

Muscle (And the Possibility of Grace)

The need for strength is something we understand even then, during our first semester, when life is not yet a matter of avoiding death—the gray wash of despair; a fluke car accident on a long, coastal highway. For us the future is that in which we believe. We are the hopeful, however uninspired. We are Freshmen.

Stilt is screaming. He lies on his back, working the bench, sweating and screaming the way women do during sex. A man will bite his tongue and roll over onto his side, but real women scream: we men here are smart enough to know. Also, it's the kind of thing I dream about at night, looking up at my girlfriend, Susan, who leans against the cinderblock wall just below the window. She is wearing her cotillion dress—white as a wedding, complete with a veil; clearly, she is coming out, and sometimes, looking up, I wonder what she would have sounded like, doing it. I think if we didn't love each other, maybe I would have found out. When she took me to the airport she said she'd love me forever. Her hair smelled like creosote and dust.

But men scream under pressure only. When Stilt screams, lifting the bar, pressing it square over his head, it becomes suddenly clear he doesn't realize the true value of restraint. Except for JD, the transfer student, we—me, Stiltman, Rosco, Mathias—are eighteen each, and Stilt is somehow all of us—wrestling with the bar, struggling for control. In our lives right now, balance is what we require most, and Stilt lies on

the bench sweating and screaming. I stand behind him, spotting, and a breeze catches the drapes. It stirs the air in the room. On the wall is a poster of a well-built celebrity describing the hood of a foreign car. The furniture is imitation wood and vinyl, pushed to the side—and looking, I think this is where I live. I think the air smells like vinegar and socks and everything, eventually, is going to make perfect sense.

“I love her,” Stilt says, later, flexing into the mirror. “What can I say?”

I’m the one from Phoenix. JD comes from Massachusetts. *The Cape*, we say, because we want to be like him. My psychiatrist has called me angry and manic and periodically threatens me with medication. Weekends is when it gets worse, at night, when the sky begins to really deepen. Sometimes I think it’s big enough to die in. Sometimes I think it’s responsible for what it overlooks, though I’m not yet mature enough to articulate this, or any other real, idea. I know only that something is growing slowly in my bones, and that when I sleep, I wake up screaming because I can feel it—that feeling, deep in the center of your bones.

“Exercise,” says JD. “Exercise is the best thing for sleep.”

We are sitting on the roof of Watkins Chapel with a twelve-pack of domestic beer and a fifth of sour mash. Most people are at the Halloween dance, meaning less than half the two hundred and twenty-seven girls living on campus, and we are sitting on the roof looking at the sky. Stilt is eating dinner alone with Mrs. Chamberlain, who is the mother of Charlotte Chamberlain. Charlotte is the girl Stilt loves even though Charlotte is dating a hockey player named Brian O’Malley. When Stilt came by to borrow a pair of black shoes, JD told him he looked *stunning*.

But above us now—me and JD—the sky is full of autumn and ghosts. The wind is growing brisk and JD points out the constellations. He shows me a satellite.

“There,” he says, lying back, pointing. “There. That’s a satellite, Davey.”

Only JD calls me Davey. I pop a beer and think satellites are too high up, they fly too fast—if we were meant to see them, we’d know exactly what they were doing up there.

I say, “Right now, Stiltman is washing dishes. He’s washing dishes and telling Mrs. Chamberlain how love truly feels.”

JD spits out his beer, it’s that funny. He sits up, spreads wide his arms, and howls, “Charlotte! But, but I *love* you!”

Deep down it could be true. JD doesn’t say this, but he’s the strongest guy on campus and, as we see it, the most deserving of her affections. Charlotte Chamberlain says she’s going to try out for the Minnesota Viking cheerleaders; sometimes, she comes over to our room to study with JD because of the way he always knows what’s going to be on an exam. When she’s not around, people make fun of the way she puts on her jeans, tightly, and while everyone knows she’s got a body smooth as porcelain, she’s nothing next to Susan. I’ve seen Susan’s body naked, in the back seat of her father’s four-wheel drive, during the day. We drove into the middle of the desert with two gallons of water, just to be safe, and when I remember how her body looks, I know that it is real. I know that it is real and meaningful and just waiting for me to come home from some college stuck in the middle of Minnesota.

JD knows how it is. That’s why we’re on the roof of Watkins Chapel avoiding all the lonely girls on campus. The muscles in my back are full of knots, and when he passes me the whiskey, I think even pain will make a body feel good.

No pain, no gain: the January term lasts a month, in between semesters, where you take one class and spend a lot of time looking for something else to do. For example, I am learning how to build a dulcimer from scratch, and where I’m from, it never snows. During my Christmas break, I went home,

and Susan and I went skinny-dipping in a pool . . . one night, almost, but we didn't have *protection*, and already now my Christmas tan has faded. When I say words with *Os* in them, people think I'm local.

In Minnesota, the snow is deep and on national TV. At night it gets so cold I begin to understand what it means to feel lonely, here, in Minnesota, where the sun has died and turned to ice. And stumbling out of the Blue Ox with Stilt and JD and Rosco and Mathias, stumbling, I'm beginning to think all this is pretty funny—last call, and closing time. “That was a last call,” I say, but no one seems to notice. Inside the bar was a girl I thought I'd like to try and talk to. The girl had skin the color of snow. For some reason, I am discovering, I become less shy when it is really cold.

“Charlotte!” yells Rosco. “But Charlotte!”

“I can't help it,” says Stilt.

“You know,” says Mathias, “I heard she does it with a flashlight.”

When I pick on Stilt, it makes me not mind being with him. Last week, Stilt wrote Charlotte a long letter, explaining he just didn't think it was going to work out, that being in love and loving another being just weren't the same thing. The next day Brian O'Malley, the hockey star, who was also a DJ for the college radio, read Stilt's letter over the air; the station is wired into the cafeteria during breakfast and lunch so people can listen in. He read Stilt's entire letter during lunch and then played a special song just for those experiencing *unrequested love*. While he was reading, you could hear people chewing their food, and all night long Stilt's been saying he's humiliated. Also, we've been drinking imports.

“And this one's going out to the Stiltman,” said Brian O'Malley, just before putting on the song.

And now in the parking lot on a Friday night where Stilt's feeling terribly misunderstood and drunk, after *Last Call*,

Rosco is trying to pick somebody up. The girl is trying to make her car go but the wheels keep spinning on the ice. “Hey,” Rosco says. “Hey!”

“Best letter I ever helped write,” I say.

“I thought it was beautiful,” says JD.

Rosco is still talking to the girl, and inside the car is a fat guy big as the moon, and now the fat guy’s yelling at Rosco. He’s getting out of the car, taking off his jacket.

“Hey,” says JD, waving. “Just having a good time.”

“Really,” I say to the fat guy. “That was a really last call.”

It’s cold, too, so cold my jacket makes noises when I move. I think the fat guy says something stupid and lots of people are starting to pay attention, including a group of guys who seem to know him. The fat guy’s feeling big, pushing me around, and JD says, “Hey. Hey!”

By now there’s lots of names going back and forth and I’m thinking this is something I’m going to want to remember. JD and me, I think. Me and JD—we’re going to kick some God damn ass, and I’m saying things now, just waiting, and JD, too, and the fat guy’s friends, the snow’s about to fly, and me and JD, we’re in the center. We’re in the center of it all.

“Nobody lives forever,” I say, which I have always understood to be true.

Two weeks later, me and JD are in court, defending ourselves, and it still hurts when I sneeze. My eyes are swollen with dark, bloody rings, and the judge is looking at his watch. It’s been a busy day. He’s explaining the need for self-control and community service. My father’s lawyer wires me money to pay the fine, and now, after we finish working out, we drive in JD’s big car downtown to play basketball with the poor kids. We pass the ball back and forth to the kids and blow whistles: JD in his sweats, waving his hands, yelling. Eventually, Stilt drops out, because he’s been publicly humiliated by a guy named Brian O’Malley, and Susan’s mother, Joyce, calls me from Phoenix. On the

phone she explains that my father is in the hospital and that she thinks it would be a good idea if I came home soon as possible.

“Okay,” I say, talking to her on the phone. “How’s Susan?”

I learn things slowly. What happened, too, is enough to shake your faith in love. My father saw Susan driving around town with another guy and called her a whore. He called her a whore on the doorstep of her dormitory, and then he tried to throttle her. After he ripped open her blouse, she kicked him, hard, and he went down and vomited. Then the police came by and carried him away.

And it’s possible to realize the moment in greater detail—the city night air, full of car exhaust and traffic lights, pretty people strolling by in fine cotton sweaters, the big glass doors leading in to Manzanita Hall; my father, still in his suit, his tie undone and full of stains because he’s stopped taking his lithium, and the booze—but these are details I don’t pursue for fear of understanding too clearly who I am. Meanwhile, I fly into Sky Harbor and rent my very first car; I drive to the Superstition Mountain Care Facility, a place I’ve been to often. There my father sits in a garden wearing Bermuda shorts, drinking a Coke, smiling. He’s talking to a woman with long black hair. The woman’s eyes are full of humiliation and disease, like my father’s, and what I want to know, right now, right now as I’m standing here in the sunshine staring at my father, is just what the hell he expects me to do now?

“I was protecting your God damn honor,” he says. “How’s school?”

Behind him, the woman is looking away at a lemon tree, listening.

“Thanks,” I say, referring to his last check.

He shrugs. “So things are okay, then. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Okay.”

And now my father is in tears, blinking. “I thought she might have heard from you, all right? I was thinking maybe she might know something!”

He’s screaming at me now, taking a swing, the woman is walking slowly away, trying not to appear dangerous or alarmed. She walks slowly away from range while the security guards with tennis clothes and shaved heads are jogging across the lawn—and here I am, still standing.

Two days later I’m visiting Susan at the state university, and what I’m thinking is that the building she lives in is tall as anything in Minneapolis. Her roommate is wearing a tank top without a bra getting ready for a date. The walls are full of horses and men on skis, a seagull flying into the sky. Susan sits on her bed in khaki shorts and a sweatshirt, saying things about her classes. When I ask her questions about what happened, she waves her hand and smiles: apparently, some things no longer matter.

“So,” she says, leaning back on her hands. “Do you want to go to a party?”

We go, and at the party are people in fraternities. They drink beer like anybody else but seem uncertain of what to do with people who don’t look quite like them. Simply, my hair is too long, my skin pale from wintering in the great north woods, and my date has been sleeping with the treasurer of Alpha Tau Omega. Troy says, holding his stein in one hand, a clove cigarette in the other, nice things to me about Susan, and you can tell by the way their eyes meet they’re feeling sorry for me—the little guy with feelings nobody really wants to hurt. I think if I wanted to, I could break this guy’s neck: one hand there, on the clavicle, another up against his jaw; maybe I’d smile real big and twist. I think this guy is someday going to get what he deserves, maybe even Susan, and now I look at her and say, “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go.”

When I get home, I pour myself a water-glass full of gin and call long distance. I sit on the kitchen floor and tell JD he

doesn't know what he's missing. Here, in Arizona, where it's eighty-five degrees. I tell him he's missing lots, not being here. I tell him I don't think I'm the kind of guy you should have a family with.

But faith is a right we need to exercise, to keep it strong, and while I forgive my father, I want at the same time to be capable of doing otherwise. Meanwhile, I tell him I'll write, and when I leave Susan shows up at the airport. Outside the terminal, standing by a cab, she says, "I'm sorry. You know I'm really sorry."

Things change, she says. She is wearing a peach dress, and this is the last time I ever talk to her. As for my father, he dries out, for good this time, and eventually decides to retire in five years to sail the Caribbean: it's a place neither of us has ever been before. We don't even know how to sail. On the phone he asks me if I want to come along, and I say, "Yeah. Sure."

"It's something your mother would have wanted us to do," he says, which is always dangerous—when he starts talking about my mother, his dead wife, and now that I'm back at school, in my English class, I think things are going to get worse. I think my heart no longer works properly, that's why I feel so bad: this, in the center of my chest, the slow burn of loss. When Stilt comes up to visit for *Spring Fling*, he asks me how's it going.

"Okay," I say. "I've moved up on the bench."

"Squats?"

"Yeah," I say. "Squats too."

And now I sit on my heels, outside where the air is wet, the grass green. Watching the grass grow, I think this is why poets pay so much attention to spring: because it hurts. In our room alone we have two kegs of beer and fruit punch laced with Everclear.

"How's Susan?" Stilt asks, meaning he wants to talk about Charlotte Chamberlain. I stand, stretching my calves, won-

dering why it is he can't tell I'm different. I take him into our room, and on the way he says, "It's true, you know. That part about the flashlight."

Inside it's full of pale bodies and sweat and the sweet, stale smell of beer: it really is spring, and even the people here are wearing t-shirts and shorts. In Arizona, the saguaros are preparing to bloom, and Stilt, he's working at a department store in Duluth, *Men's Wear*, living with his mother and thinking about the Coast Guard. My mother died when I was thirteen, and Stilt says he gets his clothes now at a discount. JD laughs at that, because he thinks Stilt dresses like a pimp.

"Charlotte," JD yells. "But I *love* you!"

By now JD is pretty drunk. He's wearing his pink muscle shirt and you can see the stretch marks shooting under his arms. Now he's pretending to play the violin. The music is loud, Connie Fitzgerald is dancing on top of a desk, Stilt is spilling out his chest, posing, and now JD looks up at me, smiling, playing the violin.

Later, the phone rings, and it's for me, and Rosco turns down the stereo. I take the phone into the bathroom, where there's a keg in the shower and everybody's muddy shoes; outside people are trying to be quiet, which is impossible, and on the phone I talk to my father's secretary, Shirley Dunnaway, who's explaining all the way from Phoenix, Arizona, just what's happened and where the body is. When I hang up, I go outside and sit on the steps. The lawns are wet and full of mud; by dark you'll never know spring was ever here, and eventually, it's likely even your lungs will freeze.

"Davey," says JD, stumbling up behind me. "Davey, what's going on?"

During exams it's easy to pretend you know the answers, and I'm thinking that this is going to take some getting used to and that probably I'm going to fail. I'm going to get washed out, like Stilt, and no one, not even my father, is ever going to know why, and now JD sits on the steps beside

me. He puts his arm around my shoulder and says, “Well, was she worth it?”

Rowing builds the lats; running slows your heart rate; self-pity atrophies the soul. My father’s liver was swollen with loss, and if you stand in the mirror long enough, you begin to see what you really look like. If he hadn’t killed himself, I think, maybe he wouldn’t have wanted to.

Still, and eventually, time passes—a couple summers in Taos, vacations in Mazatlan, but for the next three years I keep returning here where my life keeps going on. JD and I are no longer roommates because I have a girlfriend now. Oddly enough, her name is also Susan, and she represents neither my first nor my last conjugal experience, though each time of course I think it’s both. I have learned, too, at least here in a college with thin walls, that it is best to stifle the particular noises you and your girlfriend might equally be inclined to make. Mornings, when Susan leaves my room, she sneaks out through the window.

Simply, we have rules to follow, and love, like the body, requires constant definition: my girlfriend takes the pill and perms her hair. Her shampoo smells like oranges, and she is a local girl studying Economics. At home, she has a hope chest, and an organ which will replicate the sound of a drum and any number of horns. Her parents invite me often for dinner and, to my surprise, seem to like me. Her father manages a shoe store downtown; he is very proud of his little girl. “Cute as a button,” he’ll say, passing me a Coke. “Cute as a God damn button!”

And my girlfriend says she wants to marry me. She wants to marry me and move into an apartment while I finish my degree, and one night, while she is taking off her sweater, I look up at her body and wonder. Her body is strong from doing aerobics, which are just now beginning to be popular: her arms and shoulders are full of unexpected muscles. She has moles in places you wouldn’t think there should be any,

and they look nice—these small, dark passages in her skin. Naked, she looks younger than she really is.

“I love you, Dave,” she says.

It’s what she always says, and I feel unexpectedly mature and forthright. Too, if I don’t say anything, I know what she’s going to do next: we’ve been together long enough to develop rhythm, and I know she’s looking at my body the way I’m looking at hers. I know that blood requires oxygen to breathe, that the heart is a muscle big as your fist, that love is something you have to believe in first.

Now she has her hand on my chest, and I look up at her. I breathe in slow and say, “Hey, maybe we oughta call it quits?”

My advisor calls me *The Orphan*. He is a thin man who speaks five languages and jogs in between his classes. During the days, you see him running through the campus, swinging his arms into propellers; if he gets up enough speed, he just might someday take off. He is a man whose strength relies on flexibility, and when I ask him questions about seminary, he tells me to go to law school. “Grow rich,” he tells me. “Become a pillar of the church.” But this an answer I’m not looking for.

Whenever I ask JD what I should do, he always says, “Well, what do you want to do?”

JD knows my secret, and so he knows already that we both know what I am going to try and do with my life. It’s the type of conversation we have late at night, and one night, in JD’s room, whiskey and beer, he tells me a story from last semester. Apparently, JD is up on the seventh floor of the vault with Charlotte Chamberlain. She never made the cheerleading squad and has recently decided to finish her degree in Education, later she will become a flight attendant for a failing airline, but right now she is with JD and it is three, maybe four o’clock in the morning when the phone rings. Charlotte answers, thinking maybe it’s her mother in Paris,

or Brian O'Malley, melancholic and drunk, but there's no one on the other end. JD says to me, laughing, reaching for a beer, "A prank call!"

When he says that word, *call*, it's easy to trace the place of his origins—Massachusetts. He lights a cigar, points to the bottle, which I accept, and JD keeps going on: thus, and so inclined, they curl back in the sack which is still remarkably warm, but he has this feeling, this really pleasant feeling that someone he knows is watching over him. He feels something going on but okay about it all, too, *you know?* and then the fire alarm goes off. The fire alarm is loud enough to freeze your brain. JD, he's running around looking for his pants, and then the doors start opening and closing, opening and closing: the dormitory needs to be evacuated, the RAs are going through the halls, and aside from the rules, no one is supposed to know JD and Charlotte Chamberlain are getting it on behind Brian O'Malley's back, anyway—and now he's in Charlotte's pink and green bathrobe, going down the stairs, surrounded by girls who know, and Rosco, whom JD meets up with on the fifth floor. The girls swirl all around Rosco and JD and keep them going down the stairs until, outside, barefoot in the snow, JD looks up at the seventh floor. There in Charlotte's room, there behind the lit glass of her room, is Brian O'Malley, jacking off.

JD looks at the cigar in his hand. He reaches for the bottle and says, "I never told anyone." Now he's closing his eyes, shaking his head, his hands nearly full. "Anyone."

It's something I never knew. When I told my girlfriend I thought maybe we should call it quits, she stood up on the bed and kicked me in the ribs. Then she started punching me, her fists knotted up, punching away. She pulled my hair and screamed. Once she started screaming, she stopped punching, and eventually she put on her clothes.

I walked her out to her car, wearing only my boots and jeans, a t-shirt; I stood by her car and shivered in the snow.

Then I got in and she began to drive. She drove for hours, down streets I'd never been before, never saying a word. Once we skidded on some ice, but she was good at driving, she knew always where she wanted to end up: with a house, and decent people inside who needed her. Finally, she drove me back to campus, put the car into neutral, and kissed me. She kissed me the way she did before she knew me, and then she drove away to Washington, DC, where she married a pathologist. But back then I didn't know she was going to be happy for the rest of her life. I thought she was going to do something stupid. I thought about Susan, wearing her peach dress, climbing into a cab.

Once I picked a fight with Brian O'Malley. A party, outside, the keg stuffed in the snow. I wanted to see if he could do it.

"Give it up," he said.

And clearly this guy was beyond my reach. He played hockey, he was used to fighting with sticks; he had arms long as trees. When it was over, JD took a wad of snow and held it up against my cheek. He poured me a fresh beer and said, "Now why did you do that?"

And then Charlotte Chamberlain drifted over, carrying a flashlight and wading through the snow, her boots up to her knees. She put her arm around my shoulder and asked me if I was okay; even outside with her parka on, you could smell her perfume. She smelled like a department store.

JD says that's when things started happening: that night with me and the split cheek—and Charlotte and JD, putting me quietly to bed, adjusting the knobs on the stereo, closing the door and walking off together down the hallway. And just four months before graduation, when Brian O'Malley drives his car through a doughnut shop window on Sixth Avenue, we suspect there's alcohol in his bloodstream. At the memorial service in Watkins Chapel the visitors are timid and pale. Charlotte Chamberlain gives a moving, if somewhat digressive, eulogy, and Stilt, who drives in from

Duluth just to see the show, says he understands how it must have felt.

And all the while I'm thinking about my father. People are moving to the reception area, crying, telling jokes, heading for the beer, and now my advisor arrives late. He's wearing his sweats, and I understand for the first time in my life what my father must have always known to be possible. Home, where I'm still only thirteen—I'm thinking about my father sitting by the poolside. He sits by the pool, sipping iced coffee, and he tells me to sit down.

"Your mom," he says, sitting in the sun. "Your mom's not as strong as she used to be."

Inside the house, she's wearing her blue swimsuit, the one that covers her stretch marks but still shows off her hips. She's lying on the top of the couch, resting.

"You must be strong, David."

"Okay," I say, and then I grow up. I learn to change the spark plugs in my car and write an essay, fix TV dinners, go to prom. I learn to shake hands with important people and be polite. My girlfriend's name was Susan. Later, Brian O'Malley fell in love with Charlotte Chamberlain, and here at the memorial service held in honor of the dead, and everyone else I'm ever going to know, I am watching JD. He is standing up against the wall. He is standing up against the wall wearing the tweed coat his mother picked out, which no longer fits, and I'm thinking if he wants to, he can raise the entire building. I'm thinking love may very well be what the body longs for, but it feeds on muscle.

The last time I saw JD, I don't remember what he said. I don't even remember where I was. There was a time there that is gone now—years worth, years spent all across the country, trying to pay attention and survive. I do remember that we didn't talk as much as we should have, that there were things I should have told him. I'm told he caught a plane a couple years later for Florida, where he was going to meet

up with his parents and do some deep sea fishing. And sometimes now I imagine him, sitting on a cramped plane, eating his peanuts. Maybe Charlotte Chamberlain, now in her flight uniform, carrying a tray of drinks—maybe Charlotte Chamberlain comes strolling down the aisle. Maybe they talk about people they used to know, plan to meet up sometime along the beach for dinner. Probably, there's a little turbulence, because history is a weight you have to get used to: where you come from; or someone you used to know, lying dead on a coastal highway, his face full of broken glass.

But I don't think death is half as tough as learning to ski, or reading the right books, or making love with your wife. We live in Jerome, which sits right on top of Mingus Mountain; we spend a lot of time outside taking hikes. We have a town center and tourists and just enough snow in winter to make the scenery pretty, and each morning, before I lift, I look out at the sky. Here the weather changes often, but you can see it when it does: there, off in the distance, with the clouds spilling over the Mogollon Rim. Sooner or later, you know they're going to come home; you can see the weather coming from miles off and you know it's going to snow and that after, before it all melts, before you even have time to start a pot of coffee, you know you're going to understand that something's happened. Something meaningful enough to change the way you want to live. That snow, and the life you're going to try and follow, forthwith.