

# DOING THE CIRCUIT

Alexander Jablov

"So tell me, Fiona, what do you want this exercise program to achieve?"

"I'm sorry?"

"What's your goal? I'm your trainer. I have to know what you're after."

"I want, you know, a flatter stomach?"

I make a note on my sheet. "Okay."

"And, like, a tighter butt?"

"Fine."

"And I want to be able to brachiate."

"Brachiate? Swing through the trees like a gibbon?"

"A siamang, actually. Yeah. And I want to climb. It's in this year: radar antennas, buildings under construction, power plant cooling towers...."

"Good, great."

"But it's not just fitness for me. You see, I've got this girlfriend?"

I don't want to hear it. "We'll work biceps, lats, all that. Some surgical modification of the rotator cuff may prove necessary...do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"It can be done as an outpatient procedure. And your arms need to be lengthened. That's a little more complicated. We'll insert lengths of titanium alloy into your humerus, ulna, and radius. We've found that gives us the best balance of flexibility versus strength."

"Great! My girlfriend will love that."

I'm not really in any mood to discuss girlfriends. "Those fashion 'ceps of yours...very impressive, Fiona. Climbing a long-time ambition for you?"

Her biceps are massive, craggy massifs, and loom from holes cut in her denim sleeves.

"You know what's funny? I didn't have any idea when I had these installed. I just liked that tectonic look, you know? These are my two favorites. The right one's the Eiger, the left is K2."

The Eiger's infamous North Face, just a trace of snow clinging in the cracks, is particularly striking, a death waiting to happen.

"But if you want the hylobatidae mods...." I begin.

"I know, I know. I'll have to give up on geographical features. I'm ready."

Fiona, like many of my clients, is desperate to adhere to society's arbitrary standards of beauty. And she

is gorgeous, I must admit. There are times when the arbitrary is universal, eternal. I'm glad this is the time I live in.

She's completely covered with matted reddish hair, so that her green eyes look like jade earrings lost on a shag carpet. Her fingers and toes are webbed, nothing excessive, nice and subtle. She's scrimshawed her surgically implanted walrus tusks with faux-na-f images representing the passage of a bill through Congress. I can smell the bitter musk of her anal glands.

I would be head over heels, except I'm in love with someone else. Someone I can no longer reach.

"Can I...touch your skull?" I say to Fiona.

"Oh, go right ahead. Lots of people like to."

Her cranial bones flex under my fingers. Through hormonal regression she's regained the open sutures and the fontanel of a newborn infant. She wears a slant board strapped tight to her forehead. In a few months it will give her that popular Mayan deformation of the skull, with the sloping forehead and the egg-shaped head.

"Mayan mothers used to dangle a bead in front of their child's eyes," I say. "It crossed their eyes. That was considered extremely fashionable."

"Oh, really?" I can tell she thinks I'm really lame, out of it.

I recover by getting businesslike. "All right. We'll start right off with preacher-bench curls, nothing heavy --"

"Did I tell you how I met her?"

"Who?"

"My girlfriend."

It doesn't look like there's any way to avoid it.

"No, you didn't."

"She hit me with a long-distance Taser shot while I was hanging out with some friends in an abandoned swimming pool. Isn't that silly? Nothing was in it but some rotting lime Jello from some old party. When I recovered from my convulsions I looked up and fell in love. You might have heard of her? Janine Pingree?"

"Janine Pingree? Glasstooth Pingree?"

She smirks. "That's right. That's her."

Glass is a terrible substance for teeth. That's what my nine-fingered dentist told me, anyway. Pingree has the shattered pieces of a rose window from the west front of some defunct medieval cathedral in her mouth. I understand she's getting slow lead poisoning from it: peripheral neuropathy, saturnine gout, renal failure, the works. Her fans imitate her pained gouty shuffle, her dropped wrists, her inane, slurred speech. But when she clicks on that halogen bulb that has replaced her uvula, all is forgiven. Her mouth glows like the Age of Faith.

"Wonderful," I say, not meaning it.

I look out into the Club and see her. Laurie.

She's racking the lat pulldown machine. An overhead spot picks out her nostrils. Laurie's nares have been heavily modified, into an arrangement that resembles a bat wing, reinforced with ribs of cartilage. When she runs they flare out into an oxygen-packing ramjet, filling her lungs with compressed air. Laurie is a lightning bolt made flesh.

"Do you have someone?" Fiona asks.

"I did," I answer.

I abandon Fiona to a museum-quality replica of a sixteenth-century Spanish interrogation rack to practice disjuncting and limb lengthening. She needs to think about her ultimate goals a little more. I'm not sure I like her attitude.

#

I first met Laurie on a field trip. The Club sends its trainers out once a year, to maintain a presence in the wider world of exercise. That year it was the high valleys of the Pamirs.

I remember being crammed into the fuselage of a C-130 Hercules. They kept us sedated for the long flight up from Delhi: hyped and steroidal trainers tend to fight furiously in such close quarters, causing debilitating injury. Last trip we had been transported by an old Soviet Alfa-class submarine to the Arctic. That was a rough crossing. When we finally clambered out onto the ice cap, we were a mess. One sight of the twitching, shattered limbs of their star trainers as they slid stickily across the ice, easy prey for the polar bears that were their intended wrestling targets, and the Club owners had made a new policy of strict drip sedation.

Through my headachy haze I could hear the turbo-props laboring in the thin air. An air crew member ran down the narrow aisle between the rows of trainers and slapped an epinephrine/methedrine ampoule on each neck as he passed. We came to life, howling and growling. He made it into the welded shark cage at the back with only a few superficial wounds, slammed the hatch, and cowered inside. A buzzer and a red light, and we mounted our carbon-fiber-framed mountain bikes.

That was the first glimpse I caught of Laurie. She was new to the team, though we'd heard good things about her. She was a single-muscle specialist. She'd work intently with a client, building and sculpting one head of a quad or a specific back erector muscle. It's patient, intense work. I saw one particular pair of sternocleidomastoids she'd coached, so pumped and huge they stuck out from the sides of the neck like wings and made the client's head look like a cherry on a sundae. Very impressive.

The bomb-bay doors opened and we fell out, whooping. We floated down, front wheels up, and slammed to the mountain tundra, carving holes in the delicate centuries-old growth, our dual oil suspensions absorbing the impact. We were, I can say, stunning, dramatic: logo-covered Gore-Tex laminated directly on our skin, Camel-Bak bags automatically pouring water through esophageal piping in response to computerized blood-density readings. We bounded savagely down the hillsides, bounced over boulders, splashed through streams of snowmelt. I've watched the unprocessed camera images of that day and it still looks like heaven.

Below, greasy goat-herding Tibetan monks stared up in gap-toothed wonder at the sight of these apparitions. We bounded through the crumbling bricks of the monastery and score-tapped meditating lamas in lotus position on their shaven heads. You lost points if you knocked one over.

That was when I caught a glimpse of Laurie's chest. She'd had the costal cartilages that normally connect

the ribs to the sternum replaced by a line of electronically actuated expansion cylinders. As she drew breath, her ribs flexed dramatically, twice as far as a normal person's, making her chest look like some filtering underwater creature. The auxiliary power supplies for the cylinders replaced the lactic glands in her jutting, ice-breaker-prow breasts. One anatomically impossible breath, and I fell in love.

We found ourselves in some sort of wildlife preserve. I recognized the shaggy, erect-maned ponies as Przewalsky's Horses, the last wild variety of equid. They stampeded in panic. Responding instantly, like the trained team that we were, we herded them, headed them off whenever they tried for safety, until they toppled, screaming, off a cliff, to smash and die on the rocks at the bottom.

That's the true goal, to get to the root of it all: Neolithic fitness. Once the last wild horses on Earth were ground chuck, we dropped contemptuously down the cliff that had just killed them, bounced our suspensions, and sprinted onward past the twitching corpses. I leaned out with a serrated knife and ripped a bleeding liver out of a horse's side.

"Vitamin A deficiency?"

Laurie smiled challengingly at me. The others were already far ahead of us. We were losing points even as we talked.

I wiped the blood from my chin. "Can't depend on electrolyte-replacement fluid alone, after all."

I held the liver out to her. After a moment's hesitation, she reached out and took a languorous bite.

"Think we can catch them?" she asked.

I wanted to tell her that we didn't need to, that the two of us could cut our own path, but she was already sprinting up the slope. Laughing, cheering, urging each other on, we climbed up the treacherous surface of a melting glacier. We caught our colleagues, passed them. Laurie was in the front, and I was close behind her. But never, no matter how hard I tried, could I catch her.

#

"I'm sorry, man."

It's my friend Manolo. He sits on a bench in LAX, the White Zone, the post-pump recovery area. It's decorated like the LA Airport, all iridescent oil-soaked asphalt and peeled tire tread. The rumble of departing 747s relaxes those who have just finished their workouts.

"Laurie wouldn't talk?" I say.

"I don't know if she talks at all anymore. She's gone, Gustav. Face it. The body's all that's left."

"No!"

"You have to be in there with her to understand it."

"I've been in there, Manolo. Once. That's enough for me. For anyone, other than Laurie."

"Hey, tell me about it."

Manolo went into the Club Fitness Virtual Reality device for me, to carry a message to Laurie. A real friend. Stripes of drying blood show through the back of Manolo's T shirt. The skin has been rubbed raw on his ankles, and his flesh smells like it's decaying.

"So what happened?" I ask.

Manolo puts his arms around himself.

"It was a galley, like out of one of those old gladiator movies. Pulling oars, pulling oars, in the hot sun. Hours. I've never worked harder."

His skin does look sunburned. That Fit VR is some machine.

"She was there, pulling with the best of them. She had her own oar. It was like part of her body. She wouldn't talk to me. Nothing. Just the exercise. Give it up, Gustav."

"Lats, delts," I say. "Fine. What's it do for your pecs?"

"What's that, man?"

"Your pecs, Manolo. What's pulling a goddam oar do for your pecs?"

"Okay. I get a break, get up to get a sandwich."

"They got a snack bar? On the galley."

"Hell yes. Good one too, even if it's only virtual: Power Bars, Cytomax, branched-chain aminos, chromium picolinate, electrolytes, the works. Overseer unlocks you, you go get a snack."

"So you got a sandwich."

"Yeah, I got a sandwich, you got a problem with that? I hate all that fake-fruit shit, you know? So I got a sandwich. Bread, mayo, lettuce. You know. A sandwich."

"What kind?"

"Tuna. Tuna sandwich. On rye."

"Pecs, Manolo. You were going to tell me about your pecs."

"I'm telling you! You listen, you learn about my goddam pecs. I got the sandwich, peeled the top to make sure I got what I ordered. And it wasn't tuna. It was fish, but it wasn't no goddam tuna."

"What was it?"

"Placoderm."

"Devonian? They gave you a Devonian fish?"

"You heard me."

"Those things have been extinct for, what, two-hundred-fifty million years?"

"Look, did I say it was fresh? You ever see one? The damn things was armored all over. Even the eyeballs had bony plates over them. Fucking nuclear submarines. Thirty feet long! It ripped out through the lettuce, went for my throat. Teeth like daggers. I pushed on its face, kept the teeth away from my throat. Wrestled for an hour. Shoved it right back under the rye, slammed it shut." He's sobbing. "That was my pecs, okay, wiseass? I've never had a workout like that. Never."

"Fine, fine." I am shaken, but I don't want to show it. "I've always admired your pecs, Manolo."

"Yeah, right. Just don't make me go in there again."

"I won't." I take a breath, keep from demanding more information about Laurie. "You want to relax, Manolo?"

"Yeah. I want to relax."

Massages, rubdowns, shiatsu, rolfing -- all tedious superseded forms of relaxation, mere pale approximations of what we now have available. I jab Manolo in the side of the neck with a hypo of curare. It's made especially for the Club by Yanomano Indians at the headwaters of the Orinoco: plant toxins, red and black ants, snake fangs. Club Blend.

The curare paralyzes his cholinergic neuromuscular junctions. Without neural impulses, the muscles go completely and utterly limp.

Manolo breathes a last sigh of satisfaction and crumples to the floor. I grab him, slide him into an iron lung. I've given him a big dose, his diaphragm is pure goo, he can't take a breath on his own. That's how the Yanomano hunt, by suffocating their prey. There is no relaxation more complete

Manolo is done with his workout. I envy him.

"You still...want...to touch her?" His voice comes in sync with the gasping of the iron lung.

"Yes, Manolo. I do."

"Good...luck...."

"Thanks."

The skin on Laurie's biceps has been replaced by transparent plastic sheeting. I see her flexing it in the overhead mirror. The back-lab guys have spliced firefly genes into the mitochondria of her muscle cells, and as the ATP flows in her biceps glows, every striation vividly outlined. I stand mesmerized.

#

Now I don't want you to think that we Club trainers have some sort of hostility to the natural world, or something. I mean, fun's fun, and even without Przhevalsky's Horse there are plenty of other equid varieties, but when it gets down to it, we're a pretty soft-hearted bunch.

That's why I jumped at the Port Macquarie koala job: I've always loved those little eucalyptus chewers. Well, that and the fact that Laurie was going to be the other operative. I made a lot of enemies by my attempts to fiddle the roster.

I finally had to get vicious and turn my fellow trainer, Rempfer, over to the police, just to get the slot.

Rempfer was selling dianabol to kids at the Shady Tree Day School who were too young to carry weapons. He'd get to them just before cookies-and-nap. Cheesy, really. D-ball is such an old steroid it's like ipecac or cod-liver oil, something your forehead-pulsing old grandad reminisces about while adjusting the black-lace bra that holds in his gynecomastic breasts.

There was something primitive and terrifying about those tiny muscle-bound four-year-olds. They tore the principal's Saab apart with their bare hands and ate the upholstery. We still use the film of them being pressure hosed by a terrified SWAT team as promo footage for our line of introductory anabolics.

Our local Australian contact, Adelaide Snokkie, wore a black bombazine dress and a koala-shaped

button that said "Cute, Cuddly, and Endangered!"

Laurie and I were there to completely change that lame approach.

"The poor dears," Snokkie said. "They get so frightened. All those condos, those cars, those dogs...." Koalas, despite their impressive claws, are easy meat. Their population had dropped dramatically with real-estate development in isolated eucalyptus groves. The very idea made me boil.

"It's the adrenal glands." I tried not to be harsh over the koalas' physiological shortcomings. "They have adrenals the size of gnat's testicles, pardon the expression, ma'am. How much epinephrine do you think you can squeeze out of those things? Anything more stressful than choosing between one eucalyptus leaf and another sends them into shock."

Laurie patted a foam carrier with cold mist pouring from it: lab-grown transplant adrenals derived from the Pleistocene marsupial lion-analogue, *Thylacoleo carnifex*, an extinct predator from the Australian plains. The DNA was recovered from an Aboriginal site in a deep cave where creatures from earlier eras were mummified and used in Abo religious rituals.

"My surgery is set up," Laurie said comfortingly. "After a little practice, we'll be able to process ten of them an hour."

We went in. Kung fu and Aikido sensei, old friends of Laurie's, were gathered around acupuncture wall charts from Ming dynasty China that had been computer remapped at the Club to conform to koala anatomy. They were arguing furiously in Japanese, Okinawan, and a dozen Chinese dialects about how to train koalas in incapacitating and crippling holds and blows. At issue was the precise path of koala qi, the vital force. When Laurie walked in, they bowed low.

I left them together as the bows and handshakes turned into body blows and vicious kicks. It had been a while since they'd seen each other.

"I want you to meet Arnie," Mrs. Snokkie said. A koala clung to the collar of her dress. One of his forelimbs was bandaged. She set him on the floor. He twisted his head around in terror, and she bent over to pick him up again.

"Leave me alone with him," I ordered.

"But --"

"No. Let me do this my way."

She shut the door. I squatted down next to Arnie.

"I hear they bulldozed your eucalyptus grove for a golf course and ninety-eight units of luxury condominiums," I said.

He blinked.

"I hear your mate was run over by a snack truck and your children paved under for the access road."

Was that a tear?

"You hid in the reeds near the water hazard and were attacked by a Doberman and ripped apart. You didn't defend yourself. You just curled up in a little ball. A couple of teenagers played soccer with you with steel-toed Doc Martens, then left you there to die."

He tried to look away. I grabbed his head.

"You have six inch claws!" I screamed. "You have incredible teeth. You can move, you can climb. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Arnie whimpered and moaned. I shook him.

"You could rule this fucking continent!"

He wailed. He was ready to give up. I could see it.

"I can help you." My voice was soft now. "I can give you the power. New hormones, training, implanted weaponry, the works. But you have to want it. None of it will do a damn bit of good if you don't have the fire in the belly to use it. Do you want it, Arnie? Do you want to get those bastards?"

For a long time, maybe five minutes, he was just a furry lump in my hands. I thought I had lost him, failed. Then, slowly, so slowly you could barely see it move, his head emerged. He looked at me. His eyes were clear and dark. Then, knowing what it meant, he nodded.

"It'll be hard," I said. "Brutal. You'll grow to hate me. You'll want me dead. Hell, you'll probably even try to kill me, and good luck to you if you do. I don't take prisoners. But at the end of it, you and your friends will be the sort of koala no one on this planet has been able to imagine even in his worst nightmares."

Laurie and I grew to love those crazy little guys. They stayed cute and cuddly even as they grew into implacable killers. They were like our own children. So it was natural that we should fall in love with each other.

I still remember those days as the most precious of my life. Every moment we could spare from surgery, from demolition training, from dealing with the occasional berserk koala who couldn't stand the tense preparation and tried to grease Mrs. Snokkie or one of the other loyal workers at the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital, was spent making love. In free fall during practice drops, scuba diving under the grim eyes of moray eels, in the bear cage at the Sidney zoo, waiting for them to become enraged by the pheromonal scent: my darling loved life on the edge. She was always looking for more of it.

Now she's moved beyond it. I have to get her back somehow.

Six months later, our faithful C-130 Hercules labored low over the Dividing Range on the coast of New South Wales. Hundreds of koalas parachuted from it, spilled their chutes expertly, and hit the ground. Koalas with fist-sized adrenal glands that pumped them up into a permanent blazing fury. Koalas who could hang, small and virtually undetectable, on a tree branch for days, until it was just the right moment to drop and slash. Koalas that could kill a barbecuing Aussie with a single sweep of their chrome-steel-edged claws, then plant plastic explosive under the fuel tank of his Range Rover for his heirs to discover when they turned the key. Killer Koalas. Koalas of Death.

It was beautiful.

#

In the Club, a guy walks by me. His arm sweeps repeatedly over his head in a complex, semaphoring gesture. It never stops. The endless workout has swollen the biceps and triceps to immense size, so that he resembles a fiddler crab.

I stop him. "Where did you have that done?"



He looks suspicious. "Have what done?" I have to stand away from him to avoid getting brained by the swinging arm. He sputters and drools and is barely comprehensible.

"Look, I'm not reporting you to anyone. It's just that...." Honesty is always best. "It's that there's someone I want to impress. And I thought...."

"Okay." He looks around, makes sure no one's listening. This kind of thing, tic-tattooing it's called, is illegal in this country. You have to pretend it's a natural defect. A lot of underemployed doctors will give you a certificate of uterine drug exposure to account for it. "This particular one I got done in Burma, way up the Salween, almost in China. Hell of a trip. I recommend it."

"Thanks."

Tic-tattooing embosses not your skin, that hopelessly obsolete organ, but the nerve connections between your thalamus and your basal ganglia, so that you can get artistically defining tics and behavior patterns. This guy's arm swing was nice, real distinctive. Lovers exchange characteristic gestures as a sign of fidelity, though it's bad form to carry that heart-breakingly sweet yawn-and-hand-curl into the next relationship, and immensely bad form to then trade it to your next lover as one of your own.

"Don't mention it, friend."

Burma. I'm staying away from Burma. The guy's skull has been resealed crudely and has plates on it like a turtle shell. His face is slack. I haven't rendered his words phonetically: that last sentence sounded more like "do me'ye fre." Those basal ganglia are way down in there, you don't go after the damn things with a weed whacker.

I have this gesture I'd love to have embossed. It's based on some of Nijinsky's eurythmic-influenced choreography from *Sacre de Printemps*, mixed with the insectlike movements from an old time-motion study of women putting bobbing heads on Atlantic City souvenirs, and perhaps just a bit of Harpo from the mirror scene in *Duck Soup*, for a classical pop culture element. I think Laurie would like it.

I can see Laurie now, bent over a sweat-shiny brochure, the kind they use for advertising exercise gear.

She looks at me. Her eyes are full of tears.

Laurie is not entered in any lacrimal events that I know of. I start toward her, but she turns and runs. No one can move as fast as she does.

#

Laurie and I were already having problems when the Club sent us together to check out a new piece of exercise equipment. I'd been getting lazy, not putting in the Club hours, wanting to stay in bed and make love.

Screwing was a lousy way to try to stay in shape, Laurie said. We started having a lot of arguments.

Our contact was in a mall video arcade in suburban Chicago.

"Look, Gustav!" Laurie flicked the levers on a dusty game machine stuck in a corner of the arcade.

On the CRT, bicycle-riding figures spilled out of the belly of an aircraft. It was us, the Club trainers, our modelled movements. I thought I could even recognize Laurie's energy, and remembered what it was about her that I first had loved. "Spank the Lama", the game was called. It was clear that no one had played it in months. I don't know why I found that so sad.

"You here for Jorg?" A voice said at my elbow.

The voice belonged to a sleepy-eyed teenager with the fashionable larval look: pale, shiny skin, vestigial segmentation. This one had a spider-leg walker linked into his sacrum. Originally developed as a transport method for paraplegics, they had been seized upon by the mall maggots as a relaxing way of getting around.

"Yes," Laurie said. "Can you take us to him?"

"Sure. If you think you're ready." He leered obesely at us. Other teenagers gathered around, each with his idiosyncratic transport replacement: lunar spring wheel, ground-effects skirt, even snail biosim, leaving a trail of incredibly low-friction goo that caused constant accidents.

"We're ready. Let's go."

"My Mom has to give us a ride," spiderboy said. "I don't have my license yet."

A minivan pulled up out of the heat waves of the mall parking lot, and a platform lowered itself from the rear to lift the kids in.

I peered in through the driver's side window. "Thank you, Mrs...."

I stopped, startled by the flopping head and pale face of the driver. I pulled the door open, to be met by a blast of freezing air and the smell of preservative.

"Better get in. She gets mad if you wait too long."

I turned to him. "She's --"

"Yeah, I know." His eyes were blank. "Suggestion of my maturity counselor. Said that losing my mother at this age would leave me with a permanent feeling of abandonment. So we took the processors and RAMs out of some old Pentiums, rigged up some optical disks with movement repertoires on them, and stuck her all over with myoelectric connections. She really doesn't seem that much different, tell you the truth...."

The computer-controlled dead woman leaned on the horn, then put the car into gear.

"See? She'll leave you if you don't get to it. She was always impatient."

His spider legs carried him around to the van's rear. I swung up next to Mom.

She couldn't see anything with dead retinas, no way to reinvigorate the rhodopsin, but she drove expertly. A bank of microwave radar dishes all around the van gave her a great three- sixty view.

Every time she made a major muscular movement, like shifting into a higher gear, the van's engine slowed. The Mom-hackers had run the myoelectric power points off the battery, and as the muscles got depleted of stored glucose more and more power was required for activation. Her movements were increasingly spastic. The coolant condenser, blazing hot under my feet, was already stressing the van's alternator to the limit.

We drove past endless housing developments, from highway to highway, until we finally pulled off and stopped in front of a Tudor split-entry no different than any other in continental North America.

"Jorg's," spiderboy said. "He's got what you want."

Laurie and I got out. Spiderboy leaned over the front seat, hit a button on the dash.

"Want me to take you and your friends for pizza?" a sprightly voice spoke from the radio.

He sighed. "Sure Mom. Sounds great."

The van peeled rubber and left us there on the silent street.

Laurie walked up to the front door and pushed it. It swung open on a dark interior. All the windows on the outside of the wall were fake, attached to the blank walls to make it match the neighborhood.

The smell was foul. Collapse and decay. We made our way through the darkness. The carpets were thick and damp under our feet. Walls were covered with mildew and fungus. A dim glow from upstairs gave us a goal. Rot had weakened the steps, which creaked ominously under our weight.

"Jorg?" Laurie said.

"In here." The voice was surprisingly full and energetic. "You've reached your goal."

Jorg sat in the middle of the room, presumably in a chair, though that was invisible under him. Despite myself, I was fascinated.

"You use saline injection, neutral silicon stretcher?" I asked.

Jorg looked offended. "No way. This is all natural. No weird dermal hormone stimulation, either."

The room was filled with skin, fold upon fold. Jorg's head sat on his body like a scoop of butter on a stack of flapjacks. The surface area was incredible. I could see the complex spray nozzles overhead that kept it clean and hydrated. It was that moisture that had permeated the house. It had probably been years since Jorg had visited any part of it other than this room.

"Just weight gain and loss, then."

"Well...." Jorg looked a little embarrassed. "I did have to use liposuction. Take too long to lose it, the skin shrinks...."

"No, no, of course." I hastened to reassure him. "That's considered a natural procedure, for showing. Have you ever thought about it?"

He dimpled, pleased by the attention. "Display? No. This is my own private hobby. Something I share with only a few friends."

The skin was incredible. Never exposed to the drying effects of the sun, it was pale and supple, without stretch marks or scarring. It was a tough discipline. Gain three hundred pounds to stretch your skin out. Liposuction the fat out, then clamp the skin to make parts of it tight again. Regain the weight, stretching the clamped areas out. Lose again, reclamp...it took patience, dedication, complete lack of interest in other human beings. If Jorg had been willing, he could have been a champion. I imagined him rotating on a display stand like a dessert in a deli, spotlight, a cheering crowd all around him. Maybe I could persuade him, become his manager....

"This it?" Laurie said, pointing at two tangles of brain- access wires hanging over a couple of cracked vinyl office chairs.

"Yes," Jorg said. "The future of fitness. Fit VR. Sit down."

We sat down, and felt the wires clamp down on our skulls.

Nuclear war had fused the surface of the Earth into shining black glass. It gleamed in the sun. Nothing grew in it. Laurie and I skated across it on gigantic in-line skates. Ahead of us, the ground rose up to a range of mountains. The Rockies? It was hard to tell. They too had melted.

"Hey, Laurie," I said. "I don't like this."

She was just ahead of me. Her ass was beautiful as she worked her way up the slope. She looked back at me, smiled. "What's wrong, Gustav? Isn't this great?"

"I want to stop." The slope was already making me gasp for breath.

"I don't think you should. Take a look behind you."

I did. Climbing up the slope behind us, gaining on us, was what looked like a gang of skeletons. Their fishlike eyes were fixed on us, and I could see drool streaming from their spike teeth.

This was all a simulation, nothing real. But I was terrified. I climbed after Laurie. Mile after mile we skated. The air blazed in my lungs. My legs, butt, and lower back cramped in agony. And still the skeleton guys pursued.

There were things in the thick glass. The remains of houses, bones sometimes. Once I recognized a Jeep Wagoneer, its tires melted, the radial belts flopping loose. Someone was still inside of it...

Our pursuers fired tiny razor-edged nunchuks at us. Most of them went wild and tinkled across the glass, but one sliced into my shoulderblade and sent blood streaming down my back. Another caught Laurie's ear. Within a few minutes her shoulder was soaked with blood. She didn't seem to care.

Then we were over the pass, sliding down an endless expanse of smooth glass. We moved faster and faster, with no way to stop or slow down.

Laurie, ahead of me the whole way, was yelping with the joy of it. We must have been going fifty miles an hour, maybe faster. There were no features in the landscape to give it scale. Just the vast melted mountains behind us, and the endless plain of glass that stretched out ahead of us. The skeletons swept silently down behind us.

I fell on the floor, retching. Laurie pulled the wires from her scalp and stood over me. Blood still dripped from her ear.

"That's it," she said. "That's the future."

"Hey," I said. "I didn't like the way that felt."

She looked down at me, contempt growing in her eyes. She never touched me again.

#

I get ahead of Laurie by taking a shortcut, over Puffball's leg. The vast deformed kneecap shifts under me and sends me over the side, to smash face down on the sweat-slick wrestling mats. Fortunately, the sweat's just a glycerine-electrolyte solution sprayed on for verisimilitude. I wipe it from my cheek.

The mats are recycled from high school gyms in Iowa and Indiana, squashed flat from generations of corn-fed midwestern muscleheads trying to pin each other. The Club needs that connection with the old fitness, the waxy-yellow-salt-tablet, wind-sprint, fart-and-scratch, hurdler's-stretch, Ex-Lax-purged-

weigh-in, flat-topped, towel-snapped-butt fitness, now long gone.

I lean against the sagging flesh of the inner thigh and look up at Puffball's face. His massive head is supported by a forest of recycled Keiser machine air cylinders, programmed to massage his cranial muscles to prevent unsightly sores. As the cylinders hiss, his expression changes, from anger, to despair, to idiotic glee.

Puffball went for Big. We all want Big, of course, but he thought he had a way around the natural limitations of biology. He got the guys in the lab back behind the whirlpool to pump him full of hormones, then infect him with some turbocharged version of Paget's Disease, a bone regeneration defect. They said they could control it, give him some mass, an imposing inertial frame.

As usual, those biohackers fucked up, big time. Boosted by the weird hormonal brew, his bones bubbled up like over-yeasted bread. His head weighs a couple of hundred pounds, and resembles a stack of concrete sacks left out in the rain by union construction workers reaching the end of their shift. One of his legs swelled up too, and is ten yards long, big as a fallen sequoia, with a knee like an inverted bathtub. The other one stayed close to normal size, and flails helplessly from his gigantic hip.

He lives in the Club now. He can't leave. They'd have to take the building apart. They made him an employee, and hooked his arm up to an IV drip from the syrup canister in the Coke machine. Someone has notched up his tibia, and we use it to stack chrome-plated dumbbells. He earns his caffeinated corn syrup, you can be sure.

I freeze. It's Laurie, lying out on the mat. Not doing anything. Not exercising. Just lying there, as beautiful as ever.

I take a plastic cup, scrape it along the inside of Puffball's thigh.

The Club lab boys developed an artificial dermis for hot- weather competition. You know, when it's hot, humidity sky high, the sweat can't evaporate. Sweat glands pump out the water, core body temperature soars anyway, you keel over, uselessly soaked. Bad. Alcohol, however, evaporates freely, and even though its heat of vaporization doesn't match that of water, it makes a pretty good cooler out there on the track. So, they designed sweat glands that secreted pure ethanol. Get the matching liver fermentation booster and synthetic subcutaneous capillary net, you can down a pound of sugar the night before a big race, let your liver make ethanol while you sleep, then run your race, cool as a cucumber, while everyone else is rolling up eyeballs and dropping.

Problem came up just before the last Olympics. Big, high- profile proof of concept, name of the lab stenciled on the torchbearer's chiton as he headed out from Olympus. You've seen it. Everybody's seen it. Runner crossing the plain of Argos, flaming torch high, hot sun, starts to sweat...floom! Screen flares, comes back to show an cloud of oily smoke, an inky logo of death.

The lab guys hid what was left of the dermis by grafting it onto the inside of Puffball's thigh. He sucks in his Coke, his liver converts it to clean ethanol, the skin secretes it.

He's now the Club bar.

"Laurie." I offer her the cup. She takes it. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Gustav. I thought I had it. I thought I had the ultimate exercise experience."

I shudder. She's fit, all right. And not just skeletally. Neovascularization has covered her body with giant pulsing arterioles. Her arrector pili muscles are so buff that when she gets goosebumps, they're the size of

tennis balls. She's worked the sphincter pupillae and the dilator pupillae muscles of her iris until her eyeball looks like a lemon reamer. She has all the desired stigmata of fitness.

"So what happened?"

"You know what Jorg's VR machine really is? It's a piece of goddam flabbist propaganda! He was laughing at us the whole time."

She pulls out the crumpled brochure. It shows a terrified- looking fat man with Fit VR wires coming out of his head. "Experience the Horrors of Fitness!", read the caption. The next page shows him happily flopped in a deck chair, eating an ice cream cone. "Then have a lie-down." The brochure was from something called the Exercise Education Association.

The EEA had a slogan: "Narcissism, tissue oxidation, joint degeneration. If exercise was a disease, it would have a telethon."

"It's like all that drug-education stuff," I tell her. "It just makes you want to try it."

"Well, Gustav," she says, resting her head in my lap. "Maybe it just takes a while for me to get the point."

The Club's flex-display cam puts the back of Laurie's head up on the screens behind her, maybe to show the muscles of her neck. But the gain is screwed up. The display pulses, then suddenly focuses in on one hair, which swells until it fills the screen. The view cruises along the scalp, the epidermis like slabs of shattered rock, until it finds a skin mite digging busily at the base of a follicle, looking like a buffalo scratching itself against a Ponderosa pine.

I find this intimate revelation exciting. These women never show you anything that matters. Their skin is porcelain, their navels perfect footballs, even their elbows are unwrinkled and show no trace of wear. I want to see the real stuff, float in the ventricles of her brain, lick the synovial fluid off her ilio-femoral ligament, feel the slow emptying and filling of her gall bladder, take a bubble bath in her alveoli....

She smiles slowly. "Does my body excite you, Gustav?"

"Yes," I say. "Yes, it does."

**END**

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