was an athlete and she was supposed to be able to take this. She knew that. But that didn't make it any easier. Her mouth terse, she whispered, "I'm doing my *fucking* best.

The reply came back quick. "Then be better."

Kit pulled out the dildo and launched it at the wall like a hammer. It hit and dropped behind the desk. She was never going to be fucking good enough. It was never going to be enough. This was a condition with barely a name, nowhere near a comprehension, and far from a cure. She wanted to scream *Be better? You try and be better*. The words caught in her throat like a rock.

Neither of them moved. She stood up off the bed, conscious of her nakedness, conscious of the air on her skin. She crossed the room and reached behind the desk to pick up the implement.

When she bent over, she realized he could see her vagina—vulva—and that suddenly made her angry. She whipped around to face him. He slumped on the edge of the bed, his thighs very white against the navy bedding. A red dent, leftover from his heartrate strap, crossed the centre

of his chest. His limp penis curled in his lap.

"Would you stop fucking calling me Kittie? That is not my fucking name. My name is Kit or Katherine. That's it. Nothing else." She grabbed her underwear from the floor and yanked them on. "I am not a cat. I am not a cutie pie who you can slap an 'ie' onto. I do not like nicknames and you need to fucking stop pretending I am the kind of person who does."

The last part flew out and surprised even herself. She didn't realize it was true until she said it.

"Well I don't know what else the fuck to do, *Katherine."* Callum heaved himself across the bed, and he stood up with such a force that she shrunk back. "I don't know what the fuck you're doing here. I don't feel fucking intimate around you. Ever. And I'm trying to make myself feel that way but it isn't working."

"Because we can't have fucking sex." She corrected herself. "I mean penis-and-vagina kind of sex." Chris could probably hear them from his room down the hall.

That pause, that irate beat, it also signified a struggle, a mean secret kept tight. Callum spoke. "That is sex. And if you pretend it's anything else then you're kidding yourself."

Kit curled her hands to fists and dug her nails into her palms. She glared at him, willing him to take it back, willing him to be wrong. She ground her nails tighter and the veins in her forearms popped with the effort.

“Look. I don’t want just another blowjob. I love you. I want us to be together.” Callum smiled weakly. “I want us to fuck ourselves until we’re blue in the face and fucking exhausted.”

His eyes softened at the corners and she felt herself soften at the shoulders. It was a lame attempt at a joke and Kit did not laugh. From the insertion of the stick her vulva vibrated with pain. Her underwear had absorbed the fluids and stuck to the tender flesh like a membrane. Its thin pressure stung. She picked at the bits of lace at her hip, trying to budge it without having to move, but the rustle hurt too. She blew through her lips hard. “This isn’t easy for me either, you know.”

“Yeah, I get it.” Callum stepped back toward the bed, his back to her. She watched him jerk the sheets across the mattress, smooth the duvet, fluff the pillows.

Of course, he didn’t get it. How could he possibly? He didn’t have the anatomy, and then, of course, he had no frame of reference. He just didn’t get it. It wasn’t his fault.

Kit slipped her thumbs under the edges of her underwear, and then slid them down to the floor. She wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed a notch in his spine. Then she slid her hands lower until she stroked his cock. “I still want you,” she said, her mouth against his back. She didn’t want to have sex. But she wanted him. He leaned back into her and in a moment he grew hard.

“Look, Kittie, either you’re overreacting about this whole thing. Or,

you're just not tough enough."

"I can be tougher," she said, again, into his back.

He stayed still so she manoeuvred around him, and sinking back into the bed, pulled him on top of her. He was heavy and she kissed his mouth. He grabbed her hip and shoved his penis inside her.

With the impact she clamped her eyes shut and bit into his shoulder. She felt sick to her stomach, but she thought, over and over, you can do this, you can do this.

He sighed, and said into her hair, "you feel so good."

That, at least, was something.

He began to thrust.

20

The clinic's stereo played on low in the corner, and the last group of basketball men shuffled back to their changing room, their backs hunched over with exhaustion. They had lost in the quarterfinals, after all.

Propped on a massage table, Mona pressed a bag of ice chips against her ankle. With one hand she held the bag of ice in place, and with the other she stretched the roll of saran wrap and bound it tight around her leg. That morning the doctor said it might need surgery again. She leaned back against the concrete wall and began to massage her quad. There would be an appointment with the specialist in a few days.

Greta stood up from her desk and glanced around the deserted room.

"Hey, Mona, I think we need to have a chat." Greta's voice rang with false cheer as she made her way over and sat down on the edge of the massage table.

Mona waited a moment, and then spoke. "I'm not ready."

Greta's tone softened. "Yes, I know." She reached forward and adjusted the bag of ice. Grey hairs flecked her blond crown. "But that's why we need to have it."

Mona nodded. Her skin had gone numb beneath the bag of ice, and she couldn't feel Greta's fingers or the resettling of the bag.

"You know, sometimes, our bodies have ways of telling us things that we don't want to hear."

The stereo clicked to the next track, a slow song by Fleetwood Mac. In the trainer's expression, it was clear what was about to come next. They both knew it, and they both could see that the other knew it too. Mona pushed herself up straighter and braced her shoulders, as if her body could repel what was about to be said. But she felt herself shrink inward, become small.

Greta visibly swallowed, and then continued. "And sometimes, when an injury refuses to heal, it can be a sign."

The squish of the table stuck against Mona's legs, and the concrete was cold on her back. Her stomach clenched to a heavy block. "Greta," she

whispered. “I love it too much.”

Greta exhaled gently and nodded once, then looked Mona in the eye. The sad, low song droned on. Her grey eyes flickered back and forth and Mona felt a slow weight drape over her shoulders. Greta’s eyes seemed to plead, to communicate, yet leave unsaid, the worst kinds of words. Yes, you may love this. You may love it with all of your heart. But there are times when you need to walk away.

“Honey.” Greta let go of the bag and covered Mona’s hand. The fingers were cold from the ice, but her palm was still warm. Mona withdrew her hand and crossed her arms across her chest. This could not be it.

Yet, the intrinsic weight of truth pressed down with clarity. This Achilles, this ankle, it would not heal from any kind of manual therapy.

With her good leg, Mona pointed her toes forward and then flexed her foot back. The intricate dance of tendon and muscle coursed up her leg. She was strong. She should be resilient, too.

She looked back over to Greta. The trainer still sat across from her, perched with, Mona realized, an anxious wait. The woman’s grey eyes were bright and shining. Greta continued. “This sucks. This really sucks.”

Mona held still and stared back. Four years of churning skin, of thumbs pressing into deep knots of muscle, had brought a level of comfort, of trust, that Mona felt with few others. Greta had allowed her to understand the washes of therapeutic pain, to withstand the extreme

depth of her limits; and now, just the same, she taught her to feel the barrier of the end. No one else could have made Mona believe it was over. And in this moment, Mona saw, too, the shadow of another ex-dreamer, of another young girl whose physiology couldn't withstand the weight her dreams, whose body gave out far before its time.

Finally, Greta unstuck her tongue from the roof of her mouth. "But please know, from me. There are a million things in this world to love."

Steam filled the white tiled shower, and Mona stuck her hand under the stream to check the temperature. She hung her towel on a hook, pulled back the curtain, and, bad ankle in the air, hopped into the cascade. The hot water massaged into her forehead. She sighed and closed her eyes.

"So, you're done." The words had slid out wobbly and echoed across the tile, but she hadn't planned to say them out loud. She sounded tired. She peeked out around the plastic curtain. The rows of lockers and benches were empty. Little rivulets of water purled over her right foot's long and scrawny toes.

She lifted her left ankle and cupped it in her hands, pressing her fingers into the grooves and crevices of ligament and bone, trailing her thumb over the scar. It was growing red again in the heat. As always, the body knows what it needs before the mind will acknowledge a need for change. It's up to the mind to relinquish what it cannot have, and allow the body to then move along or heal. Greta's words. Mona lowered her foot to

an inch above the tile.

She washed and dressed as quickly as possible, shoved her foot into the aircast and slung her arms over her crutches. The shelves of her locker would need to be emptied, but nope, nope, not now.

She kept her gaze down, eyes off the team photos, off the inspirational quotes, off the piles of sneakers atop the lockers. They were artifacts from girls gone and forgotten. To another generation of girls, that's all she would be—a lonely a pair of stained sneakers, the rubber soles worn smooth with a thousand miles. On her way out she flicked off the lights and, fumbling with the fucking crutches, pulled up her hood, to cocoon in the final vestiges of shower heat.

The yellow light from the foyer bled onto the dark parking lot, and the cool press of air on her skin seemed to seep into wide open pores. Each crutch-step stride landed with a harsh emphasis and her wet hair dripped down her neck.

It was painfully slow going, but she detoured through the centre of campus to avoid passing the track. The floodlights would be still on, left that way for the night as a sort of ghost light; the scene would only make her fantasize of an epic night-time matchrace. Her breath clouded and crystalized in the sharp air.

A breeze wavered the leaves high in the trees, but down on the ground the trunks might as well have been made from black marble, for the smattering of lampposts illuminated an aura around the straight

edges. Shadows obscured the buildings across the grassy quad, and she hobbled on in the near-blackness. A few students exited the library, zipping up jackets and rubbing their hands together for warmth.

One race stood out above all the rest. It would always stand out. She had been twenty, in her first season as a 1500m runner, and the race itself had been the outdoor national championship final. It was a good story, one of the best.

It had been a brilliantly sunny day, but the thick air had smelled of alpine rain, and the salt and rubber tang of mondo surface had settled in her nose. The brain built its panoramic memory around scent, and this particular mixture would forever recall that day. In her mind's eye, Mona watched her little self check in and drop off her bags, hop and skip through the drills on the corner of the warmup track, tie the four knots in her laces with jittery hands. It was like watching a younger sister, hair ribbon and all.

Now, adrenaline tingled through her limbs until she unconsciously moved faster, and at a set of concrete stairs she hurried down in neat little clips. Her good ankle seared and twisted up the back—she gasped and grabbed the damp metal rail and the crutches clattered to the ground. She breathed in, picked them up, then started forward with care.

She reached the end of the stairs and wiped the dampness from under her eyes. With the intellectual clarity that stems from shock, she understood that grief attains adrenaline's heightened senses.

In the moments before a race, time takes on a strange dimension. Little Mona had tied her laces, and she had leaned back in the plastic chair of the call tent. The seconds beat out more slowly than her heart; the dreaded minutes zipped past with a manic speed. The white tent walls glowed with sunlight, and red and blue and yellow sunspots shone through a fluttering gap, as if captured and sharpened by the cinematographer of an art film. She and the other finalists paraded out in front of the stands, where colours blazed with extreme exposures and she could feel the honed precision of each gravel pebble beneath the soles of her shoes.

Her heart had swollen in her chest cavity, and her blood twitched a steady rhythm beneath her shoulder blades. Her mouth had felt suctioned free of saliva and her gums had chafed the insides of her mouth. She was not always like this, not always this aware, and for that reason the day was special.

The ankle throbbed as Mona moved along the sidewalk, but no longer in that same violent wrench. That was just a twisted joint, not a shredded Achilles. It would be gone in the morning.

As Little Mona had strode out onto the track, as she had lined up between the shoulders of her competition, and as she had stared down the back straight, a physical crescendo of emotion built and built and built. At the cue, the field had bent forward over the line and the gun had fired and Mona had surged forward and the rest of the world disappeared. For the

space of fifteen hundred metres she did not hear, she did not taste, she did not smell or feel or see; or, rather, the senses flowed through her, uncaught fish swimming through a wide net's strings.

She had simply run. Buoyed by a brilliant orb in her chest, her legs swirling and churning with an elastic freedom. Her body had known what to do; her mind had belted the emotions from a wordless and epic ballad. She had surged into the front on the back straightaway of the third lap, and at the same place on the fourth, she had shifted onto her toes and left behind the pack. The burst of speed that seemed to come not from her legs but from the centre of her core, and she felt lifted, her feet hitting not hard ground but a conveyer belt of numb air. In the rest of her life she was not a believer but on that day she realized how the human form could fly.

In the final straightaway, when she led by twenty metres and she knew no one could catch her, the heightened sensory experience crashed back into a recordable form. The white finish line shone against the red mondo and the roar of the crowd vibrated in her eardrums. She ran across the line and punched the air, her mouth stretched wide in a soundless cry. Then she dropped to her knees. Her legs felt flubbery. There was probably a lactic pain she knew, but on that day she felt none of it. The bumpy surface grated against the heels of her hands. Her nose filled with salt and rubber.

Little Mona had wrenched her body upward, then stood and ogled up at the brilliant blue sky. The air thickened upon her as if she floated

beneath the crushing pressure of an azure ocean. Sounds faded to an underwater warble and her vision blurred as if tangled in a dizzy mirage. Someone handed her a plastic cup and she lifted it to her mouth. The water had tasted of iron and copper.

She left the track and headed towards her duffel bag; the world swirled with movement both too fast and too slow. A crowd of hugs and congratulations encircled her like a school of fish, and she floated through the thick of it. The pen to sign the drug test form hovered in mid-air above the clipboard, and somehow her signature appeared on the form.

Ansell Road came up quickly after that. Mona turned the corner, and streetlamps and front windows illuminated the dark rows of side-split houses. She lifted her knees carefully, set each foot on the pavement with the precision of a dancer, trying at least to savour the final moments of athletic identity, of her life. A car drove past and pulled into a driveway ahead.

People had called that race the greatest performance of her life. In the years since, she heard even herself referring to it as her greatest accomplishment. On the day, Mona had grinned when they put a medal around her neck and she had laughed at the reactions of other people, and all this had made her happy in turn, but even then she had known that none of those things made the day important.

Since that day, she had heard enough stories. Too many retired athletes had told her that when they looked back on big wins they wished

they'd enjoyed the moment's glory, relished in their accomplishment. They wished they'd let go of the ever-present thought-stream, where their broken-record mind sought faults and flaws, which may or may not have hindered their performance. Mona knew, crutching along the dark sidewalk, passing rows of dark houses, that on that day, for once in her life, she had been free of those plaguing thoughts. She had not been obsessing over the race, not planning the upcoming world championships, but had instead marvelled in the way the air itself seemed to breathe, seemed to seep through her pores and cool the inner layers of her flesh. She had dived inwards and touched the edge of what was possible. And that was the greatest accomplishment of her life.

Mona stepped onto the edge of the lawn and her shoes sunk into the soggy grass. She stopped again, stretched out her arm and brushed the sturdy leaves of the quince bush. Their waxy surface skated under her fingertips.

Through the living room window she saw Liv stride in from the kitchen, brandishing a bowl of popcorn. That was probably her dinner. More than any other act, telling them would make it real.

Her arms ached now, her armpits chafed and sore. Kit and Liv's running shoes leaned against the doorstop—laces tangled to knots, insoles pulled up over the heels. They had been stacked there at some point nearly every day all year, but tonight the sight stung.

When this year's national championship aired on television, Mona

knew she wouldn't be able to watch it. She would look up the results online, then tell herself was just another race.

The next year, she would make herself watch it, for the sake of the girls she knew. When girls who she used to beat qualify for national teams she would repress the longing to step out of her life and into theirs. And when the names of girls who were faster than her eventually stop appearing on startlists, she won't say anything. She won't contact them with a kind word, because she will know that there is nothing to be said, nothing genuine, that will help.

Eventually, she might be able to run some road races, maybe time trial a few 10ks for the prize money and free swag. Maybe as her body erodes with age and her flash-in-the-pan speed sputters and dies, she will tape up her foot and point blank pop in a marathon. But all the while, if she continues to wear through the rubber soles, she will always know herself to be someone who once ran, *used to* run, in a different lifetime.

She turned the handle and the door swung open as if of its own accord and she stepped over the threshold and shouted to the house that she needed to talk to them. Immediately.

Liv looked up from the couch and asked what was up, but Mona turned to the closet and propped her crutches against the wall. She watched with detached fascination at the way the coat hanger pierced into the sleeve as she hung away her coat.

"Mona, what's going on?" Liv stopped following her and leaned against the counter, arms folded, her tone shrill and warranting a glare. Mona hopped to the sink and emptied her travel mug. Coffee grounds clumped around the strainer, so she ran the tap and watched the current lift the dark flecks and circle them down the drain.

Jenny's soft steps padded onto the linoleum. Of course Jenny would be there, that night, of all nights. As if she knew, somehow, exactly how to cause Mona pain. In that moment Mona couldn't look at her, couldn't see the face she had loved for far too long.

A moment later, heavy feet stumbled down the stairs and bumped through the archway. Mona turned around. Wrapped in her quilt, Kit squinted at the ceiling, her face peaked and bloated from sleep. The other two leaned forward and stared wide at Mona. It was all happening so quickly, but then again, it would.

Mona ground her teeth before speaking. "I don't think this ankle is going to heal. Fully. Neither does Greta."

Liv, for once, said nothing. The fluorescent light above them blinked and settled into a faint hum. The ratty wooden cabinets seemed to fill the room and wrap around her like a constricting blanket. She watched Kit play with her quilt's fraying border.

"And," Mona spoke carefully, "I'm going to move out at the end of the semester." This came to her in the moment but when she said it she knew it would be true. Her roommates stood locked in their bodies, but

Jenny was looser. “I’ll pay until May, and I’ll find someone for the rest of the year, and—“

“No.” Kit seemed to wake up. “Why? No. You—”

Jenny intercepted. “It makes sense.”

Mona almost told her to go fuck herself but glared at her instead.

Liv picked the splitting ends of her hair.

Jenny continued. “I mean, you were going to have to move out when you graduate. And, the rookies are looking to move out of res. One can fill the room.”

“Yes.” Mona was brusque. “My thoughts exactly.”

Sometimes she felt herself to be a million connections of people away from them, and yet they probably knew her better than anyone else on the planet. They’d put up with her anger, her shit, and now she was going to leave because she couldn’t be like them anymore. She glared at them in their stiff limbed and clownish stupidity. Kit in her goddamn fuzzy monster slippers, Liv with her upside-down French braid that curled over her shoulder like a scarf. They were so fucking young.

“Look,” Mona said. “I just want so bad to be able to say I’ll make it back. That I’ll be able to come back and win indoors or outdoors or get through a fucking workout but I can’t. It isn’t going to happen.”

Jenny stepped forward and opened her arms as if to offer a hug, but Mona steeled herself into the corner of the counter and cupboards. The three girls stared at her.

"One performance and then that's it." Mona's voice cracked. "That's it."

Kit lowered the quilt from her chest, knuckles loosening, eyebrows high and eyes unblinking. Mona rarely spoke of the day she had become a national champion, out of some sense of modesty or splintery reticence. "Thank God," Kit deadpanned. "You stormed in so suddenly. I was worried you were going to yell at me for ignoring the cleaning schedule."

Kit had so obviously said it to break the tension, yet it was also completely within her character that Mona would yell about a damn cleaning schedule.

Snot dropped from Mona's nose and she wiped it with her fingers. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." There wasn't enough real estate on her hands, so she used her sleeves. That didn't help either, and she held up her dripping hands, tears and drool pouring on her face. "I'm sorry," she gurgled. "I just can't be here."

Jenny grabbed the paper towel roll, ripped off a sheet, and wiped Mona's forearms. "You're fucking disgusting you know."

Mona's face crinkled into an ugly grin, tears rushing down her cheeks. "It's over. It's actually over."

Then Jenny curled her arms around Mona's back. Mona pushed her face into her neck. After a moment, Liv and Kit joined in the hug, forming a group huddle that felt as much awkward as sincere.

When Mona stopped crying, she told them to go to bed. They

offered to sit up with her but she wiped her face with more paper towel and reminded them of their early morning flight.

After their protests, after Liv made her a cup of tea, after they had shut off all the lights except the one above the kitchen table, Mona sat down with her agenda and a pen.

Her fingers looped through the handle of the mug. She should make a list of moving supplies. Flipping to a blank page at the back, she bit off the cap of the pen and pushed the point into the paper. She wrote *make ad for room, buy broom,* and *get slips of L's plants.* The peach tree's branches tapped at the black window, swivelling in the gentle wind.

In the way that some people turn to religion or science, running was the way she had understood the world. She enjoyed the challenge of engineering, took satisfaction in tackling a web of figures and problems. But her joy, she found that circling and circling the track. Had found.

But, if she could have known, going in, that on that very day she would summit the pinnacle of her career, she would not have lived it for what it was. She would have felt only the grief at the end, the same heavy sadness whose weight now leeched into her bones.

She heard the rough click of the upstairs bathroom door. That would be Kit, probably not sleeping again. That girl was hiding grief in there, somewhere—just as Jenny kept her secret hauntings hidden, her under-the-bed demons veiled with hyperbolic humour. These girls all had their own kinds of loss.

It was better, then, that she was going out on a low, rather than a high. To have even cherished such a dream was worth more than any medal, and to have actually lived the journey was greater than any transparent success. It had to be.

Because now, she would never live quite like that again.

21

Kit walked along the indoor track's outside lane, Brent by her side.

"Your training is in the bag," he was saying. To her he sounded old, worn. He recognized the tiredness of the lines, the blandness of the advice, but went through with it anyway. "Now it's showtime."

The crowd in the stands erupted in a cheer. A long jumper leapt from the sand and punched the air. Banners and signposts with the conference championship logo peppered the metal walls of the fieldhouse.

"Yup, I know," she said. "I can handle it."

"Don't be afraid to sit on them. You've got a devastating kick, but

don't show it too soon." He clapped her on the shoulder. "Good luck girl."

She walked away from him and he watched her grow smaller. Before a big race, some athletes find solace in conversation, in the closeness of a friend, a training partner. They seek out what he referred to as an Emotional Sherpa, someone to whom they could pass over their worries and strains, to ease the load for when they needed to be light. Despite her stoicism, Mona Thornborough had always needed someone. In the best races of her life he'd walked her to the call tent, clapped her on the shoulder, and passed over her spikes. The memories made him tired.

Others, though, they retreat to the quiet bubble of their minds. The strongest of that kind seek that place because their affirmation arises from within; they possess the ability to compartmentalize their problems and zone in on each individual choice. Fifty feet away, Kit sat down on the floor, cross-legged. She popped a pill in her mouth and took a swig from her water bottle. Some, when they retreat into their minds, though, they are trying to shut down, hide away, while a storm of insecurity and doubt rages in their skulls.

Cross-legged, Kit swallowed the water but kept sucking on her caffeine pill, holding it to the roof of her mouth. She thought, I don't want to do this. I can't do this. I will do this. The flat pill crumbled on her tongue.

She shimmied her warmup pants over her hips and pushed them down her thighs. Smooth from the morning shave, her legs were hard

cords of rested muscle. She was strong and she was tough and she was fit but there was one thing she couldn't beat. Between her legs lay an open, festering sore.

Her heart pounded in her ears. She left her clothes in a pile on the floor, then skipped through a few drills, her paper number pinned to her singlet and crinkling on her chest. She smoothed her number stickies onto her hips, and slapped her thighs to wake them up. An official called them to the startline.

Girls from schools across the country, their eyes narrowed with the focus of their task, waited behind the waterfall startline. They swayed their hips, hopped on the spot, jimmied their feet in their bright spikes. In her bummies and singlet, in her paper number and hip stickies, Kit stood stiff and still. Liv was two girls over, and Kit did not look at her.

"Alright ladies, alright ladies," the announcer was saying. "Two commands. Set and the gun."

Kit lined up in her place, and tendered one orange and blue spike behind the white line. The announcer called their names.

Lights at an indoor track were never bright but she wanted darkness. Spectators lined the inside and outside of the track, some with watches in their hands, most of them silent. Her quiet solace, the refuge of the moving body—that was gone. There was nowhere she could hide. She realized she was shaking.

Standing on the startline is like leaning over the edge of a cliff,

peering into nothing but an abyss. To go through with it is to pour in all your fear and all your fight. When it's over, you are nothing but a puddle of raw, real emotion, and you cannot hide from even yourself. And when you've been through this a hundred times before, you know exactly what is coming.

The decision wasn't a decision and it came easily. She spun around and ran off the track. Past the check-in table, past Brent with the shocked look on his face, past the chattering spectators, she pushed open the heavy door and crashed into the hallway. Before it swung shut she caught the end of the announcer's baffled stuttering.

The hallway was dim and free of people. Fluorescent lights shone on the glazed cement floor. She ran down it and turned down another hall, and at the corner she grabbed the wall and pushed her forehead into the sharp jut. The fluorescent lights blinked and wavered and she slid down the wall, onto her knees, breathing hard. The pain in her head was soothing.

Wiping her eyes, she re-emerged after a few minutes and caught the tail end of the race. The atmosphere was electric. Athletes from different schools jammed around the finish line, screaming and cheering, and Kit saw a blonde ponytail fly across the line. She ran into the melee.

Liv was bent over, gasping for breath, a wide grin across her face. The rest of their team crowded around her, shouting and cheering,

reaching out their hands, trying to touch her, hold her, help her stand. Phone to one ear and finger in another, Cliff shouted that she had finished second, and from Kit's guess, Mona was on the other end of the line. Liv stood up and Brent wrapped her in a giant hug.

Kit hated her. She hated her for winning a medal, for standing up and producing at the right moment, for coming in ranked tenth and surprising everyone to win silver. She said, "I can't believe you just scraped second." Immediately she hated herself.

Liv's face was stoic. Her chest was heaving, her hair stuck to her soaked temples. Calmly, she looked Kit in the eye, her blue eyes hard as stones. "Fuck you."

Though the sun had not yet dimmed behind the cloud; the rooms of Ansell house were nearly dark by the time they returned. They were quiet; it could be that Mona was sleeping and they ought to tiptoe down the hall so as to not wake her. It suddenly clicked why people keep fish; at least the flash of scales provides some movement, some reminder of life.

Callum had picked them up at the airport and driven to their house. Banging her suitcase behind her, Liv hurried up to her room first, calling, "you two have fun now." It was the first thing she'd said to Kit since the race. It wasn't unkind.

In her bedroom, Callum kissed her and she let him. He took off her shirt and she showed no reaction. They were young and they were hot

and they were athletes and this is what people like them did. They won titles and they had glamorous bodies and they fucked. She didn't win a title, and because she'd pulled out she wouldn't even race nationals, but she could be tough in another way.

She let him fuck her, and it hurt so badly that she finally cried. In that came a relief. He was heavy on top of her. With his thumb he wiped the tears from under her eyes and kissed her nose. When he shuddered and came she pushed him out, then closed her legs and asked him to leave.

Shock crossed his face.

They were not good together and she told him this, and then folded her legs. He put on his clothes and after the door clicked shut.

She listened to his feet on the stairs, down the foyer, thinking get out get out get out. The front door opened and closed and she looked at herself in the closet mirror.

She pushed herself to the edge of her bed and spread her legs wide. She turned on the bedside lamp.

She spread her legs wide as far as they would go but bent at the knee, and then sat up tall, tilting her pelvis forward, so she could look at herself, naked and raw and stinging.

Before the race she had shaved away her pubic hair, so it wouldn't show in her bummies, and the skin was bare and pink as a child's. The fleshy folds of her vulva were red, and they flopped open, revealing the insides, the rounded mounds of flesh and tissue. She hated it. It was ugly

and raw and disgusting. Standing up, she covered herself with her plaid robe.

She twisted the tub's chrome tap to hot, and water gushed out of the faucet. While the tub filled she pulled on Mona's rubber gloves and, carrying the spray bottle, began to clean.

She squirted cleaner and balled the rag and scrubbed and scrubbed at the edge of the sink, at the rim of the drain. Mona kept it all clean but this house was old. There were hidden parts, streaks of dirt and grime that no one saw. The smell of cleaning product was pungent. The underside of the faucet was speckled with rust and she rubbed to no effect. She took off the gloves and scratched at it with her fingernails. It made no difference and the specs stayed in place.

Out in the hallway, the doors to the other bedrooms were closed, covered in shadow. She swung the bathroom door shut and the room filled with steam.

She shut off the tub. Water sloshed just to the brim, heat peeling up in translucent waves. But she didn't want to be naked, not even alone. She clutched the robe under her chin and lowered a foot into the tub. The heat seared against her and she held in a cry, biting her lip. As she had with so many ice baths, as she had with workouts and with racing and with sex, she turned off her mind and slid into the pain.

The water soaked first into the fluffy fabric but then burnt her skin. With her volume it sloshed over the tub's edge and onto the floor. She

shifted and it sloshed higher, seeping through the robe to wet her shoulders. She bit her tongue, her face contorting. The robe felt like it should protect her but it did nothing. Her flesh was burning, peeling off her bones.

Laying in the tub in her robe, the thick fabric swayed and floated around her limbs. She closed her eyes tight and sank lower, so that the water rimmed her face, hovering at her forehead and mouth.

22

The cherry blossoms bloomed late that year. Not until March did they fluff the tree branches and thicken the city streets with their rich scent. Outside the front of Ansell house, the pale pink petals floated slowly to the ground. Kit mostly stayed in her room.

After conference it felt like the world should stop but of course it didn't. Liv kept training, and Mona decided on a replacement roommate and boxed up her things. Hanna, the rookie, was moving in.

In the week after conference, Brent called a meeting with Kit, to suggest that she stay home from the spring training camp this year. Sitting

opposite him, the wooden real estate of desk in between, she flatly told him she wouldn't be attending practices either. In his stiff, understated way, he agreed that he supported that decision. She stood up and left.

Callum's hip had become too problematic to continue running, so he no longer trained with the team. He texted and phoned her, but she blocked his number, and he seemed to get the message.

Kit clipped her backpack around her waist and shouldered more securely the heavy grocery bags. The trees were either bare or speckled with leaves, the blossoms scattered across the sidewalk and pavement, ground into the spring mud. She had to hurry home, to try and start the midterm paper due in three days, the one she'd gotten a two-week extension for. The weight of cans and produce and jugs dug into her trapezius and, her thumbs tight under the straps, she struck out into the grey parking lot.

The world was closed over with condensation. Mist filled the streets and wrapped between buildings, the windows in cars fogged from the inside, and the damp steeped down the cuffs of her rain jacket and wrapped round her wrists. Her boots slapped on the sidewalk, and she lengthened and shortened her stride to avoid the breaks in slabs; don't step on a crack or you'll break your back, don't step, don't step. Her feet were cold and when they hit the pavement the strike sent needle shoots up her shins.

"Hey, do you run varsity?"

She tipped the edge of her hood to the side, and looked for the source of the voice. It came from another water creature, a tall figure in a long black rain slicker. “Pardon?” she said.

“Do you run varsity?” He caught up to her, and flashed her a warm smile.

“Why do you ask?” She knew she sounded unkind. It was cold out.

“Your backpack.” He poked the top pocket, where the varsity logo was stitched. She had forgotten. His wide-set eyes were warm and he seemed genuinely interested, for whatever reason. She raised her eyebrow, adjusted her bags, and turned back towards her sidewalk path. It didn’t discourage him. “Do you know an Olivia Buchannan?”

Kit eyed him. “She’s my roommate.” She hadn’t said “best friend.”

“Cool, she’s awesome. She’s really fast, isn’t she?”

Kit wondered what the hell he wanted, and started walking again, sinking under the weight of her groceries. “Yes, she is,” she said. The boy’s long legs kept up with her, stretching out at an easy cadence. He was lanky, with an easy bearing and, apparently, a generous character.

“Here, here,” he said. “That looks heavy.” After hesitating, she let him lift a bag from her shoulder.

She assessed the situation. He was probably just some overly friendly undergrad looking for a conversation, or more likely, a smitten kid looking for pretty-blonde-Barbie Liv’s number.

She asked, “How do you know Liv?”

"School. We're both in biochem."

Kit nodded and blinked, to show the blandness of the connection.

"She's racing a lot lately, isn't she? She's missing a lot of Friday classes."

Kit chose her words, to gauge his intent. "She's away a lot, yes, but today she's at her boyfriend's."

"Ah, man, Scott's awesome. Love that guy."

Kit stopped. They'd reached the intersection where she turned off. Through the bordering of trees and slat fences, the rows of houses multiplied to either side of the street.

He said, "So, do you still run?" His charm contrasted the dreary afternoon, the stream of cars funneling past in the street.

Clearly, he was friendly, and he was tall, rather not-bad looking. His dark hair was messed into a Tintin sort of coif, and she didn't think it was on purpose. The collar of a wrinkled shirt peeked out from the top of his rain jacket. The friendly dishevelment piqued her attention. There hadn't been anyone new for so long, and her current lifestyle didn't exactly let her meet anyone else. She said, "Why don't we get coffee sometime, and I'll tell you more about it?"

When she got home she didn't mention the meeting to her roommates, even when Liv asked, in a nebulous tease, why she kept checking her phone. Instead, she stayed up the next two nights and finished the paper. Once, when Mona ghosted past through the hall,

moving slowing with her crutches, Kit looked up from her desk and considered asking about her Achilles, about how she was doing. Mona shut her door, and Kit bent back down over her computer.

The next day, she staggered into the arts building. She knocked on her professor's door and sheepishly presented the paper.

"Glad to see you actually finished it," the professor said.

She arrived at the campus coffee shop to find the rain-boy sitting by the window, a novel propped in his lap, a latte on the table beside him. It was lunchtime and the room buzzed like a hive; it was too loud. After ordering and picking up her coffee, she sank into the armchair across from him. He stood up and shook her hand, and the touch was warm and firm. She didn't know what to do next. She unzipped her jacket and hung it on the back of the chair.

His name was Stephen, and they were the same age. In his chair he leaned forward, chest open, eager for conversation. He made her laugh with liberally delivered bad puns, and when asked about his day, he settled back into a narrative mode and described a scene he'd witnessed, where two pelicans battled for sandwich leftovers on the edge of the pier. His voice rose so she could hear, and he seemed unbothered by the din. When the track-running-athlete thing came up, finally, she emphasized the injuries as her reasons for retiring, and evaded the notion of her success. With care, she centreed most of the conversation on Liv, on life in

the same house as the varsity star, and the conversation ended quickly enough. He told her about trying to go for jogs, and asked for her advice on attempting to run a 5k. When he mentioned an op-ed he'd written for a local newspaper, which received mixed feedback, she disagreed with the premise and wondered about his political views, but kept that thought to herself. She decided he was interesting.

When they left, Stephen invited her out for lunch, to a pub down by the marina, close to where he rented his "moldering basement grotto." The slight infusion of creativity into his description made her heart warm; she didn't see why not, so she said yes.

He was busy during the week, and treated school like a job, so the following Saturday they bussed downtown and walked Dallas Road. The road ran along the seawall, and the cool rain whipped at her face. They left, and walked towards Beacon Hill, the sprawling downtown park. He looped his arm through hers. As they strolled underneath the canopy of tall trees, she leaned into his rain jacket and pointed at the squirrels, the budding gardens. To her, they seemed like a nice, young couple, out for a lovely stroll. They took photos of the peacocks, of the blue and green and purple feathers. She stood in front of a vast rhododendron bush and smiled for the camera as he raised his phone and took a snapshot of her.

23

When she stopped running, Kit's body changed. Her skin took on a grey hue and grew flaky on her elbows and knees. Her appetite shrunk to a fraction of what it once was, and she knew she'd been thin but now she grew thinner, her muscles slackening and the crevices of her knees filling in. Leggings that had once been tight puckered over her thighs. Or, maybe her body had been changing for a while, and she was only just beginning to notice. In the shower she pulled out her hair in clumps, the brittle wet strands cracking over her fingers. She left them swirled on the tiled wall.

When she stopped running she mostly slept, but sometimes she walked. She walked to the bus stops, to her appointments with Dr. Blough and Keeling. She walked to the library or to meet with Stephen, or she walked alone, circling the trails around campus, passing by neighbouring houses.

A light mist was drizzling down, and though she was dry under her jacket the moisture coated her face and hands, leaving them damp and clammy. She had another paper due, a final one, but didn't particularly feel like writing it at the moment; she could stay up again and get something passable done by morning.

People grouped about her as she waited for a streetlight to change. A bus pulled to a stop and more people got off, plugged into their headphones and joining the steady current of downtown workers. It was the middle of a weekday and everyone was on their way somewhere, to some sort of engagement or obligation. Everyone was on their way to something. Kit crossed the street and strode down another sidewalk. She kept close to the buildings, under the protection of the low awnings.

She passed the window of a used bookstore, and a flash of movement caught her eye. Black hair pulled back, brown hands rearranging a display of cookbooks, the sight of the figure yanked Kit from her blank reverie. Peony Shipp's head was bent down, intent on her chore.

Kit stopped and looked at her, wondering if the girl would look up, hoping she would. Peony finished the task and turned around, disappearing into the shop.

Kit pushed open the door and it chimed, softly announcing her presence. Inside was warm and cozy, and it smelled of old pages and stale glue bindings. Books were crammed onto the shelves, which stretched all the way up to the fifteen-foot ceilings. A handful of customers browsed silently in the narrow aisles.

Peony picked up a load of books and carted them into the stacks, re-shelving them, carefully smoothing any dog-eared price stickers. A velvet bow held back the front pieces of her hair, and her black long-sleeve was rolled up to her elbows. She fit the setting, and Kit realized she'd dressed to look the part of someone in a bookstore.

Kit wasn't sure of what to say, of how to draw attention to herself. Despite Peony's offer in the coffee shop, they'd barely spoken for the rest of the previous semester. When they'd admitted to having vulvodynia, Kit had assumed they'd have been brought together; instead, the knowledge felt like a dirty secret, a wedge that rendered them uncomfortable. After they walked out of the final exam, Kit had spotted her in the crowd, and knew that Peony had seen her in return; but, deliberately it seemed, they'd both avoided acknowledging the other's presence.

Peony moved deeper into the stacks, and Kit turned to leave, but in doing so she bumped into a travel display, knocking over a pile of heavy

books. They slid and thudded to the floor. Peony looked over, and thankfully, her face lit up. “Hello!”

“Hi,” Kit said, and knelt down onto the scuffed wooden floor and began to pick them up. Peony stuck the last book on the shelf and came over to help.

“It’s been a while. How have you been?”

Kit slapped the fallen books onto the piles still covering the table. “Hey, when do you get off?” She sounded like Mona.

Peony seemed unsurprised by the bluntness. She gathered the books into a haphazard column and heaved them between her arms. “Not until five.” She stood up and so did Kit.

“Can I help you put them away?” They slid the heavy books back into place, straightening the edges of the disheveled heaps that surrounded. “Not these.” Kit gestured to the cart that needed re-shelving.

Peony paused. “Alright.”

Kit carried the paperbacks and, moving through the aisles, Peony took one at a time and located its place in the shop. Kit asked how she liked working here, Peony confirmed that she liked it; she liked the busywork, she liked the light chitchat with customers, she liked the smell of books and ink and old wood.

Kit said, “Can I ask you something personal?”

She seemed to have expected this, and stayed forcibly relaxed, face turned to profile and concentrated on her task. Kit’s mouth dried up in an

instant, and before she could open it, Peony was speaking. “I was told by everyone that I was making it up.” She didn’t look at Kit but shoved a book in its place, and then checked the author of the next.

“By who?”

“Doctors. Enough of them.” Peony stepped down a few rows, parted a gap, and rammed the next one in place. “That it was my hymen not rupturing. That I wasn’t structurally sound.” Still not making eye contact, she lifted the next one from Kit’s arms. “That I was making it up. That some women just aren’t sexual people. That for some women it was bound to hurt, always, and it’s why women apparently don’t like sex.” She lowered back into her calm carriage. “It was all bullshit and I stopped looking for an answer, for a while. Then I went back and they told me it’s this.”

“What did you try? Can I ask that?”

Peony sighed. She said, “Just about everything.”

She listed medications, the same ones Kit had tried. She mentioned dilators, switching birth control pills, vibrators, a stint on SSRIs, a consultation for Botox, and talk therapy. “I tried physio for a while. And I think it could help, maybe,” she said. “But I also wasn’t ready for it. And I think you need to be ready.”

“I saw a physical therapist too,” Kit said. “See, I mean. But I don’t think it helps. I feel shaky after.”

“Look,” Peony said. “I’m sorry. But I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

“No, it isn’t,” Peony said. “It isn’t fine. But, also, it is what it is. And we’re somehow expected to be okay with it, expected to pretend we’re not in pain.” She stood up. “I’m sorry, Kit. I read everything I could get my hands on, at first. I don’t know what to tell you.”

Kit passed her the last book, and followed Peony’s gliding carriage into the next aisle. She watched her silently shelve it.

“If you ever want to hang out, or something, let me know.” Peony slid her fingers down the book’s spine, then turned to look at Kit. Her brown eyes wavered, but she tucked a strand of hair more securely into her bow. “Look, I have to get back to work.”

24

The next weekend, Stephen came over to watch the streaming of the championship. The house was quiet and empty, the winter rain leeching into its bones, making even the insides seem damp and chilled. Liv was racing in the final, and Mona had disappeared into the library, barely coming to the house to sleep. With the girls all gone the dullness was only more blatant, so Kit dialed the radiators and flicked on all the lights, even the lamps.

Kit set her laptop on the coffee table, and sat down on the rug, the wall of the couch at her back. The radiator clicked and sputtered to life,

and the green and yellow lanes of the Edmonton track faded onto the computer screen. The living room grew bright and hot.

"So, what's this meet again?" he asked from across the room.

"In a minute," she said. "The fifteen is up next."

"Cool, is that a distance race?"

"No." She turned up the volume and patted the floor beside her. The announcer's voice ran through the names of the finalists, blocking out the clicking radiator. "No, well. Yes. Middle distance."

Stephen settled onto the floor and crossed his legs. "This is really cool," he said.

Kit half-smiled. The gesture seemed familiar, and after a moment she remembered how Liv had once sat the same way. That was when things were different.

On the screen, ten grainy figures bent over the startline, and at the gun they shot off. Kit picked at the mat as they rounded the turn, crashed out of the waterfall lanes and into a tight pack.

Her neck prickled and she stared at the screen, "Yeah, kinda," she answered.

The pack swung into the home stretch, the bright colours of their school singlets blurring in the grainy feed. The narrow figure of Liv, her head stilled with focus, settled into the rail, her knees and toes almost striking the leader in front, a crowd of other girls pressing tight against

her. The 1500m race was too short, too physical, to get comfortable for long.

Kit picked at the fibres of the mat, uttering instructions under her breath, a sacred sort of chant. The girls ran through the quarter at a slow clip—the race was gearing up for a wild sprint to the line. On the screen, Liv still sat on the rail, her skinny elbows jabbing and fending off attacks from girls leaning into her, bumping at her back, clipping at her heels, pressing down on her as they rounded turn after turn. "Don't settle, don't settle, stay alert, stay fucking alert," Kit muttered at no one in particular, at Liv.

Stephen said, "Which one is she?"

Kit didn't answer but kept chanting. She was sweating now, the muscles of her thighs itching, aching. "You got this Liv. You got this baby." The field passed through eleven hundred, and the pack began to make their moves. The back runners tore into the turn, swarming the leaders. "Get on the train, get on the fucking train." Kit was shouting now, her heart pounding, and she saw a gap, saw a break, and almost cried out and thank god Liv surged forward and took it. They were rounding the homestretch with one lap to go, Liv's skinny legs striding back in third, curling and reaching with energy, ready to roar. "Go now, go now, go now," Kit was shouting as the bell rang, and Liv passed the Calgary girl into second place. She was so, so frail, just a coat hanger, why hadn't Kit seen it before. She watched as Liv muscled onto the shoulder of the leader.

The two blue-clad girls sprinted all out, side-by-side, arms pumping in sync, their shoulders tightening with the battle and their suffering visible in the hardening of their strides. The announcer hollered and the crowd boomed and in the final fifty metres, down the home stretch, Liv fought into the lead. Ahead by a stride she dipped at the line, her long braid flying behind her.

Kit flopped back onto the mat. Her heart hurt. She wanted to punch the air and call her friend and scream into the phone. She felt sick to her stomach.

She looked over and saw that Stephen had been watching her, a bemused expression on his face. He said, "That was exciting."

Liv had won a national university title. She'd actually done it.

"Yeah," she said. "So she just won."

"Do you want to call her, or something?" Stephen stood up, as if to get his bag and his phone.

"No," Kit said, and stood up too. Her skin burned.

He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could speak she kissed him. She kissed him hard and he grabbed her waist and he kissed her back, his tongue lolling in her mouth, and she didn't want to admit it but she felt nothing. Instead, she grabbed the collar of his shirt and dragged him to her room.

Soft, dark hairs peppered his chest, and he was lanky in the way of the physically active, non-athlete. She kissed his neck and he smelled of

soap. When he slid into her she bit her knuckle and her whole body tensed involuntarily.

"Whoah," he said, "are you okay?"

"Yes, yes," she said, her voice strained. "It's fine."

"Are you sure?" his voice was incredulous.

"Yes, I want to, it's fine," she said.

"I really don't believe you," he said,

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Okay. I have this chronic pain condition and it's normal for me so let's just have sex and I'll tell you about it later."

"I think we should talk about this," he said, and pulled out. With a gush her stomach felt empty again.

She sighed, and shifted out from underneath him. His forehead creased, and she stroked the stubble of his beard, then rolled over and wiped herself off with the edge of her sheet.

"Okay," she said, and she explained what she knew, and what it was, in a strange, detached way. She told him about the medications she'd tried, the dilators, the physical therapy. He listened intently, nodding along, not speaking until she'd finished.

"Okay," he said. "I can deal with that."

She gave him a look. He said, "I don't know you that well, but I don't think this is a big deal, so I'm not turned off."

He was kind. That much was clear. She stroked his jaw again, and snuggled into his chest. His hair prickled against her damp skin. She thought, maybe this is what I need.

After that, they started spending more time together. They made dinner at each other's places, and ate their lunches in the stairwells of the humanities buildings. They sat together and studied during the day, and Kit found herself beginning to absorb her readings. On weekends they walked on beaches or ventured downtown, to museums and for beer and for live music. They had sex a respectable two times a week, in his room or in hers.

When she told her roommates about him, they were interested, in a casual sort of way. They asked about his credentials, and chatted with him when he came over. Mona passed him a cup of coffee, and he drank it without seeming to notice it was room temperature. They said he seemed nice enough, and when Liv asked how he'd "taken the news," Kit refrained from snapping at her and simply said "fine."

"I'm sorry, I don't want to hurt you," he'd say, whenever she tensed, whenever she made a noise that alluded to pain. He'd retract his finger, or pull out, or raise his tongue, and sidle up to cuddle her. More often than not, that's how sex ended; neither of them entirely satisfied, but contented to snuggle. Sometimes it bothered her, when she wanted to keep going, but she reasoned it was better than the alternative. She still

spent most days in her room in that dozy near-sleep, but when he'd text her she'd wake up, get dressed, and go meet him at the library or the quad or wherever it was he wanted to go. Once there, she'd pretend she'd been awake the whole day. He studied hard so she did too, and began to complete her readings again, to plan for final exams, to speak up in class discussions. After a month, he asked if he could call her his girlfriend, and she agreed. It felt like a good decision, the right decision, and in making it she felt grown up.

25

The leaves of Beacon Hill park were out in full bloom, the grass blue and rich, the garden beds full, paths swarming. Kit and Stephen strolled around the park, arm in arm; it was by then a routine, the adage of an old married couple. It was summer; Kit was taking makeup classes, for in the end she'd failed three. Stephen worked on campus. Ducks floated in the manicured pond, squawking and gliding beneath the rough stone bridge. A sweaty, middle-aged man, bowled over a potbelly, jogged passed. His knees nearly knocked when his feet struck the pavement, and Kit almost said something to Stephen about bad form.

A fluffy shepherd dog bounded towards them, a stick in its mouth.

"Pip!" came a voice. "Pippin!" The voice was familiar, and Kit gripped Stephen's arm and stopped.

Mona hobbled from around a flowered hedge, a leash flying from her grip. "Come here dog!" She was crutchless but an aircast still encased her left foot.

"Mona!" Kit cried and jumped forward. The dog dropped the stick, and Kit grabbed her shocked friend in an emphatic hug.

It had been two months since she'd seen her, two months since her virtual disappearance. Kit released her, and with a pang Kit realized just how much she'd missed the older girl. "Who's this?" she asked, and scrubbed the dog under the chin.

"My neighbor's. Pippin. I take him for walks."

"He's gorgeous." Mona's high bun was thicker, her face a touch fuller.

Kit bombarded her with questions. "How are you? How have you been?" She grabbed Mona again. The older girl was stiff; it was rather like grabbing a statue. As always her face was calm, but her thin, brown eyes twinkled. Kit hopped on her toes and felt a grin spreading across her face.

"Don't worry about me," Stephen said, and pecked her on the mouth. Mona's eyebrow arched; she bent down and clipped the leash on the dog.

"I need to get going anyways," he said to Mona. "Good to see you again." He turned to Kit, and she wondered who the hell had made him so understanding. "See you later." He headed off towards the bus stop. "Good to see you again," he called, again, with a wide wave.

"How's the Achilles?" Kit asked.

"Healing." There was a lack of forcefulness, a lightness in the tone, that in anyone else would have suggested truth but in Mona bled into the contrived. With her voice, Mona still carefully concealed the pain of the statement. She gestured towards the dog. "But I can take him for walks every day." The dog pulled at the leash, dragging Mona along, around the pond, towards the village along Cook Street. "Are you running at all?"

The answer was short. "No."

Mona's combat boot crunched the mulch trail, where the aircast landed with a soft sigh. She, of anyone, would get it.

They walked across the thick trail, the scent of mulch and dirt and water on leaves filling Kit's nostrils. Oak trees, their leaves thick and rich, led down to the water. The clouds had lifted, some, and far across the ocean was the clear line of the Olympic mountains. Kit swung her arm alongside Mona's slightly off-kilter gait.

"How're things with the guy?"

"His name's Stephen, you know."

Mona wrapped the nylon leash securely around her wrist.

"You're not into him, you know that, right."

Kit rolled her eyes. Trust Mona to make a sharp blanket statement in the first five minutes. “Mona,” she said. “He’s my boyfriend.”

The dog stopped and sniffed at the base of an arbutus tree. Mona turned to face her. “I’ve seen you care about someone. This is not it.”

Kit harrumphed, her thoughts swimming for another route, another conversation. She hugged her friend again, and Mona stiff-armed her, but then gave into the hug, before clearing her throat and marching forward again.

Mona clucked her tongue at the dog, and it was a firm, sharp, kind of sound. This was a different Mona, the non-track Mona, the non-school Mona. The Mona with an apartment away from the university, the co-op Mona with a near-real-life-job, the Mona who cared for a creature and who went for meandering daily walks. She was still tough, still hard. Kit said, “It’s so, so good to see you.”

“You too,” Mona said.

They walked down the street, past the heritage homes with artfully unkempt lawns, making their way towards the ocean. Conversation lapsed into the mundane; they traded stories of living arrangements, projected graduation dates, the status of shared friends. Mona answered the questions plainly, without much emotion, bearing into Kit the obvious flatness, the fakeness, of the topics they covered.

“What do you do together?” Mona asked, finally. “I didn’t think you’d still be seeing him.”

Kit told her about the walks, romancing up the smitten attraction. "We mostly do work together. He's really into school and clubs and stuff."

At the spiraling cement staircase, Mona let Pippin off the leash and he bolted down towards the beach. Mona gripped the metal handrail, stepping healthy foot first, tender foot second, landing on each stair with care.

They clambered onto the beach, onto the sand thick with driftwood and round grey pebbles. Waves whooshed up the shore, crashed, and dragged back over the bumpy pebbles. A vintage car horn blared from the road above, and tourists chattered. Along the shoreline, Pippin bolted from log to rock to shrub, the wind flattening his long fur.

They kept walking, and with the light conversation passed and done, they were silent. Mona had been here longer, and had spent more time along these watery scapes. Kit sighed. "Fine. Mona, tell me. How do you know what love looks like?"

Mona was quiet, and for once, Kit could see the gears turning in her head, as her friend struggled to articulate the answer. She hadn't realized the specificity of her question until after she said it aloud, and from the silence, knew she'd struck a particular note.

She exhaled, sharply, once. "I was just happy to be near her," she said. "I loved her without conditions. I didn't need anything from her, didn't want anything but to be close her. It was the simplest, clearest thing."

Mona didn't preface it with a winding introduction, didn't beg for an understanding of the circumstances, and she didn't give a reason for her boldness. The dog barked ahead of them, bit onto to the edge of a piece of driftwood buried in sand, trying to pick it up. Kit had never heard her speak so personally. She asked, "Was it Jenny?"

Mona picked up another stick and, pivoting on her combat boot foot, whipped it into the distance. The dog scurried after it. "Of course it was."

Kit made no move. How could she have not known that, not seen that, for all the years in the locker rooms, the vacuum hours spent in airplanes, the days spent trackside. It seemed so obvious a truth that the answer came to her lips, ready made. With a sinking realization, she knew she hadn't cared to know, hadn't bothered to see what was right in front of her.

Jenny had left. They had never really been together and Mona had to move along. The reference, that unrequited, shadowy relationship, was nothing like what Kit had experienced, and she knew Mona knew that, but maybe there was something there, something at the core that connected their experiences. And, she'd always assumed that Mona went no deeper than her program and races. "Mona," she said, tightroping down a narrow log, "what was it like, when you started having sex?"

Mona blew out through her lips. "Oh god," she said, "You don't want to hear about this, Kit."

"No, I do." She landed with a thud and wobbled from her feet up.

"Okay, then," Mona said, lilting up at the end. "Well, sex the first time for me didn't count. Well, I mean, I did it. But there was no, well, emotion." Kit gave her a confused look and Mona began to blush. "I was in high school and it was with my boyfriend at the time. The first time that was real, that I count, that I have a feeling you're asking about"—her face was burning red, but she rolled forward—"The first time with a girl, that is. I got hammered at an after party." She paused. Kit looked at her to continue; this wasn't the question she'd asked, but she'd take the answer anyways. "I was, well, out of control. Zero inhibitions."

"What?!" The image of a drunk Mona was stranger than a messy Mona or a relaxed Mona. "You drank?!"

"Don't look so shocked," Mona said. "It was before you knew me, in my first year of university. And I can have fun, you know." Kit raised an eyebrow, and Mona continued. "I just don't when I want to be fast. But, anyway, I saw this girl at this cross-country after party." She smirked. "She was a senior from an Ontario school. I was insatiable. I had no idea what I was doing. I took her home with me."

Kit shook her head. "No. You're lying."

"I'm not."

"Is that how you…"

Mona laughed. "No, god, Kit. I knew I was gay by then. I also happen to have standards."

Kit had never seen her speak so freely. “Did you win, or something, to make you so bold? Weren’t you afraid of being rejected? Did you ever see her again?”

“No, actually, I finished so badly.” The smirk was audible. “I got my ass handed to me. And no, no fear in approaching her.” She brought her fingers to her mouth and whistled for the dog. He dropped the stick and came running. “Well, maybe there was a little. But I just really liked her. I went for it.” Mona’s eyes flashed.

“Have you seen her since?”

“I saw her again this year. She came to cheer.”

“You’re secretive!”

“No, you’re unobservant and I’m subtle.”

This was incredible. All of it. Kit said, “I had no idea you knew how to party.”

Mona gave her a look. “Anyways, she’s almost done med school now. And you’ve been stuck inside your own head a lot.”

There it was. Kit huffed, sashayed to the side, as if she could physically avoid it. “Tell me why you didn’t ever date anyone, when I was there. Why you are always alone.”

Mona stopped moving. The surprise in her voice was genuine. “What do you mean?”

“I just want to know.”

Mona turned to face her, grinding in the gravel. Kit looked out at the water, at the mountain line in the distance. The white peaks seemed superimposed on the background, and Kit glazed over. Cold air swished back under her clothes and washed over her skin; she had been warm and she hadn't noticed. She wished she hadn't said anything.

"Kit," Mona said. "Are you okay?" There was gentleness there, the tenderness of a nurse treating the newly wounded.

Kit nodded. "Yeah, of course." It was a stupid question to have asked. The dog returned, a ball of vibrating fur. She pulled the stick from his slobbery mouth and tossed it out into the waves. He leapt after it like a deer, knees shooting up over the white rows of foam. "Of course I am."

Mona was silent for a moment. "Once I loved Jen, I did stop dating anyone else. Because, being with anyone else felt like choosing something lesser, something that would never be enough."

"But she left."

Mona paused. "She went home, yeah. She had to."

Kit nodded.

Mona gave her a hard look. "It was the way it was. And, yeah, it really sucks. But sometimes you just have to get over it." The dog darted back and bumped against Mona's calves, sand and salt water stringing through his fur. Kit thought she heard her mutter "timing" as she bent down to ruffle the dog. Pippin dripped onto the pebbles and his tongue

wagged from his mouth. “Come on, bud,” Mona said, and clipped his leash. They walked back towards the staircase, back towards the road.

She knew Mona was right. The older girl was always right, in her sharpened perceptions, in her cruelly blunt kind of phrasing. Was it actually better to be lonely than to live with something you knew should be better, be more? When would more ever happen, and what would it look like? And, would she be good enough to hold onto more, if it ever wandered across her path?

When they were athletes, everything had seemed so clear, so definite, their daily routines and goals and purposes mapped out before them. Now nothing made sense and there was nowhere to hide. “No.” she said. Mona was far enough away that the sound of the waves, the placid crashes, drowned out her words. “Mona,” she said. “I don’t think I’m okay. But I don’t want to be this way.”

When she got home, Kit changed into a pair of tights and shoved her feet into her old sneakers. After the keds she’d been wearing for months, the netting and foam sole felt like an aged, worn-in slipper. She wiggled her toes.

Within a minute of running on the pavement, her legs dragged as heavy as cinderblocks. She pushed onwards, to the trail that circled the university, through the cavern of rainforest growth.

Her hips felt stiff, and her knees wouldn't lift high enough, and the winding stride that was once a glide was now a shuffle on cinder chips. Mona was broken. Jenny was broken. She was broken. Liv was breaking and would be broken soon. Not one of them, ever, would be strong enough, good enough, to get to the shining mirage of their dreams. Their bodies would ultimately fail, would become a prison of confinement, and, inside her cage, Kit lost the pursuit that had made her most free.

She stopped on the trail, waded out into the thicket of ferns and jurassic undergrowth. Rubbing her face, she felt her pulse beating in her neck, her blood coursing into her hands. Her vulva felt stuck, chafing against the lining of her tights. It was all that other bullshit that got in the way, all the strange complexities of the mind and body and heart that broke them down. And that, more than the conversation with Mona, more than knowing she would end it with Stephen, broke her heart.

She walked back home, shivering. In her room, she kicked the sneakers to the back of her closet and retrieved the box of dilators. The sight of them made her stomach lurch with hatred, and she clenched her teeth.

Chanting fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, she grabbed the middle-sized dilator from the box. She thrust her forehead into the glass door of her mirror, ripped down her pants and shoved it up her sweaty cunt. The pain caught in her throat. She pressed her head harder into the glass and told herself to breathe, breathe. At the place where the mirror began ran a

strip of metal trim, which was dirty and clogged with dust. She didn't want to see what she looked like, what the rest of the world saw.

26

Liv sprawled on the massage table, one arm dangling over the edge, thumbing through the apps on her phone. Her entire body ached, weighted down dead, as if she'd just clambered up a mountain and back. Greta's hands worked their way across her back, and a heavy pressure scrolled up the knots along the spine. Her thumb flicked through snapshots of her cousin's trip to Greece, snapshots of somebody's shredded beet salad, snapshots of girls she had beaten, posed, drinks in hand.

Over at the medicine cabinet, Brent replaced the box of blister care band-aids, checked his watch, and asked, “How is she?”

Greta answered, “She seems okay. The muscles are a bit weary. She probably needs to back off before something gives out.”

Liv shifted her forearm under her chin. How the hell Greta could tell that from just touching her legs seemed like voodoo magic to her. She scrolled again, daring Brent to ask her.

As if reading her mind, Brent spoke. “I have a secret suspicion that she adds in extra mileage.”

Liv looked up at him and smiled, before glancing back at her phone.

The last three weeks of workouts had fried her nervous system, leaving her sleepy and lethargic. Even though Brent had cautioned her against adding extra mileage, for risk of injury, she’d increased each week to over a hundred kilometres, and then omitted the extras from her training log. Every major joint was inflamed with muscular tension, and she did feel weary. And, now, exams were underway.

“Sitting’s the new smoking,” Greta was saying. “Make sure you take walk breaks when you sit.”

“Unhunh,” Liv said. A protein shake rested beside the table leg; she picked it up and sipped. “Brent, you’re moving speed to Thursday?” Brent nodded. “So, today’s just another tempo?” He confirmed that, yes, they would have an off-track tempo workout, and told her where to take the team in the warmup run. She followed him out of the clinic with her eyes.

He always caved to opposition. Greta dug into a deep trigger point and Liv winced. “You can go harder, you know.”

Greta’s mouth wrinkled, and Liv turned back to her phone. Now onto her hips, Greta’s hands maintained the same cadence and pressure, pushing down and smoothing the muscle. Liv flicked up another image, one of a cappuccino or latte or whatever, steamed into a striped heart. The phone vibrated in her palm and an unlisted number flashed across the screen. She turned it on speaker.

“Hello?”

“Liv, it’s Mona.” There was a rustling in the background.

Liv didn’t bother to keep the surprise from her voice. “Hey? New number?”

“You on campus?” There was more rustling and the chirp of a car door lock.

“Ya. In the clinic.”

Greta spoke. “You’re done.”

Liv set the phone on the table, flipped over, and arched backwards into a back bridge. Croaking out, “all good, Greta,” she flopped back down.

The phone sounded underwater. “Kay.” Liv heard quick footsteps and, after a moment, a heavy door opening. Mona’s voice was ragged, as if she was running, quickly. “You need to. Talk to Kit.”

Liv held the phone to her ear. “Why?”

The voice faded in and out. “She’s not okay.”

"What?"

There was more rustling, and a gaggle of other voices buzzing over whatever Mona said.

"She's fine. And I don't really think that's—"

Liv sat up. The toughened figure of Mona strode into the clinic, her boot striking the ground with quick, hard snaps. Stuffing her phone back into her pocket, she seemed to zone in on Liv, her faced narrowing to a glare. Greta waved hello. Mona didn't respond, and said, "She's not fine."

Liv rolled her eyes and sucked on her water bottle. "Kit just broke up with her boyfriend." She slid off the table, and her legs wobbled with a post-massage flubber. "That's normal." She added, "Thanks Greta," and stiffed past Mona, towards the team changing room.

The runner girls bustled at their lockers, chatting as they dressed for practice. It was summer and they left their t-shirts hanging on the hooks of their lockers, their stomachs bare to the creased abdomens. Their shoes squelched on the cement floor and their babbling conversation filled the room. "Agh, I got the runs today," "Man, my hammies are so fucking sore," "Shit, my foot's locked up and jammed," they said, as they swiped deodorant and passed bobby pins and picked at the heels of their socks.

"Hey," Hanna said when Liv entered, face contorting with confusion a split second later. Liv turned and saw Mona on her shoulder, pale and rigid and out of place in her jeans.

Mona cleared her throat, back stiff, shoulders back. And after a beat, Liv realized that the older girl, the former team captain, the girl everyone once wanted to be, hadn't said goodbye to half the girls in the room. She'd simply disappeared. The chatter stilled. Mona leaned towards Liv's ear, and said, in a low tone, "This is important."

Liv snatched her running jacket from her locker and snapped the door shut. It was fairly warm out, but she was starting to get cold all the time. Hand on her hip, she said, "Well, we've got a workout, Mona."

Awkwardly, the girls filed out, a row of ponytailed ducks. Mona's glare narrowed to a point, and, wordlessly, she stepped up on a bench and, aircast raised up, ruffled above the lockers. She hopped back down holding an ancient pair of runners. They were red and scarred and crusty, their foam soles rubbed free of their grooves.

Liv closed the door behind her. When the team crossed the hall and stepped outside, though, she glanced back. Still in her jeans but down to her sweater, Mona jogged towards them, the battered red sneakers laced tight.

The group of girls started their watches, launching into their normal conversations about their days, their breakfasts, their pre-workout shits. They struck out as a pack, settling in for their warmup run. Mona was right on Liv's shoulder, striding out in in the ill-fitting, overused, and abandoned shoes.

“We’re just doing twenty today,” Liv said to the group, masking her relief with the sharpness of the command. It was her second run of the day, and she’d added an extra half our in the morning. Her legs weighed heavy and wobbled a touch, but she relaxed into the rhythm of her stride.

“Liv,” Mona said. “Could you just focus, please? I don’t think she’s okay.”

“Why can’t we talk about this later?”

“You’re supposed to be her best friend.”

“Yeah, well.” Liv didn’t answer beyond that. The rest of the girls had quieted, listening in on the conversation. This was neither the time nor the place.

Liv knew that Mona had run around the campus trails twice a day, every day, for the better part of her young adulthood. She knew that the older girl felt these paths like the lines of her palm, carried a memory of them more clearly than the street of her apartment. This warmup run was once easy, once a mere glide, for her. But she also knew, intuitively, that since the second injury, since the move, Mona hadn’t been back to these trails.

Ten minutes in, the group surged forward and quickened up their cadence, running at a tempo pace. Whereas they could have bantered before, now their effort prevented them from speaking. Mona responded to the group and hung onto Liv’s shoulder, leaning in a touch closer than proper etiquette. They didn’t quite touch, but like a roadblock wall, Liv felt

Mona pressing down on her with a smooth, steady pressure. They clanked elbows.

In races, Mona Thornborough had cracked girls, broken them with the sheer staying power of her revving engine. Liv's throat felt thick as she sucked in more air, and she couldn't speak; the presence bore a hole into her already-lethargic body. The pack of girls flew round the turns, light on their feet like deer in the trees.

Then, Liv felt it; it was a slight, nearly imperceptible change, one she wouldn't have noticed had she not been waiting, hoping, for it to come. With a shift in the hips Mona's movements started to jerk through the speed, as she broached the precipice of what her Achilles could take, of how much it could endure before giving out.

Mona, with her lack of mobility, shouldn't try to keep up. It wasn't even the pain of it, because her movements were more restricted than painful. Bare, raw, her ankle was clogged with scar tissue. It was incapable of bending, and it refused to return to the position where it once tore. Running fast was harder, and Mona's body had become a blockade. From the corner of her eye, Liv saw the death mask appear, and knew that despite the risk, despite the history, this girl would not tap out.

"Fine." Liv stopped her watch and halted. "Kit and I are not friends anymore." Sweat dripped down her temples and she was breathing hard. Hanna hesitated, and then kept running, indicating that the group should do the same. The girls disappeared around the next leafy bend.

Mona grabbed her knees and spat. “Why the fuck not?”

“Because I needed her too.” The shoes on Mona’s feet were cracked and ancient and ugly, so beaten-in that they blended with the undergrowth. At her bent over figure, Liv shouted, “She was supposed to be my best friend and she stopped first. I got fast and I beat her and she couldn’t take it. And then I didn’t have a best friend anymore.” Everything else was quiet, save for the rustle of the breeze.

“Olivia.” Mona stood up and blinked at the trees. “That’s not it.” Naked annoyance filled her face. “Liv, she is sick. And she needs you.”

Biting her lip, Liv stared at the ground.

Mona peeled off her sweater. Sweat glistened on her chest. “Woof,” she said, and half-cracked a smile.

Liv softened. “Never thought I’d see you tired after eighteen minutes.”

“Never thought you’d be captain.”

They started to jog again, more of a shuffle than anything.

“You must have known for a while,” Mona said.

Liv paused. “I tried, at first. Didn’t you?”

The breeze picked up. “You’re her best friend.” Mona stopped, picked up her ankle, and twisted the joint. Her face was calm. “Try harder.”

Liv fiddled with her watch. “Fine,” she said. “I can do that.”

Kit lay in a lump on her bed, her laptop open to the wikipedia page on vulvodynia. The blinds were down, and the blue light from the screen barely illuminated the space. When the thoughts set in, that's what she turned to—a blind revision of the facts, of the limits of her life. Her eyes weighed heavy but she wasn't sleepy, and the thick, dusty smell of her bedding drew her into the dense reservoir, the safe, comforting nook of the world.

Bars of the outside world slatted through the blinds; the sun would set soon. She slid her hands under her pajama shorts and between her legs, knotting her fingers in the hair before pushing a fingertip into herself. It hurt but she breathed through it. Callum had done this to her, and the touch had been violent. She closed her eyes. She needed to get better, be better.

Tugging the bedding up to her chin, she shifted onto her side, and her plate slid off the quilt. The crusts of her toast dinner fell onto dilators, which were already slimed with lidocaine cream. She spent too much time in here, in this room. It smelled stagnant, of her unwashed body. But there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

A soft tapping came at the door, and she didn't answer.

The tapping came again. "Can I come in?" It was Liv's soft voice.

Dully, she answered, yes.

Liv cracked open the door and tiptoed in. She chimed in a low, singsong voice. "It's past tea time."

“Cool.” Kit shoved the plate and dilators and tubes of cream towards the wall, and closed her laptop.

“Whatcha doin?”

“Nothin,” she said, in the same mocking tone. “Googlin.”

Liv crawled onto the bed, digging and burrowing under the covers. Her presence was warm, her energy buzzing a bit too loudly for the quiet room. Kit stiffened. They hadn’t been this physically close in what felt like forever.

“Hey,” Liv said. “Whatcha do today?”

“Oh, this and that.”

Liv moved to open the laptop, but Kit slapped her palm down. Her friend dropped back into the pillows. “Sorry,” Kit said. “Just looking up some stuff.”

“Coolio.” She said it with a drawl, and snuggled in. Kit opened her mouth, to ask about her day, about why she was in here, about what she wanted, but before she could say anything, Liv bolted up and pointed. “What the hell? Is that a dildo?”

The pink edge of a dilator poked out from under the covers. Kit shifted to grab it but couldn’t reach and it rolled down the edge of the mattress. “It’s a dilator.”

Liv leaned back against the wall. “God. What’s that?”

“For stretching.”

Liv looked at her with an exaggerated blankness.

Kit sighed. “For my vulva. It’s one of the treatments that’s supposed to work.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Does it?”

The answer came unbidden and in a rush. “No.” She surged forward, grabbed it, and stuffed it further under the covers. “I don’t think so.” She lay back down, her head on the pillow.

Stiffly, her discomfort emanating in deliberate movements, Liv settled down beside her.

Kit rolled over and looked at her friend lying beside her, her face eighteen inches away. Pores clogged on her nose, and two zits budded at the centre of her pale hairline, but her blue eyes grew glossy, the pupils unflinching. Softly, Liv sighed.

Kit swallowed. The closeness of her friend, in her barefaced, watchful wait, seemed to pierce past the veil of composure, to completely disregard the careful glaze of bullshit. “I hate them.” Kit whispered. “Liv, I hate them so much.”

For so long she hadn’t shared this with anyone. Except for Callum, and then briefly Stephen, she had been alone in this. Or, maybe, she had always been alone. The emotion poured out of her, and in that moment, she realized just how much she needed someone to hear her words.

“They’re like this measure of competence. And I’ll never live up to it. I hate all of it. I hate physio and I hate medications and I hate all of it.”

Liv nodded.

"Sometimes I get hopeful. Hopeful that they'll find a cure, figure something out. But then I remember it's a condition without a cure. That they know nothing. Doctors, I mean."

Liv lay on the pillow, her hand under her cheek, just watching. Kit flipped on her back and stared up at the ceiling, her chest rising with the effort of the speech, the words hammering out of her mouth.

"And everything I do, everything I'm trying to do, is never enough and it's never going to be enough. And I know that sex is supposed to be more than what I've had, more than this, but it's always so clinical and I'm clinical and I hate it so much."

Liv watched as her friend battled with the intangible, with the real core of it. What she wanted was to be free from pain, but what she needed was self-worth. Liv kept her mouth closed and listened.

Kit wiped her snotty nose. "And I look at Mona and her body gave out and mine's giving out and, Liv, most days I think that's just how it is. I don't know what to do or to think or how to be or whether or not anything will ever be good enough. I wasn't good enough for Callum, and I let him hurt me, and that was shit, but I don't know what else will ever come of that kind of situation, because pain seems inevitable, and Pea's never found a cure and won't talk about it, and says she hasn't given up but she has, and that seems like bullshit to me, but I don't know if anything I ever try will actually work—"

Liv laid her hand on Kit's hot cheek. The gesture was so tender, so sincere, that it broke the spiraling stream-of-consciousness. Slowly, Liv spoke. "Listen to me." Kit looked at her and looked at her, at the girl she'd lived with for two years, the girl she'd met in first year and trained alongside and traded midnight secrets with.

Liv spoke, slowly, slowly. "You are perfect, exactly the way you are. There is nothing wrong with you." She paused, waiting, allowing the words to hover. "You are my best friend, and you are a wonderful person, and you don't need to be anything else."

Kit was still, her entire body tense. Liv said it again. "Listen, to me, Katherine. You are enough." Her voice was steady. "You are enough."

Kit's already-red eyes welled again. Her greasy hair stuck to her forehead and cheeks. Liv said, "In a race, there comes a point where you make a decision. You know this."

Kit nodded.

"It's usually at the middle. In the long dark part, before the final lap."

Kit knew exactly what she meant. The place where the fatigue and pain begins to set in, when the racer realizes they have a lonely long way to go. Liv said, "You decide, right then and there, that you're in. You're in or you drop out. That you're going to pick up your knees and see this through, no matter how hard it seems. And Kit, I've seen you make that choice a hundred times before."

Kit whispered, “And I’m trying. But vulvodynia—“

“—I’m not talking about vulvodynia.” Her voice was hard. “I’m talking about your life.”

Kit rolled back over. “Yeah. I—”

“—Dude.” Liv sat up. “Let’s get in my car.”

They drove west.

On the highway, Liv fiddled with the radio until it blasted new-age folk music, the long blue feather dancing from the rearview mirror. Kit huddled in the passenger seat, her knees to her chest.

“Shoes off,” Liv commanded, once they hit the highway. The dark forest whizzed by on the roadside. She slapped Kit’s knee. Kit let her sandals fall to the floor, and put her feet on the dashboard.

They drove and drove, passing signs for beaches and trails and campsites. Thick emerald forestation hung over the edge of the two-lane highway, and after an hour their phones lost service and the radio turned to static.

When they arrived at Botanical Beach the sky was pearl white. The mountains were a diluted sapphire line across the horizon, an unreal, superimposed stroke of paint. Alpine firs barbed along the cove’s edge. Kit inhaled the thick smell of brine, of the sea, of salt. It was dead quiet except for the crash of the waves.

The beach was a plateau of yellow and black rock. Liv toured ahead of her, picking around the tidepools and mussel beds, towards the water's edge. Kit followed in behind. Beneath her feet the rock face was smooth, worn down with the washes of time, grey barnacles stippled across the surface.

"That's called ulva," Liv said, over her shoulder, and jerked her head to what looked like lettuce sprouting from the rock. Kit poked a growth with her toe.

Liv squatted beside a tidepool, sitting like a cat on her bare heels. She pointed to the sea anemone and tiny white crabs, to the silver of a fish whose name she couldn't remember. "I really should know what this is," she said.

At the edge of the beach the rock face dropped off into sort of miniature coves, basins filled with of eddying water and seaweed five feet down. Waves slammed against the rocks, over the rows and rows of black mussels, frothing and spraying high into the air.

The undertow sucked backwards, baring the rocks on the bottom. They were red and blue and yellow and brown, bright and smooth, as if coated in wax. Another wave crashed in overtop. Kit breathed deep, feeling the expansion from her bottom ribs.

Liv stood ten feet over, tilted down over a full basin. There was a wild glint in her eye. "Come on, loser."

She whipped off her shirt, undid her belt buckle and shimmied out of her pants, the tops of her thighs white from her shorts tanline.

Kit shook her head. “No, no—”

Liv was hopping over to a good launching point. She shouted, “Hurry up! You don’t want to miss this!”

Kit hesitated. There was no one to see them but themselves, and they’d seen each other naked or near naked enough that there was no mystery left. But there was a patch of fat on her stomach. Her thighs had softened, touching in the centre; with months of no exercise she’d lost her leanness. She stepped with the ginger of a colt, unsure in her own form.

Something stabbed the bottom of her foot, and she lifted it to see three barnacles. They were tiny and white, sequestered on a smooth hummock of black rock.

She stripped off her clothes and the air was a cutting cold across all of her skin. Liv glanced back over her shoulder, and leapt over the shallow cliff.

On her legs and arms and back and neck Kit’s hair stood up stiff. She used to mask her discomfort with her body by finding satisfaction in her fitness, by focusing on what her body could get her. But she needed to let go of that. She stepped towards the edge.

Liv treaded water below. The waves swirled around her, and she swam to the side and touched the rock wall. She looked up, at the brown

bird of Kit, the softened knees and elbows and wooly hair, and while she was watching she saw the give.

Kit jumped and cold water hit her body, binding to every inch of her skin. Panic rose in her chest and her lungs strained for air, but she made herself sink into the turquoise blackness, into the movement shredded with filaments of light.

Salt stung at her eyes so she closed them, curling and flexing her arms and her legs, relishing in the stretch of the muscles, in the stinging tingling of movement and cold. The world was different underwater. There was no sound, only stillness. Its pressure, encasing her whole body, covered the ringing in her head.

Liv's white legs swirled above her. Kit surfaced, her head breaking into the frigid air. She gulped for oxygen and wet hair suctioned flat to her skull.

They half-swam, half-dragged themselves around the rocks and towards the open ocean. They scraped their hands and knees on the sharp bits, struggling to grip the slimy seaweed. Finally they were free of the rocks and could swim, and with swimming, Kit's body generated heat that dulled the cold.

She had been a runner but somewhere along the way she had started to misunderstand what that meant, to comprehend the word through another definition. She had valued pain and pushing her limits,

had clung to the thought that she could conquer anything. But, of course, that was never the way things actually went.

Liv swam a stroke ahead of her. “I’m sorry I’ve been so shitty,” Kit said over the lapping of the waves.

Her friend twisted over her shoulder. Water had darkened her hair, and her face was pale. “I still love you, you know!”

“I love you too,” Kit said.

She tilted her head back and raised her knees, floating in the water, letting the fingers of the shifting tide drag over her. She had been a runner, but that was not all she was. She had been diagnosed with vulvodynia, but that was not who she was either.

Fingernails pinched her big toe. Kit looked up and her friend grinned. The rest she would figure out later.

Further out into the ocean bobbed a field of seaweed. They swam in that direction, so they could touch it.

27

"I want to just be me again."

"That's a great idea," Liv said. "How do you want to do that?"

"Your room looks like you," Peony said, stretching over the bed to brush the dream catcher that hung from the window.

"Yeah, it's a scattery mess," Liv said.

"Thanks." Kit said, to Liv. Peony smiled. Kit had reached out after the trip to the beach, and now Pea basically lived at their house. Liv and Hanna butted heads; Kit hadn't really noticed but went with Liv's

announcement. Peony would be moving into the vacant room come September. Possibly earlier.

"I need to get rid of all of this. All the gear." She picked up a dilator between her thumb and forefinger. "The paraphernalia."

"Okay. Let's do it." Liv slid off the messy bed and snapped up the blinds. The brilliant evening light poured into the room. Stacks of dishes and wadded tissues and bundled clothes covered every surface; the floor was carpeted with old towels and discarded sweaters and socks. "You go first."

Kit felt the hard line of a dilator through a bundle of sheets. Peony looked uncomfortable, and busied herself with scanning the bookshelves. Liv picked up the white box from the floor, passed it to her. "Why are there so many? Do you hate all of them?"

Kit snorted. She scrounged through the bedding for the eight dilators and Liv twisted the caps back on the tubes and jars of medications. "There's some pre-natal-sensitive-bio-approved lube in the top drawer," Kit said, pointing to the dresser. "I hate it and it's going too."

Peony stood up. "Kit, you should know, this is great, what you're doing."

"What do you mean?"

Peony looked somber. "It took me a long time. But I realized that's the most important thing, too."

Kit reached over and squeezed her hand, and Peony squeezed it back.

They piled the dilators and the medications and the stretching schedule and leaflets onto the sheets. Kit reached under the bed for the bag of dildos, and tossed that on too, not even blushing when Liv smirked at her. “My doctor said they’re a lesbian-friendly sex toy,” Kit said.

“Maybe Mona wants them.”

In spite of herself, Kit laughed. She gathered everything into her arms, and staggered through the house and across the yard. With one hand, she raised the lid to the garbage can; flies flew out. One by one she dropped the bag, the armful of wax, the prescriptions, the papers, all of it, into the squelchy pile. She closed the lid with an emphatic click.

She returned to find her room empty, and her bed had been stripped, the quilted mattress bare. The dishes had been cleared away, the general mess tidied. The rocks snaked along the back of her dresser, curling into a swirl. She’d added rocks from the days at Botanical and Dallas, the important days, her days with Mona and with Liv.

A yellow flashcard stuck to the lampshade beside her bed, and she went over to pick it up. The tape that held it in place made a tiny ripping noise. In neat, swirling cursive, read the same words Liv had whispered in bed.

You Are Enough.

It had been placed perfectly, where she would see it every morning.

"In case you need a reminder," Liv said, from the hallway.

28

The late July heat baked on her skin, threatening to pull sweat from even a still body. Kit turned her face to the sun and imagined herself a tulip, drinking in the energy. She said, “Mona, I just want to get fit again.”

“Yes. You said that already.”

Kit opened her eyes. Beside her, Mona stood on one leg, a hand clamped around her raised foot as she stretched back her quad. Her bike leaned against a tree. “You’re going to take it slow, you know,” she said, before opening her eyes. Kit saw a fleck of humour there, and took it as a win.

The sky was blue and the trees were green and the grass was bleached brown. Looking out over the colours of a Victoria summer, Kit gave a good-natured harrumph and resisted the urge to prematurely break into a jog. Mona hopped on the bike, slowly dropping her weight into the pedals as they meandered towards the mouth of the trail. With each step a thick bed of cedar woodchips buoyed Kit's runners. It was brilliantly sunny. They were at a golf course, one surrounded by soft trails. Mona had picked it—it was the perfect place to re-introduce one's body to the stimulus of running. She said, "We'll start at the post."

Inside the trees it was cool and variegated with sunlight. At the post, Kit pressed the start button on her watch and began to jog, Mona spinning lightly beside her. She felt bulky and stiff, shuffling in quick steps with little air to her stride.

"Hold up from your core. Try and relax your shoulders." Mona weaved from the handlebars, struggling to steer at the slow pace. "God, your ankle recovery time is awful."

Huffing, Kit glanced over at her friend. Even her arms felt heavy. The watch closed in on a minute, and she slowed to a walk. "Gah. Everything feels so uncoordinated," she said, walking forward. Already, she was counting down the four minutes of prescribed rest. "It's like my body's forgotten what to do."

"You've been basically sedentary for months. You're a locked-up mess." Mona might as well have added *obviously*—she stated the

physiological truth so plainly that it took the emotion out. Kit grimaced but was glad of the reminder.

She wanted to ask about Peony, and opened her mouth to do so, but shied away at the last second. The two of them had met a few weeks ago at Ansell house, when Kit had attempted to host a dinner party. They'd hit it off, to say the least. After waiting a few minutes, she finally blurted out the question, "How's Peony?"

"She's fine." Kit could feel Mona's controlled smugness. "I think she said the two of you were going to hang out yesterday, actually."

"That's not what I meant, you know," Kit said.

"Yes," Mona was forcing down a smile. "I do know."

Knowing she wouldn't get any more out of her, Kit kept walking along the trail. Mona wobbled beside her. Two middle-aged women jogged past them, and soon, a man pushing a double stroller did the same. Kit was embarrassed for walking, for not running, for her sweat and her softness and her slow-moving youth.

"It doesn't matter, you know," Mona said.

"Yeah, I know."

Mona kept spinning and weaving and wobbling.

"Fine," Kit said. "How much longer do I have to do these walk-runs?"

"You have to build slow. Be patient. Your body is adjusting."

Kit picked at her watchstrap, tightening it, loosening it, tightening it. She was always playing with her wrists, with the things attached there. She realized it was an anxious gesture, and swung her arms by her sides instead. They felt awkward and oddly light.

"And, besides," Mona added. "The body doesn't forget. You've done this far too many times."

Kit knew what Mona was going to say before the words came out.

"Also," Mona said. "You may say you're not training again, but you should go see Greta."

29

At the buzzer, Mona hurriedly finished unpacking the groceries, shoving the apples and Gouda onto the same shelf and slamming the fridge shut. She danced out of her kitchen, swearing under her breath in a warm, anxious stream. Stopping before the door, she checked herself, pinned up the dangling rattail, and pressed the intercom.

At the knock, she opened the door in what she hoped was a graceful, slow arc. Peony's oval face was bright but nervous. She had straightened her hair, and it fell down her back like a river. "I think I might

be early," she said, and held up a bottle of wine. Somehow, the words made Mona relax just a little.

Mona attempted to rush her through the apartment tour, but Pea had other ideas. Her wide eyes drank in each little detail; the stenciled flower prints hanging in the hallway, the dishes behind the glass door in the dining nook, the painted mantelpiece and the alphabetically ordered books on top of it. "It's adorable!" she exclaimed, "Not bad for a random." Pea sat down on the stiff grey couch, eyes trained to the stack of coffee table magazines. "Are these yours?"

"No, they're my roommates'." Mona paused. "He studies fashion and graphics."

"Is he home?" Her voice lifted up at the end.

Lukas was at the gym, and would bartend after. "No, he's out for the night."

Mona didn't know what else to say. Was there anything there, anything between them, when the others weren't present? She opened her mouth, and then closed it. She stood in the living room, looking at Pea looking at the magazines. Mona swallowed, walked to her bedroom and quickly returned, carrying her antique typewriter across her forearms.

Carefully, she placed the heavy box on the dining table and lifted off the cover. She realized she hadn't said anything, but had expected to be followed. Against the scrubbed wooden grain, the typewriter's sleek black cover, open-faced levers, and long silver carriage looked like a photograph

from a magazine. A hipster device for the out-of-time writer-girl. It had belonged to Jenny, and she'd left it behind when she moved. Mona suddenly felt unsure in bringing it out.

The bone of Pea's jaw lowered onto Mona's shoulder, and her hair tickled Mona's neck. She felt Pea press against her back, close enough that their bodies just grazed between the fabrics of their shirts.

"It's beautiful," Pea said, threading her arm between Mona's elbow and waist. She traced her finger over the gilt logo, then down the round black keys. "Where'd you find it?"

Mona hummed, and rather stiffly answered, "It belonged to a friend." She threaded a sheet of looseleaf, then swung into the kitchen. Peony flicked her hair off her shoulders and, with the grace of a pianist, pulled out a chair and sat down. Mona retrieved a pot from the cupboard and, from the edge of her eye, watched the reedy brown fingers hover above the keys. Very gently, Pea's index finger pressed down. The type guide clanked.

Mona listened to the clacking of the keys as she chopped onions and garlic. They hardly spoke, save for Pea's brief offer to come help, which Mona declined then immediately regretted. It was terribly inconvenient to want to touch someone, but to hover in uncertainty upon approach.

She simmered mushrooms in olive oil, stirred in ground beef, and poured over her homemade tomato sauce. While she chopped and stirred

and twisted in ground pepper she glanced over her shoulder, verging on speaking but immediately trapped by the tongue in her mouth. Then, her face would flush, and she'd bend into the waft of steam to camouflage her embarrassment. Pea still sat at the table, typing out a poem. This was ridiculous. Mona asked, "Do you like spicy food?"

The marinara sauce bubbled on the stove and she dumped the noodles into a colander in the sink; thank god it was done. The typewriter clacking had stopped, and smears of wine ringed inside Pea's empty glass. Mona dipped a long wooden spoon into the sauce and brought it to her tongue; the savoury of the basil cut perfectly against the sweet of the tomato. "Dinner's—"

A pair of hands touched her waist and a pair of lips pressed down on her neck. Red sauce dripped onto the white stove, and Mona set the spoon down. She flicked off the burner and turned around.

Their faces an inch apart, she could feel the space between them vibrate and grow thin. She parted her lips, brought her hands to Peony's waist, and shoved her back against the fridge. They collided at the hips and at the chest. Mona opened her mouth and kissed Pea hard.

They left their clothes on the floor and tangled under the white sheets, their skin slippery and hot. This girl's patchouli scent filled Mona's nose, and her dark curtain of hair swam about Mona's face. Pea's lovely head arched back and Mona trailed her tongue down the brown skin, sliding down the bed.

Her groin was bare of hair, her lips ballet pink and glossy wet. Mona dipped her tongue against the tender flesh and Peony whimpered and Mona's stomach dug. Her fingertips bit into Mona's forearms, and Mona pushed her hands up her tensing stomach. She tasted of the sea. Mona felt her rumble and heard her cry out, and she stopped, and said, gently, "Do you want me inside?"

Peony stilled and half sat up. Mona raised her head and looked across Pea's naked body, across her soft abdomen, over the swell of her breasts, up at her now-anxious face.

"So," Pea said. "I have this thing. It's totally not a big deal at all, but you should know, and it's called vulvodynia."

In the quickening of the speech rang a dash of insecurity. Mona replied, "It's okay." She kissed the inside of her thigh. "I know what that is." She had not forgotten, the day that Kit came home from the clinic.

"Fuck yes." Pea flopped back. "Fuck yes." Her whole body seemed to sink, to give at the sinews.

Mona hadn't heard her swear before. The surprise made her like Pea even more. "So," she said, her mouth hovering on Pea's skin. "Why don't you show me what works, and I can take over from there?"

She felt Peony smile more than she saw her mouth move. The fingers let go of her forearms, and slid past Mona's face, to between her legs.

"I like this," she said, her fingers swirling and dipping. "And this."

A light growl curled in the back of Mona's throat, and she touched her fingers to Peony's clit and to the tender skin. Peony's hands dawdled into Mona's hair, her fingertips hovering about Mona's ears.

Peony slid open the screen door and stepped into the dining room. The leaves of the peach tree waved lazy shadows in the weak morning sunlight. Kit sat at the dining room table, feet tucked under her chair, her hands around a mug of coffee. Her blank face pointed towards the wall, an emptiness filling her tired stare.

"Good morning," Peony said, and walked past, into the kitchen. She grazed her palm against Kit's shoulder, and the touch barely elicited a response.

"Hi," Kit said, still in her dozy voice. "How was dinner?"

Trust Kit to genuinely ask about dinner, and not the early morning return. "It was delicious. You're right in that she's a beautiful cook."

Kit nodded, and, a beat later, wondered if she had just heard a sexual reference or not. Peony didn't seem the type.

Peony watched the absentness glaze back over Kit's face. She debated pulling up a chair and asking, but hesitated, and let it alone. Kit had been like that for months, though for the last few weeks she'd been visibly making more of an effort to be engaged.

She watched the girl's gaze drop down to her cup, which by now must be cold. Peony fixed herself a cup of tea and took a pastry from the

tin above the fridge, and milled about, tidying the mess that always seemed to accumulate. Finally, she licked the last bit of pastry from her thumb, crept across the kitchen, and sat down beside Kit. She sipped from her mug, the loose leaves rising to the top and sticking to her tongue. She waited.

"So, how was the rest of the night?" Kit's voice was hoarse. She cleared her throat.

Peony smiled, her voice soft. "It was great."

Kit's face stayed blank. "Mona's one of the good ones, even if she projects that she isn't. I can see you being good for her."

"Thanks," Peony said. "We did just meet." She crossed one ankle behind the other and listened for the response.

It came after a moment. "Yeah. I know."

Experience had taught Peony that the best way to make someone realize something is to allow them to get there first. To wait, until you feel them give, because until they're ready to hear it they're incapable of listening to anything but the crashing inside their own skulls. She let the silence lapse. The branches of the tree tapped against the glass, and she wondered if the peaches would ripen soon.

"I just," Kit said. "I just."

Without making eye contact, Peony lifted the mug from Kit's hand and entwined their fingers.

"I just want that." Kit was crying.

Peony waited. “I’m sorry,” she said. She let the silence stew. With her free hand, Kit wiped under her eyes. Peony gripped the other tight. “I didn’t always think I could have it either,” she said, finally. “For so many reasons.”

Kit sniffed, the snot snorting in her nose. She wiped it on the sleeve of her robe.

Peony continued, her voice low, careful. “Will I ever be able to have good sex. Will anyone ever understand what I feel like every day.” She spoke in facts and not in questions, swirling her mug so that the flecks of tea circled and stuck to the rim. “Will anyone ever love me. Will I ever feel comfortable with who I am. Will I ever reconcile the person I am supposed to be, with the person that I am.”

Peony didn’t stop talking, but rolled onward with her own momentum. “Will there ever be a reason. Will there ever be a cure. Will what some doctor tells me finally be enough. Will I ever feel like I’m enough. Will having this condition ever stop feeling like a barrier and start feeling like just another part of my body. Will I stop hating this body for what it looks like, for what it feels like, for its limits. Will I ever love anyone the way I’m supposed to. Will they ever want me back. Love me back.”

She swallowed. She was crying now too. “Kit it has seemed impossible for so long. But then sometimes it doesn’t. And I’m starting to think that we will. It may seem impossible that anyone could understand

this condition, and yes things may never go anywhere, but I think that if we can get over ourselves and let things get off the ground with someone, trust someone, then I think we stand a chance of having something that could work."

Kit said nothing. She'd never assumed no one else understood her. That was Peony, and not her; they had understood their shared condition in different ways. She settled back in her chair, and they sat in the ringing silence.

After a few minutes, Peony stood up and went up to her room to get changed for work, and then a few minutes later called goodbye from the hall. Kit walked over to the sink, rinsed out her cup, and put it in the dishwasher.

Liv had said she would be enough, and as a friend maybe she was. Kit headed towards her room, bypassing the row of Liv's running shoes neatly lined up in the front foyer. That girl was still so, so thin. Scott had tried to cook her curry the previous night, but she had teased her way around it and only eaten half a bowl.

That was the problem, when all these challenges and changes came at the same point in your life. They crashed down over you and you didn't know which way was up, which way was normal, which was the way things are supposed to be. Suddenly, she was ashamed for her insipid, conceited behavior, for her assumption that her struggle trumped that of everyone else. She was not, she realized, so painfully special.

She returned to the kitchen and set a pan on the stove. She cracked four eggs and whisked them with a fork. She poured the fluffy mix into the pan and, stirring them with a spatula, she let them cook evenly through. After grating over cheddar cheese, she carried the scramble on a plate, and knocked on Liv's bedroom door.

"Yo dude," she said. "I've made us breakfast, and I'm coming in."

31

In the summer months, the athletic therapy clinic was nearly always quiet. Unencumbered by the influx of in-season varsity athletes, and free from the noise of intramural-playing students, Greta's only contact was brief conversations with in-and-out coaching staff or the occasional summer-track runner. Most of them were away for the week, competing. The radio crooned on low, and the artificially-lit, cinder-block clinic stayed tidy and cool and calm. She missed the commotion.

Kit arrived to find Greta folding towels and organizing them into an open cupboard. Her back was turned, her movements slow and careful;

she smoothed the edges, then stacked them into tidy columns. Kit had never seen her move in such a measured way. Greta closed the cupboard door and, looking about, as if for something to do next, saw Kit standing there.

"Good to see you," the therapist said, sounding not unsurprised.

"Have you got a minute?" Kit asked. She was in her sports bra and shorts.

"Grasshopper, I've got all day." She patted the top of the closest table and Kit scuttled over.

"What's going on here?" Greta said, as she tugged on Kit's feet and rolled her legs from side to side.

"I'm all locked up. Nothing's moving right."

"Unhunh."

The radio played on low. The ice machine clicked and hummed. Greta's hands worked over her thighs, and the pressure of her touch and the smell of the coconut oil and the occasional sound of her shoes shuffling on the cement floor grounded Kit. She felt weighted to the table; slack-limbed, but as if a magnet held her down. She was unable to rise even if she wanted to.

Greta said, "So, I heard you've hung up the spikes."

Kit didn't answer. Her tongue was thick and she couldn't get the words out. The foam-tiled ceiling was speckled with tiny holes, black pricks on white, like vanilla bean ice cream. Greta kept working on her.

"I don't want to," Kit said, finally, the words low and cracking enough that had anything else been going on, had anyone else been in the room, Greta wouldn't have heard her.

Kit's shorts were neon green, trimmed with orange. Where this girl shopped Greta could only wonder. One hand on the hip and the other on the top of the thigh, she ground the heels of her hands into this body and slowly pushed the leg away from the core, stretching the tissues in the direction of her movement as if to lengthen the very socket. She knew that in the space between her hands, in the layers of flesh and cell and muscle and fascia, there would be a gradual burning sensation, a slow-building heat that wasn't quite pain but had the potential to grow into something intolerable, if she pushed it too far. She'd release it before it got to that point, and then this stretch, this fascial release, would free the hip from the inside out.

Kit, like Mona and like Liv too, kept moving because it made it easier to ignore what they felt. It was the thing that intrigued her most about these girls, their strange ability to simply discount what they felt, to physically blockade themselves from their discomfort. They needed to stop moving, or to find their stillness while moving, if they were ever going to truly understand pain.

Kit's hip flexor burned but in a good kind of way, a helping kind of way. She'd been through this a hundred times, a million times. It never lessened in pain. To bear it was still an easy thing.

Over the last few months she'd spent time in school, half-paying attention in her summer classes, but finishing the assignments at least. She'd spent time cooking dinners with her roommates and lying in the sun on beaches, visiting Peony at work and watching Liv's races. She spent time learning to run again, time re-learning her technique, time wishing and waiting and working to go slow, so that later she could be fast. Time and time and time she filled and yet, on this table, she had nothing to hear but the glug of heartbeat, the rustle of her bones. There was a clicking sound, coming from a source close to her face; after a moment, she realized it fell in time with her blinks, and that it came from the muscles around her eyes.

The muscles of her face were so hardened with tension that they grated together even when she blinked. Her body was hardened and tense and full of gunk and that felt terrible and unfair.

Thoughts of the past year began to flood into her mind, and with it came an unbidden rush of emotion. Her eyes welled, but on the table, weighted and, trapped in her own body, she couldn't pinch the tears away. The massage table was sticking to the back of her shoulders and arms.

She thought of what this last year had involved, and all the things she hadn't processed; the bad friend she'd been to Liv, the sliding consequence of school. Being diagnosed with a chronic pain condition. The loss of her racing season. The entire narrative with Callum. It all felt so heavy. She set her jaw and tilted her head back.

The pressure of her hands still on Kit's hip, Greta's voice came quiet. "That's a big one you've got there."

Kit didn't say anything and didn't say anything and didn't say anything and just let her thoughts run on. She didn't know if she'd always been this way, if she'd always held things in her body like this. She didn't know if it was new or old or just a right now kind of a thing. She didn't know if it was something she could prevent or she could control, but she knew that everything from here would be up to her.

"You can try and let that go, now, if you want," Greta said.

It wasn't the same as it had been in the winter, when Greta had worked on her stomach and she'd been attacked by peals of ugly laughter. This was quiet, subtle, and a choice to let go. Kit felt Greta's hands on her hip, pushing the sinew beneath her palm, and she let it release, allowed the tissue to let go.

Greta's hands worked through the warm and malleable flesh, and she hummed lightly.

Kit breathed deep, letting the clean tears trace down the sides of her face, letting them puddle in her hair.

32

In late August, Brent shuffled up the concrete stairs, climbing from the basement clinic to the main foyer of the gym. Foam dripped from the ceiling like stalactites, and the beige cement walls conveyed the dankness of a mildewing parking garage. This building had always been dingy, throughout all of the decades he had passed in its dim rooms.

From within the clinic, Greta shouted. “Don’t worry, really. He’ll be fine!”

Brent nodded and mumbled a reply not intended for her to actually hear. He’d left Nathan in her capable hands, and knew that if left to her

care alone, the incoming student-athlete truly would be fine. But, the semester hadn't even started yet, and already Nathan crammed his days with work and training, with volunteering and jump-starting his Torts readings. He was talented enough, mature enough, biomechanically solid enough, to handle the big loads and contend at nationals. But, even though it was only August, Brent mentally penciled the boy as just potential. An invisible asterisk beside the name. Watch out for that one; tell that one to back off in the most strenuous sessions.

If anything, the tenuous ways in which he landed the head coaching position had left him with a grievous sense of responsibility. He was a caretaker for these children—yes, they were still children. Yes, his job was to build them as athletes, but it was also his job to tend to them as people. He reached the top of the stairs, his legs heavy, his lungs a touch winded.

When their lives came first that meant athletics came second; so, yes, being a university coach involved accepting the fact that some of them would never reach their full potential. Brent turned down the hall to his office. He'd learned that the hard way.

Seated at his desk, he squinted through his glasses and reviewed his spreadsheets of training plans. For the afternoon, he plotted out the long runs of the cross-country season, the track speed of the winter months, the cycles of hills in between—when to cycle in deadlifts, when to build mileage, when to target *who* for *what* at *which* point in the year

evolved into a draining undertaking. It was all just penciled in, of course; the plans always ended up changing.

He slipped his fingers under his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The skin felt puffy; maybe he wouldn't have noticed this except Trish had commented that morning. So many of the girls had graduated or left. This year's women's team would be young. He sighed.

Above his desk hung a gallery of framed team photos, banners, and thank you notes. They were tokens of almost thirty years of coaching, symbols of the hard work and passion of so many young athletes who'd traipsed through the halls. Amongst the collection was a snapshot of Mona, captured the moment after she crossed the finish line, at that championship four years ago.

Her arms were thrown up, her face contorted with raw emotion. He had been standing thirty feet from the finish line and Trish had taken it. Even after the second surgery, after it all ended, he couldn't bring himself to take it down.

For three decades he had to stand back and watch as potential was lost or abandoned, as runners got their hearts broken and were forced to figure out the other sides of themselves. He always hoped that his program would make them strong enough to handle any challenge. That included walking away.

He picked up a pen and jotted down a note to contact Mona. There was a budget for a part-time managerial position, and he wanted someone

to come in and talk to the new girls. Provide the right kind of presence, an elixir of aspiration mixed with a healthy fist of reality. He already knew she'd say no to both, because she continually said no to anything he asked of her.

But he also knew that one day enough time would have passed; she'd get over her walls, and she would pick up the phone and answer with a curt *yes, fine*, *what time should I arrive?*

There came a rappitty-tap-tap of fingernails on the doorframe. Kit stuck her head through the open space, her wooly hair tangling about her shoulders. Her movements were jerky, formal. Clearly, she was going to ask for something big. It nearly bubbled out of her.

She said, with a deliberate air of the taciturn, "Can I have a quick word?" Without waiting, she strode into the room with a bit more quickness, a bit more emphasis, than when he'd last seen her. Over the two years, her impetus to constantly move, her impulsion, may have wavered, but he was glad to see it had never fully disappeared.

He controlled his expression in a mask of blank indifference as she sat down, paused. With this one, he never knew what was coming.

Finally, she blurted out her words. "Brent I want to rejoin the team."

He leaned back in his chair, not in a grandiose fashion, but in his perpetually awkward, take-a-step-away sort of mannerism. It was the half-tensed, lean-away kind he displayed when confronted by any form of

intensity. This was one of his habits, and when he wanted a moment to collect his thoughts, he affected it like a tic. Concern spread between Kit's eyebrows.

"I'm serious. I swear." Kit crossed her ankle over her knee and leaned forward.

"I haven't heard anything from you for six months," he said, testing the water.

"Yes. Well." She blushed.

Brent decided to string her out. "What prompted this…change?"

She hesitated, grew serious. "Time." She thought: and healing. And growing up. She said, "And healing. And growing up. And realizing that the reasons I didn't want to do it anymore had nothing to do with the actual sport."

Brent said, "I see." He brought his fingertips together to form wide arches, staring at her with what he hoped was a piercing, laser stare.

He kept staring and staring and staring, until a subtle realization flickered across her face.

Her mouth swiveled as she struggled to contain a smirk. "I mean, I know you thought you got rid of me forever, but Brent, did you really think it would be that easy?"

Brent dropped the stare, and adjusting his glasses, turned back to the files on his computer screen. "Katherine, nothing with you was ever

going to be easy." He heard her harrumph, and added, "The time trial for the walk-ons is next Saturday."

She almost made a shocked gasp, but held it in. Then, the glint of the old, cocky, self-assured ego crossed her face. "What is it—four k in sixteen minutes?" Brent nodded. She said, "I'll be ready." She stood up and pushed in the chair, and as she did, the wiry figure of Nathan sauntered into the room.

He wore his beanie pulled low over his brow, even though it was August, and an unbuttoned plaid shirt flapped about the thighs of scrubby jeans. The kid looked like a hippie punk, and it was almost impossible to believe that he was starting law school.

He, like Kit, knocked at the metal doorframe, his knuckles making that rap-tap-tap sound. "You wanted to see me?" He turned to Kit and nodded. "Hey. I'm Nate."

Brent watched as she stuck out her hand and he grasped it, and they looked at each other. He saw something pass between them: that godforsaken, eye-lingering, hormonal, wordless communication.

He thought, I'm definitely too old for this shit.

33

Kit spent the next year slowly increasing mileage. What began as gentle intervals gradually transitioned into harder workouts. She narrowed her mind to the thin platinum rail of her task, listening for her body's inner exchanges. She did not race cross-country or indoors; her body needed time and she knew that. Standing beside the pile of blue duffel bags, coolers, backpacks, and foam rollers, she promised to cheer from afar. When the team bus pulled down Fennerty Drive she waved from the sidewalk, then returned home to make lunch with Pea or headed to the library to study with Mona.

In January, she began to work out on the track. When the last repeat ended, she would jog a cooldown and zip her shoes back into her bag. The bag stayed in the front hall closet the rest of the day. In training, she pushed her body when needed, as needed, but always eased off in rest cycles. If her hip felt tight she stood tall in her core to gently stretch it. That, or she lay on her back and breathed, sending waves of calm to the inflamed tendon. She went to class, drank beer with friends, tapped out bad poems on Pea's typewriter. The cravings swelled back and she heeded them, seeking asparagus by the bunch or russet potatoes by the bagful.

And, then, it was spring, and it was time.

In the privacy of her bedroom she slid back the mirrored closet door. She reached up over the stack of jeans and dug free her old spike bag. The red mesh of the bag had stiffened with lack of use, congealed in a stringent separation of parts in the way of an old rubber and canvas shoe. The sharp pins of her spikes poked through the fragile fabric and she unraveled the cord that had for so long bound the bundle together.

The insides of the bag smelled of grass and mud gone stale, of rusted metal. Of course she had not been organized when resolving to quit. The bag held just spikes, and by then she'd bought new ones. She needed her racing gear, the tiny outfit that had once made her feel feather light.

She dropped to her knees and bent under the bed. The crown of her head grazed the bottom of the box spring as she elbowed herself

forward, edging aside last semester's anthologies and coil notebooks. Long hairs had coagulated into snarls of dust; bits of textile fibres, seeped-in plant pollens, discarded flecks of human cells. The dark and narrow under-the-bed space bit at her nose with a sharp and bodily scent. Another red mesh bag lumped in front of the back corner and she grabbed it in her fist.

Then, at the back, she saw a lone dilator.

It lay butted against the white plaster of the wall, having somehow escaped the rampage from a year before.

Her stomach pressed into the hard floor, shoulders taut and locked between the blades. For a moment she felt cold, as if a draft had seeped in. Pick, pick, pick at the old scarlet scabs. It jolted her back to the sad moments, the times she felt broken and tried to hide it. It made her think of once happy memories curdled and clotted by the events that unfolded after. It made her think of memories that she never wanted to think of again. For another moment she lay on the floor, eyes fixed ahead, battling a one sided staring contest with her old self, the old version of Kit, the one who did not just run, but who ran away.

Then, she gradually softened her shoulders. She reached out, curled her fist around the hard stick of wax, and inched back out from underneath the bed.

The year and the dust had dulled the dilator to a dirty grey, and in the heat of the spring it was gummy and greasy. It was just a dirty, old,

oblong, rounded device made of a substance easily melted down and done away with. She walked to the bathroom and tossed it into the garbage can, onto the pile of tampon wrappers and tissue wads. If she wanted to plumb the past she could look back to old photographs, see the hollowed eyes and skinny limbs, and know she is no longer there, and that if she ever gets there again, that she possesses the power to leave. But that day was not today, and she did not need to relive those scenes.

She spread her racing top and bummies on her duvet. Sticker stains from races past pockmarked the blue lycra; they had been worn and washed so many times that they would never be entirely clean. From a manila envelope she unsheathed tomorrow's bib, white and crisp with the bold black numbers, and after jiggling free the old rusted pins, she fastened the new paper number with fresh ones.

It was not the end of a year, not the close of a school semester, not the night before another birthday. It was, for all intents and purposes, an indistinguishable Thursday, the unassuming day before an event common in the life she had chosen to lead. But it felt, with an astute clarity, like the beginning of an end.

Kit glanced up and saw herself in the closet door mirror. A bit of stomach fat protruded just against the ribbing of her tight t-shirt; the girth of her arms was so much thicker than it had once been. Her brown eyes flashed with a golden phosphorescence, the lower lids edged by thin

furrows. She stood up straight. Her body was strong, her eyes alive. The gear may have been old, but the girl was new.

It was strange, then, that an ending should be disguised by a return. Rewind the cassette and play it backwards. Re-set the record and re-experience the opera. Only this time, listen better; perhaps hope to distinguish the muddled subtleties of the violin from the viola, the cello from the bass. Understand the pieces within the swell.

Kit stepped aside from her bed and stood in front of a mirror that had seen so many versions of her. This mirror had seen her shocked and cold, cracked and wanting. In it she had seen the dead eyes, the clamped-tight jaw, but then the muscles loosened, the flesh plumped back into the bones. The mirror had reflected but not recorded, seen but not captured. The mirror always changed with her.

Her brown irises swiveled back and forth, the pupils swimming in a slicked-over glaze, water over a perfect black pebble. Her iris and its flecks of yellow thinned as her pupils dilated; that was not new.

And then, she thought, I love my eyes because they are expressive. They do not hide who I am.

She undid her ponytail and her hair waved about her shoulders. She thought, I love my hair because it grows thick and rich. Because the strands tickle my chin and stick to my face when I sweat. When it blows about my cheeks and my neck it reminds me to feel each individual

particle, each miniscule sensation, and that reminds me to be in the world where things move.

She peeled off her shirt and it fell to the floor. Her black sports bra adhered to her chest, the edges smooth and flat. Her shoulders sloped low, held back but not tightened by the scapula and fascia of the thoracic spine. She could feel the strength within the trapezius. The sloped back clavicle conveyed openness, the wide held shoulders confidence. Stress could roll right through her upper body, its currents seen, felt, but allowed to continue through the pores without tangling a web of scar tissue.

She swung her arms, bounced on the balls of her feet, and dropped her eyes lower, to the shallow gullies that hint at strong abdominal muscles. It's easy to love your body when you're fit, to love it for what it can get you, for the way you look and the way you feel. And so, she loved her core for another reason; because it was the midpoint of her body. It was the place that broke down her fuel into energy; the place lovers slid their arms when you leaned in for a kiss. But it was also her centre.

She unbuttoned her jeans and kicked them to the side, and then stood in front of the mirror in just her sports bra and cotton underwear. Her bare toes spread and gripped into the hardwood. Across the tops of her thighs, blue veins dashed beneath white skin, and then disappeared at the top of the femoral muscle, where the shorts tanline began.

She raised one leg up and held her knee in her hands. Inside this knee the tissues track cleanly over the bone, as even as machinery. She

slid her hands down her calf and dug her thumbs into the belly of the muscle. It was free from lumps, free from knots of tension. In her foot, more blue veins wove through the latticework of tiny bones. She set her foot down on the floor, the front ball first, a slow expansion of the metatarsals, then a gentle resting of the heel. It was in good working order.

Her legs were strong; their muscles could churn for hours, their ligaments and tendons could withhold the intense strain of their task. This body had reverberated with ready-to-explode energy before the startline of a race, then wobbled and given out from exhaustion at the finish. With this body she had felt towards the edges of her possibilities and still she stood strong.

Kit took off her sports bra and her underwear and stood naked in front of the mirror. She arched her spine and threw back her arms, breathing deep, stretching out her belly. She dropped her arms to her sides and reached her fingernails towards the floor, relishing the lengthening in her shoulders, the popping in her inner ear.

She inhaled and exhaled, feeling the edges of the diaphragm muscle as it engaged and then softened. The ability to breathe quite so deep posed a certain grounding in the world. Muscle and capillaries and expanding tissue.

With training, her breasts had shrunk; they appeared once again as a shadow rather than a protrusion. Her nipples jutted sharply from the

pancake glands. Between her nipples and her untanned patch of skin, her chest looked like Neapolitan ice cream.

The soft lines of her stomach cut down to the sharp drive of her pubic bones. The curly black hair grew in an unruly triangle; she would need to wax that before racing in bummies tomorrow. From under the tangle of hair her clitoris peeped like a raspberry. Her two nipples and her clitoris were like raspberries and she grinned. She slapped her butt cheeks and grabbed the flesh. It jiggled and she kneaded the flesh into her palms. This was her awesome ass and it may be flat but she loved it.

She ran her hands down her hip flexors, through the crop of hairs until her fingertips brushed over the pulpy flesh of her vulva. She thought, look into my eyes and slide your fingers over all the pieces of me. Touch the bits of my skin that are tender and raw and know that I will love you for it. Know with your hands who I am, sense with the unspoken who I once was. There was a boy, Devin, and she had told him not to come watch the next night, but suspected he'd be there anyway.

Kit grinned and grinned and grinned at the mirror and almost shouted, not to him but to herself, I don't love you because you're strong or pretty or tough but because you're me and I'm you and we're a tangible touchable real connection to all the good and all the bad.

She dug her nails into her stomach and hopped on the spot, feeling at once the sharp dig and the weightless breath of flight. She was in a

taper week and with all the extra energy her mind was bound to run wild, her body guaranteed to leap almost involuntarily.

Love your body for its strength, for its health. Love it for its possibilities for the future, for where it has carried you through. Love it for its resilience, for its ability to change and adapt, to submit to change and evolve beyond that change. Love it because it's the flag that marks you throughout time and space, a sewing needle stuck in the map of the world to tell you exactly where you exist.

She bounced on her toes and shrieked. Thank god no one else was home. And tomorrow. Tomorrow was going to be fucking boss.

Kit stepped into a pair of split shorts and, dashing down the hall, she tugged her sports bra back down over her chest. She slid her feet into her running shoes, shouldered through the door, and ran down the stoop. The front door slammed shut behind her.

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