

## THE REVERSE

### 3:30

“Today’s the day,” said Andrea, my diving coach, standing with her thick legs apart, back arched, meaty arms crossed over her large bosom. “Today’s the goddamn day.”

I nodded. My crotch tingled as if I needed to pee, but I knew that was impossible. Before leaving the locker room, I had balanced over the toilet three times, the last time unable to squeeze out a single drop of fear.

Andrea squinted at the bleachers on the other side of the indoor swimming pool, where my friend Theresa sat like a small sun, her light-blond bangs shooting ten centimetres into the air and fanning open. To achieve this gravity-defying look Theresa would soak her bangs in hairspray and then press them, panini-style, between two books. The rest of her hair fell softly to her shoulders, framing her small, vulpine face, which was twisting around a jawbreaker. Without the bangs, scrawny Theresa barely made five feet.

Andrea ran her hand through her short, russet hair and said, “What is that punk doing here again? Does she have a crush on you? Tell your lesbo friend to take off.”

“She’s not a lesbian,” I said, having only a vague idea of what a lesbian was and no idea of what a lesbian did. Actually, my sole image of a lesbian was Andrea, because that’s what one of the older divers had called her last week, the same boy who, to my utter bafflement, always called Greg Louganis “Greg Loose-Anus.”

Andrea clapped her hands and pointed at me between the eyes. “Listen, my little Star of David, if you don’t do the reverse dive today, you’re out. Off the team! You’ve been wriggling your way out of it for months. If you don’t do the dive by”—Andrea looked toward the big round clock hanging high on the cement wall—“four o’clock, that’s it. You can walk your coward’s ass on out of here, clean out your locker, and never show your face at this pool again.”

### 3:36

I took my time going through the warm-up exercises on the blue gym mats to the left of the boards. I grimaced through twenty lunges and fifteen push-ups. While doing my sixty sit-ups, I pictured how nice it was going to be two hours from now—diving practice behind me, Theresa and I down at the shops, eating poutine out of Styrofoam containers, a full twenty-two hours to go before I had to be at the pool again.

The Pointe-Claire municipal pool had no windows, yet somehow a

sense of the January outside—already dark at this early hour and twenty-five below—mingled with the smell of chlorine. Under a very steep, church-like roof, high enough to accommodate a ten-metre diving platform, lay Canada's first Olympic-sized swimming pool, built in 1967. Twenty-one years later, it was still the training ground for the country's best swimming and diving team, and a number of Olympic medalists and World Record holders were diving off its boards that very afternoon. All around me were strong, beautiful bodies: practicing handstands, somersaulting high above the trampoline, bounding off the springboards and soaring into the air as if they had a different relationship with gravity, seeming to suspend a moment, arms spread open, before falling toward the water straight as a spear. After emerging from the pool, wet and glistening, they would grab their pastel shammies and whip each other's bums, joking and laughing as if we were doing something fun here.

I lay back on the blue mat and stared up at the roof's crisscrossing rafters. That I would sooner or later have to do a reverse dive—where a diver jumps off the board facing forward, but then flips backward, toward the board—had been haunting me for over a year. When I set off for my first diving practice, my dad said he was allowing me to take up the sport on one condition: that I never, ever do a reverse dive, which in his South African English accent he called “a gainer.” To make doubly sure I obeyed, he claimed that on any summer day, half the people in an emergency room were there thanks to gainers.

Why was Dad so alarmist about reverse dives? Probably because five years earlier in Edmonton, a diver from the Soviet Union named Sergei Chalibashvili smacked his head while doing a reverse dive and died. I was too young to remember the accident, but it must have been in all the Canadian papers because Chalibashvili, to this day, is the only diver to be killed during an international competition. What happened after the medics carried Chalibashvili away is diving lore: Greg Louganis, who'd been standing on the ten-metre platform when Chalibashvili's head hit it, after peeking over the edge and seeing the water filled with blood, had to go ahead and do the exact same dive—a reverse with three-and-a-half somersaults—a dive Louganis himself had hit his head doing a few years earlier in Tbilisi, USSR, which just so happened to be Chalibashvili's hometown.

I had recently seen the video of Louganis hitting his head back in 1979 in Tbilisi. They had replayed it on TV that past October after he once again hit his head doing a reverse at the Summer Games in Seoul. If I hadn't already been terrified of the dive, I would have been after seeing that old black-and-white footage. It came to me again as I lay on the blue mat, Louganis smashing his skull against the hard platform and then, head joggling as if he were a bobblehead doll, losing consciousness in midair and just falling, limply falling, until he met the water with a flat back.

“Hey there, Sleeping Beauty.” Andrea's ruddy face stared down at me. She was bent over, hands on her knees, the roof sloping up behind her. “Would you like a pillow?”

My first warm-up dive—a simple front dive from the one-metre—did not go well.

“Like piss hitting a plate,” Andrea said as I pushed out of the pool. She was leaning back in her steel fold-up chair, one ankle resting on her knee, her hands propped on her wide waist.

I grabbed my blue shammy off the bleacher and wiped down my arms and legs.

Eyeing my white thighs, Andrea said, “You’re not the skinnymalink you were a few months ago. You’re getting boobs and hips, eh? Too bad. Harder to slice the water like a knife when you’ve got bags of fat hanging off you. Not impossible, but harder.”

I nodded as if I were to blame for the new breasts pushing against the plasticky white windmill on the front of my swimsuit. The team emblem was the Pointe-Claire Windmill, “the oldest windmill in Montreal,” built by Sulpician priests in 1709, when the only other people leaving snow prints on this part of the island were the Iroquois. That was hundreds of years before the land became a suburb of the city, covered in track homes and strip malls, and more than 250 years before my parents would immigrate to Canada, but it never occurred to me that this windmill wasn’t a part of my history. I was very proud of that team swimsuit. The first time I put it on, I stood in front of my bedroom mirror, hands down at my sides, chin raised like a soldier at attention, thinking, Look at that, you’re an athlete now.

Back in line for the board, I waited behind Jackie, a buck-toothed girl who was, it could not be denied, a truly good diver now. When the two of us first made the team, I had been a far better diver. I had been the best of all the rookies. Until recently I had always been the best at whatever I did: the fastest runner on the street, the highest climber of trees, the top student in Greendale Elementary. I had played Snow White in a production downtown, singing and dancing for an audience of hundreds while an understudy almost twice my age waited in the wings. But lately, everything had become a lot harder. My last report card, hidden under my mattress since the summer, had been a column of Cs. My parents were too preoccupied, first fighting over Dad’s friendship with his new secretary, then driving Mom back and forth to the Royal Vic for “treatments,” to notice I never gave it to them. Six months later I was still debating whether I had the moral obligation to bring the shameful report card to their attention. The director of my drama school, after failing to give me a lead role in *West Side Story*, asked, “Whatever happened, Jessamyn, to your beautiful voice?” And all the other new divers had gotten better, executing dives with higher and higher degrees of difficulty, while my dives stayed the same, leaving me the worst diver on the team.

I have to do this dive today, I thought. I have to do it. It would be proof that I wasn’t going to be a failure from here on out, that I wasn’t going to be the remarkable little girl who grew up to be a big sad disappointment, that I was still on track to be a remarkable woman, the kind of woman who didn’t let fear stand in her way. If I didn’t do this dive, I would officially be a coward.

Never to do anything great. Never to be admired. Or loved, not truly loved, the way Gilbert Blythe loved Anne Shirley. Gilbert never would've been so taken by Anne, yearning for her year after year, if she hadn't been the bravest and most talented girl he had ever met. This was my last chance to prove that I was an Anne of Green Gables, Jo March, Scarlett O'Hara.

### 3:47

After messing up another front dive, I swam for the pool's edge without coming up for air. The world above was a muffled blur. As long as I was underwater, everything was on hold.

Andrea pretended I was invisible when I climbed out of the pool, looking all around except at me, as if my dive had been too terrible to be real.

I got back in line for the board, teeth chattering. Squeezing the water out of my black braid, I peeked up at the clock. Thirteen more minutes. Maybe I really did have to pee now?

I looked over at Theresa, still sitting on the bleacher, chewing her jawbreaker. Catching my eyes on her, she lifted her small hand and turned up her small mouth. I smiled back, thinking, *Why? Why* did she come with me, every afternoon, across the slushy boulevard from our high school to the pool? I knew Theresa was needy, everybody knew it. There wasn't a girl in our grade Theresa hadn't dragged into a photobooth, as if she required evidence she had friends. Still, lonely or not, how could she stand it, sitting on that bleacher, day after day, watching other kids work hard to get good at something? Didn't it bother her that she wasn't good at anything?

When I first started spending my evenings with Theresa, hanging at the shops and staying late at her townhouse, often sleeping over since Theresa lived around the corner from our high school, my mom didn't like it. She said, "Theresa's mom's never home. All you eat there are microwaved hotdogs"—a comment so out of character for my mother, a woman who made Toblerone fondue for dinner, that it still niggles at me decades later. My mother was an Italian immigrant, a stay-at-home mom, but she never said conventional "mom" things, never scrunched her nose at other women and their homes, and there's just something about that microwaved-hotdog comment that I can't quite put my finger on.

Mom didn't press the point, though. How could she, when we weren't eating much better at home? Not since the breast cancer came back for the third time, and Mom and Dad finally told me about the other two times, because this time was guaranteed to be the last. If Mom wasn't at the hospital, she was either sitting in the family room on the puffy black recliner, wearing her oversized auburn wig, a neck brace, and a scowl, or she was locked in her bedroom with the silver vomit dish, mostly in silence, though once I heard her cry out: "Please, dear God, just kill me already!" As for Theresa's mom, I had no idea where she was. I never asked. I just made the most of her absence.

A full year of school nights at Theresa's townhouse, and all I'm left with now are a few flashes: my hands bringing a plate of frozen hotdogs up to the microwave; Theresa cackling as she pulled a strand of condoms out of her

mother's half-packed suitcase; sitting cross-legged on the beige carpet, passing the telephone back and forth while we talked on the Party Line to "Nine-Inch Brian," whom Theresa told, unable to suppress her cackle, that we were Catholic schoolgirls.

Who would have thought that an adult man would desire a schoolgirl? But Theresa knew things at a time, in those last years before the internet, when it wasn't so easy to find things out. It wasn't a prudish era; sex was everywhere—Calvin Klein ads, slapstick comedies, music videos (George Michael wanted yours)—but exactly what everybody was talking about could remain, sometimes for years, unclear, a little fuzzy, like those scrambled soft-core movies that came on after midnight. Only Theresa, between "fuck this" and "fuck that," bandied about terms like *blowjob* and *rimmer* and *double-team* like she totally knew what they meant, always followed by her machine-gun HA HA HA HA HA!

That's why it was such a surprise when, earlier that year, in the middle of Sex Ed, while we were watching a close-up of a baby's hairy head pushing out of a stretched vagina, Theresa fainted. She timbered out of her chair—the shadow of her spiky bangs passing over the screen—and landed with a crash in front of the film projector.

### 3:50

"Show time!" Andrea said, when I popped my head out of the water after finally doing a decent front dive. "Time to shine, Star of David."

I looked to the clock. "You said I had until four!"

"Jessamyn!"

"Please," I begged, clasping the side of the pool. "Can't I do a few more warm-up dives?"

"One more," Andrea said, holding a finger up in front of her face as if I didn't know what one meant.

I glanced back at Theresa who shook her head like "fuck that." Andrea followed my eyes and ordered me to go tell my loser friend to get lost.

I said, "I won't look at her again, I promise."

"She's creepy. Tell her to go home."

I walked around the pool, hunched, arms twisted in front of my chest. Instead of walking around the boards, I took the long way, circumnavigating the swimming lanes with their furious back-and-forth of goggled swimmers. At the far end of the pool, I paused to watch Katherine, only one year older than me, all the way up on the ten-metre platform, standing still, mentally preparing for her dive. When she started to run, my chest rose and the breath caught in my throat. She leapt off the platform with her arms above her head, whipped them forward, and started falling while spinning, not in a ball, but bent in two at the waist, arms wrapped around her straight legs, going round and round, and opening up just in time to pierce the water. I exhaled, and thought about how good it must feel to be a work of art.

"Coach says you have to go."

Theresa's eyes were as blue and clear as the pool. Judging by her tongue and lips, her jawbreaker had been blue too.

“Bitch,” Theresa said. “I still don’t get why she keeps calling you Star of David. Who the fuck is David?”

“Seriously, you have to leave right now.”

“You don’t have to do it, you know.”

“Yeah, I do. You need a reverse to compete.”

“Why do you have to compete?”

“Because that’s what it means to do a sport, Theresa,” I said, although I knew that I no longer had to do the reverse to compete. I had to do it to quit. Do this one last dive, and I could walk away with dignity. “I told you, I have to push myself.”

“Why do you have to push yourself?”

I glanced back at Andrea who opened her hands in a “What’s taking so long?” gesture.

Turning back to Theresa, I said, “Honestly, I don’t know why I hang out with you.”

“Fuck you!” Theresa said with a cackle-laugh and picked up her army backpack. “I’ll wait for you in the foyer.”

As I walked back around the pool, again the long way, again hunched with my arms folded in front of my chest, a doughnut popped into my head—a soft white yeasty doughnut topped with chocolate icing and pink and blue sprinkles. Without fail, this doughnut came to me every practice. I could see it, smell it, almost taste it. The vision of this doughnut, sitting on a piece of wax paper on a red counter in front of a giant mirror bordered by vanity lights, was at once ironclad and hazy, as first memories tend to be. When I was four years old and taking swimming lessons at the indoor pool closer to our house in Dollard-des-Ormeaux, my mom would buy me a doughnut to eat afterward, and this doughnut would be in the locker room waiting for me to finish changing into dry clothes. Cavernous indoor pool, fear of drowning, followed by a doughnut.

### 3:57

Upon my return, Andrea said, “That took too long. No more warm-up dives.”

I looked to the clock. “You said I had until four!”

“Jesus Christ, Jessamyn! Have some mercy on me.”

“You said I had until four.”

“By the time you’re on the board, it’ll be four.”

### 3:58

Jackie climbed onto the green springboard, and I moved to next in line. One year younger than me, Jackie still had her childhood body. She adjusted the fulcrum, moving the knob back with her pale foot and spindly leg.

Crossing my legs against the pee feeling, I ran through the reverse in my head, because that was what all the great athletes said you should do. Never think while moving, they said. Imagine yourself doing the perfect dive (or dunk or catch or whatever) over and over again, so when the time comes, your body just does it, automatically, with grace.

*I'm standing in the middle of the board, facing the pool. I take the first step of the three-step hurdle. The second step, the third. I jump onto both feet at the end of the board and, as it's bowing beneath me, I bend my knees and jump as it springs back, jump high, not out, and when I'm as high as I'll go, no sooner, I open my arms while looking back...*

But if I did as I was supposed to, and only thought about jumping high off the board, not away from it, how was I supposed to make sure I didn't hit my head? And if those great athletes were right, that you'll naturally do what you've been imagining, then what was going to happen after I've been imagining smacking my head all day?

### 3:59

Jackie stood at the end of the board, her back to the pool as if she were going to do a back dive, but she was preparing to do an inward, where a diver jumps backward and then flips inward, toward the board. Her pale, freckled face was stern, her big blue eyes focussed. Her long black lashes were in wet, doll-like clumps. Jackie would have been one of the prettiest girls on the team if not for the gigantic buckteeth that prevented her from ever fully closing her mouth.

When she raised her hands above her head, I thought, oh god, here we go. In two seconds, she'll be done, and I'm up. Jackie jumped, whipped her hands forward, somersaulted in a fast tight tuck, and opened up—

I gasped. Andrea did too.

Jackie's face met the board. She didn't skim her forehead. Her entire face smashed into the board, flat down. The board bent under the pressure and lobbed Jackie off, in an arc, blood sputtering off her face like a summer sprinkler. She landed on her back, the water swallowing her and blooming red.

It felt as if I had wished this on her, as if my imaginings had been that powerful. And yet, that wasn't why I felt so guilty. No, the guilt came with the sweet giddy relief, the weightless tingly sense of good fortune. Now I wouldn't have to do the reverse. Maybe tomorrow, but not today.

"Call 9-1-1!" Andrea shouted as she ran and dove into the water. She surfaced with Jackie and sidestroked back with her under her arm. Jackie fumbled for the steel ladder—at least she was conscious. After managing to climb a rung, Jackie stopped, opened her mouth, and the blood waterfalled out. All of her ugly teeth were gone.

A lifeguard pressed a towel against Jackie's mouth, while another lifeguard, wrapping a towel around her shoulders, said, "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay."

"An ambulance is on the way," came a cry from across the pool.

Everyone stood and watched from the deck, the one-metre boards, the three-metres, the seven, and the ten, as the lifeguards escorted Jackie out.

### 4:14

"Okay, your reverse," Andrea said, towelling off her hair.

I widened my eyes at her.

The rest of the divers, after respectfully waiting for Jackie to disappear into the locker room, had gone back to work. The blood had dissipated into the giant pool, been disinfected by the chlorine. The place was loud again with the thud of boards and the swimming coaches' impatient whistles.

Andrea said, "If you don't do it now, you'll never do it. It's a falling off the horse sort of thing."

Louganis after Chalibashvili.

This had become an even bigger test of my heroism.

"Go on," Andrea said. "The longer you wait, the scarier it's going to be."

I turned from Andrea and walked toward the board. I climbed its ladder with my heart pounding hard and fast. No urge to pee. I hardly felt my body. Only the thudding heart. How was I going to control my body if I couldn't feel it?

"Hey!" Andrea said, approaching the side of the board with her hands held high, making a triangle with her thumbs and forefingers.

I made the same triangle but upside-down, and we brought our triangles together.

She said, "Star of David! Powers activate!"

Andrea forced me to do this ritual she had invented every time I was attempting a new or difficult dive. Was she laughing at my being a Jew? Maybe a little. But mostly, I think, she was trying to give me a laugh and wish me good luck. Whenever she said it, I thought of this gold pendant Dad used to wear, a rather large, slanted Star of David that nestled in his chest hair while we played in the swimming pools of Daytona. My favourite game was "The Rocket," where Dad would crouch underwater and I would climb onto his shoulders and he would spring up and I would go rocketing into the air. That was back when I wore a Wonder Woman swimsuit and Mom still had hair, dyed-red, carefully curled hair, which is why she would only wade around in the shallow end, careful to keep her head above the water and out of the way of The Rocket. But I always assumed she was watching me soar into the air, thinking, My daughter, such a daredevil!

Andrea stepped back. I took my position in the middle of the board. I brought my feet together, straightened my back, and lowered my hands by my sides.

#### 4:16

"ONE!" shouted Andrea when minutes later I was still standing in place.

I didn't turn to look at her. I stayed in position, eyes forward, but she haunted my peripheral vision with her hands cupped around her mouth.

"TWO! If I get to ten and you still haven't done it, that's it! You're done!"

What was she doing? How was I supposed to concentrate with her yelling like that?

"THREE!"

Her voice boomed everything else into silence. The thud of the boards ceased again. I tried not to look, but my eyes leapt about against my will. Everyone, the Olympic hopefuls and medalists, the other coaches, the newbies who were



far better than me now, had all stopped to watch. Even a few swimmers had gathered to the right of my board.

“FOUR!”

You have to do this, I thought. You have to do it. Do it.

“FIVE!”

The doughnut. What? Why the doughnut now!

“SIX!”

I knew what those great athletes meant by not thinking, I really did. Once I had been able to do it, to simply be, simply move, trust, trust that things were going to be fine, better than fine, good, perfect, but now I couldn't get my mind to shut up to shut up to shut up just shut up and go go go

“SEVEN!”

Go go go go go go go go

“EIGHT!”

Oh my god, oh my god, I'm going. I'm going! Look, my bare foot taking the first step.

“NINE!”

The second step, oh oh am I really doing this, the third step, I'm still not sure, I'm jumping onto both feet at the end of the board, bending my legs, and—

There I remained. Frozen. On bent knees. The very picture of a cower.

Andrea didn't bother with “Ten.” Everyone watched as I straightened my legs, but not my shoulders, turned around, and made my way back down the board.

Andrea shook her head. “Go pack your stuff.”

#### 4:33

Alone in the communal showers, under a jet of hot water, I stood for a long time, half hoping Andrea would come and tell me that it was okay, she was just trying to play hard ball, I was still on the team, and half hoping I would never lay eyes on her again. It dawned on me that I was in the middle of a second test, that Andrea was out there right now, standing by the board, waiting to see if I would come back and beg for a second chance to prove myself.

#### 5:00

Out in the foyer, Theresa looked up from her paperback copy of *Cujo*.

She asked, “Did you do it?”

I shook my head. My backpack was filled with all the things I wouldn't be needing anymore: Ultraswim shampoo, the shammy, the swimsuit with the iron-on windmill.

“Good,” Theresa said, slipping her arm through mine.

I shoved her arm away and pushed through the glass doors into the wintery night. Since it was considered nerdy to acknowledge the cold, neither one of us wore hats, mitts, or boots, just acid-wash jean jackets, Theresa's hanging off her shoulders, and Converse high-tops. In seconds my wet hair would harden into

Medusa-like icicles.

The sidewalk in front of the building was lined with cars, parents waiting in the drivers' seats, headlights on. My mom's face used to wait for me behind the windshield of an old boxy white Buick—her high, plump cheeks, thin lips, green angora beret over her red hair, black winged eyeliner magnifying her already big, black eyes. I could always tell when her eyes caught sight of me coming toward the car. She didn't smile or wave, but she just looked happier, reanimated, as she turned the key in the ignition. I would climb into the heated Buick and Billy Joel would sing us down Saint John's Boulevard, past the big shopping centre and fast food huts. If we didn't pick up Harvey's or McDonald's on the way home, she would make a huge bowl of her chunky french fries with the skins still on, which I would soak in salt and vinegar and eat sitting on the brown carpet behind the coffee table, watching *Today's Special*, followed by *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, *Cheers*, *Night Court*. There were no quotas on TV in our house.

And it hits me, not then, but today, thirty years later. Thirty years too late. I'm lying on my side in bed, my husband asleep behind me, and I'm nodding off after a day spent writing out this memory—the reverse, the reverse—when my eyes pop open. I clutch the comforter and stare into the darkness of the bedroom, a dark bedroom in New York City, so far away from there, from then, from that autumn morning Mom stood in the sunlit foyer in her red velvet housecoat and, watching me put on my jean jacket, asked whether I was planning to go to Theresa's again after diving. Mom probably no longer filled out the red housecoat; it probably hung on hunched, bony shoulders. She probably no longer filled out her face, but I can't say for sure because I wouldn't look at her face, at those harrowed black eyes. She said, "I don't like it. All you eat there are microwaved hotdogs," as I walked out the door. No wonder those words wouldn't go away. How could I have been so slow? Knowing she had only a few months left with her daughter, Mom was saying, hey, instead of going to Theresa's every night, I would really like it if you came home. But she couldn't say that, knowing the whole reason I wasn't coming home was because she was there, dying.

Theresa said, "Hey, Jess. You have no reason to be mad at me. I didn't do anything. I didn't kick you off the team."

Theresa was right, so I nodded, but I still couldn't look at her. We crossed the snowy parking lot, its streetlamps throwing small circles of light on the compacted snow. Empty white spotlights. The grief was breathtaking. Not for Mom yet, but for me.

I was gone.