

CHAPTER 1:
A SNAPSHOT

1.

“A slimy film of vinegar that coats your throat and seeps into your lungs, where it turns into millions of gnat-like insects that burrow deep into your tissue and gnaw at your bronchioles,” Mary says. “Then the rush hits—20 years clean and I still know what it feels like to smoke heroin.”

I slam the last key that finishes Mary’s sentence into my keyboard.

A decent way to end the scene, I think.

My lungs, clear of gnats and vinegar, fill with a large breath. I run my hands through the unwashed hair I haven’t lost yet and exhale. The date and time blink at me from the corner of the computer screen: December 30th, 2023, 12:07pm.

My phone is on silent. I grab it and see that my agent, Chuck, has called 12 times. I lean my elbows onto the thick varnished wood of my desk to brace myself and call back.

I wish I didn’t care so much about this, I think.

2.

“Congrats,” Chuck says, answering after one ring, “you’re an Oscar-nominated screenwriter.”

My eyes fall shut. A sound leaves my mouth; I’m not sure if it was a sentence made up of words, but it registers with Chuck as a response.

“You got the nom for ‘Best Original Screenplay,’” he continues, “AND Franco got ‘Best Actor,’ AND”—I cut him off. He obliges, reluctantly, when I apologize and ask for a moment.

After I hang up, I walk across the epoxied cement floor to the northeasternmost corner of the loft, and look out through the ceiling-high casement windows at

downtown LA's various architectural facades. Traffic zooming by on the street below, pedestrians dawdling about, and other sounds of the city jingle in the background.

I force a smile, but the tears rule the day. A violent rush of memories rips into my skull, and pounds at my mind like an avalanche, carrying three years worth of pain, hard work, and sacrifice that flash before my eyes in a loud millisecond, then—

Snap.

Back in the moment, I remind myself to enjoy this. I wipe the tears, regain my composure, walk back to my desk, and call Erika.

“We did it,” I say.

She screams through the phone with excitement. After a congratulatory beat, there's a sweet silence.

“Listen to me, Michael,” she says, “you deserve this.”

A knot free falls from my throat as I swallow, into what feels like an empty space in my torso where a stomach should be.

“I know,” I say. And I mean it.

CHAPTER 2: HEALTH & WELLNESS

1.

My yoga mat slaps the floor. I start to stretch my legs out in preparation for a jog. As I bend my right knee to push my hip forward, I glance at the kitchen countertop and see a package of aluminum foil on the surface. I scowl.

2.

Before Erika woke up today, I took her scruffy grey-haired terrier, Kelly, and my blubbery English Bulldog, Douglass, out for a walk. The two very antisocial dogs have now become so attached since Erika moved in, that they sleep in the same bed, and whine when one goes anywhere without the other. After I tugged their panting mouths along with me to grab coffee, I picked up a bouquet of fresh roses still covered in morning dew—the plan being to surprise Erika with the gift of one less chore to do, plus the flowers, over a homemade breakfast spread.

The dogs barreled through the door of the apartment when we returned. Erika was at a mirror clipping in a pair of gold earrings that meshed well with her bronze skin (and, I noticed, weren't the ones I'd bought for her birthday).

"The pearls are too dressy for the office, babe," she said, reading me perfectly, as always.

She fluffed the tight bangs of her light-brown hair, then walked over to me while pulling on her favorite black shawl.

"Flowers and a coconut milk latte for you," I said.

She grabbed them both, and placed the bouquet on the table.

"No time for breakfast?" I asked.

"Not a minute to spare."

Latte in hand, she clutched her purse and headed towards the door. I pulled my cast iron pan from the cupboard, feeling oddly rejected. As she slipped her heels on, I noticed the package of aluminum foil out on the countertop.

“Always leaving shit out,” I said, grabbing the box and turning to shake it punitively in her direction as a joke. “And how is it always the foil?”

She drifted back over to me, squinted her eyes, and sucked at the latte in her right hand. Then, she raised her left hand as if to caress my cheek, when... BAM! She slammed shut the cupboard I’d just opened.

“You work on closing these cupboards,” she said without looking away. She brought her face within an inch of mine, and her sweet post-brush breath floated onto my skin as she whispered, “I’ll work on keeping the counters nice and clean.”

She kissed me, then smirked as she quickly pulled away.

“Not a minute to spare?” I said, fighting the urge to rip off her skirt and make love to her right there on the counter.

“I’ll make it up to you,” she said, walking towards the door to leave, “and you have more important things to worry about today besides foil. Call me as soon as you find out, okay? And don’t forget, dinner is at Il Fornaio at 6pm—don’t be late, I have a surprise for you. And if you go on a jog please don’t overdo it, Michael. I’m serious.”

3.

Two promises you made her, I think to myself now, as I walk through a park on the outskirts of town (aka Chinatown) shaking out my limbs. It’s a chilly and overcast afternoon which means I should have worn leggings, and that the only people out on the track are the most dedicated of runners.

“Don’t be late, and don’t overdo it,” I whisper out loud.

I begin to jog at a light speed. Three years ago I committed to a daily exercise routine regardless of how busy life gets. Today is no exception. After I write, I run, and with a good chunk of words under my belt, now’s the time to let my brain unwind. I check my watch.

Five minutes in.

A full lap around the track completed. My legs pick up the pace. It’s taken a while, but they no longer go numb. My right hip was so badly impinged a few years ago, that just a brisk walk put my entire leg to sleep. Now, thanks to years of grueling physical therapy, I can jog again. And I don’t intend to take that for granted.

Ten minutes in.

I wheeze.

Since today is a day of achievement, I think, then I would also like to break my personal jogging record of 10 laps around the track in an hour; the eggy ribbons of tagliatelle pasta covered in slow-simmered beef ragu I’ll eat tonight at Il Fornaio will work as a motivator.

20 minutes in.

Another lap complete. That’s four. Running a flat track like this is different from pushing against the rough terrain of a trail, a practice I’ve included in my workout regimen these days. I notice my breath—it comes in short pulses. My legs are light now, and the right one has started an adiabatic wobble.

You’re fine, I think, and check my watch.

40 minutes in.

My friend Andrew saw a picture of me shirtless on the beach and asked if I would be his personal trainer last year. I told him no, of course. Even though I was in decent shape, I was still working through my battle with food. Depression and ADHD medication put me through bouts of

anorexia, with my bones poking through my skin in response.

Shit, that's only seven laps, I think as I speed up, feeling a tight pinch in my right hip.

Eating disorders are nasty. Your mind is held hostage by your most basic need: hunger. I read once that, in Jungian theory, self-inflicted harm by way of anorexia represents a projection of existential angst onto food. Facing that struggle head-on was one of the best things I've ever done. Now I stick to a healthy diet that's not too restrictive, and allow myself time to let go on weekends—

10 minutes to go.

There's something in my hip grasping for a connection it's not making, and whatever misaligned body parts that are jiggling around in there are screaming.

Two laps left...

I have to pick up the pace if I'm gonna beat my record.

My body pulses forward. I think about scarfing down a greasy piece of cheese pizza, licking at a sweet scoop of strawberry shortcake ice cream, and chomping into the doughy bun of a buttery burger that I chase down with crispy french fries. These are the usual suspects during my weekend feasts; their images almost take my mind off the blood pumping into my hip.

5 minutes left...

Starved.

That's what I was a few years ago. At my worst I went two days without food, which isn't so bad as far as anorexia goes, but my therapist has helped me see that I minimize the problem to justify my actions. The cells in my body felt the same way then as they do now: like a hungry orphan falling onto the steps of a church begging for sustenance.

My hips growl and my stomach aches, my writer's mind thinks, or is it—

I see the end of the track. I break out into an endorphin-funded dash. My joints grate against their sockets. Cold sweat bleeds into my eyes. My lower back feels like a cyst ready to burst. And I'm starved. I'll eat tonight. My commitment to eating better comes with a clause: don't overdo it—

TIME!

An hour passed. My respiratory system goes into crisis mode as I slow myself down. I try to count through heavens. My last lap completed was... 11! Success!

I almost feel this a much greater accomplishment than the Oscar nomination somehow, so I put my arms in the air and gloat to no one but an old man in a tracksuit. He smiles, because he "gets it," then goes about his undoubtedly more mature life.

I make my way towards the car, my legs wavering with each step, and click the key fob to unlock it, when... BAM!

Something in my hip snaps and I fall.

The open car door is my savior. I grab it before I'm on the floor. I maneuver myself into the driver's seat and look down at my leg. It's red hot and twitching uncontrollably.