

ONE

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APRIL

MY BEST FRIEND Danny Fleck is convinced that I'm the messiah of competitive eating. He tells me I'm the long-awaited American gorger who will dethrone Yoshimi Takahashi, the Japanese wonder who has won the Nathan's Famous International July Fourth Hot Dog Eating Contest the past seven years. Danny's current goal in life is to somehow get me to travel to Coney Island this Independence Day to share the stage with the nineteen

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greatest professional eaters on the planet and shock the world by bringing the International Mustard Belt (yes, there is such a thing) back home to America. There are numerous reasons why his dream will never become reality, but as I sit at the dusty kitchen table of his filthy second-floor apartment on this early spring evening, I soon realize he refuses to give up hope.

At six feet two and a jiggly three hundred pounds, Danny has some trouble squeezing his wide frame into the narrow chair across from me, but once in position he places his laptop in the middle of the table so that we can both view the grimy, fingerprinted screen. Then he lights two cigarettes, opens two bottles of Pabst with his teeth, and hands me one of each. The apartment smells like dirty laundry and smoke. Sitting there in his white tank top and khaki cutoffs, Danny Fleck flashes a disturbing smile and quickly finds the website he's looking for.

I hear the sounds of the Detroit Tigers from the living room, the team coasting to an easy win against the Blue Jays. Problem is I can't see the TV because Baghdad Bill, Danny's psycho roommate and proud Iraq War veteran, has moved a decaying brown recliner directly in front of the screen, leaving me with an unpleasant view of a patchwork of blue veins protruding from the back of his shaved head. Regardless, one doesn't confront Baghdad Bill about his seating arrangement. Actually, one doesn't confront Baghdad Bill about *anything*. However, I do find it odd that Bill is home right now. He rarely associates with us on Saturday evenings, preferring instead to get drunk with his war buddies and end the night at a target range on Woodward.

"They finally updated it," Danny says, raking his long,

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greasy brown bangs away from his eyes as he studies the laptop screen.

“Who updated what?”

Danny gives me a look and exhales smoke out of the corner of his mouth. “The ICEA,” he says, pointing at the screen. “The International Competitive Eating Alliance. This is their new site. I’ve been waiting a long time for this day. It’s like following some obscure band for years and rejoicing when they finally hit the big time. Competitive eating is the fastest growing sport in the world, Spinks. Do you know how happy that makes me?”

“You must be in heaven.” I take a lengthy pull of beer and roll my eyes.

“Hey, come on,” Danny says, tapping the table with his meaty palm. “Indulge me here, okay? I’m telling you, the way you eat, with a little training I think you could compete with these guys...well, and girls. There’s that one Asian chick I’ve told you about. Dae Moon. She’s surprisingly skinny and amazingly hot.”

I nod, feigning interest. Truth is I’ve always had a disproportionately huge appetite for a man my size (five-eleven, one seventy), but I can’t stand sloppy eaters, and competitive eating is the most disgusting “sport” on the planet. Over the past few months, Danny’s tried showing me dozens of videos of various eating competitions (meatballs, French fries, pizza, doughnuts, and, of course, hot dogs), and, yes, the “sport” is growing. He tells me competitors are carefully crafting their professional personas much like professional wrestlers do, giving themselves nicknames and even maintaining their own websites. But personally, as a spectator, I can’t take more than two minutes of watching these mostly fat men

further destroy their bodies by shoving ungodly amounts of unhealthy food into their mouths. It might all be a bit more acceptable if they at least used cutlery. Instead, they grab the food with their hands and shovel it in like human bulldozers. By the end of each contest, the eaters' faces and shirts are a filthy, nauseating mess of food particles, sauces, and condiments, and the table they eat at looks as if an F5 tornado came through and wiped out the world's largest buffet.

"Keep it down, freaks," Baghdad Bill yells from the comfort of his recliner. "It's the ninth inning over here."

"This is a promo highlighting last year's circuit," Danny continues, ignoring his roommate. "Most of it's ESPN footage from the Nathan's contest. I'm sick of watching Takahashi break his own record year after year in Brooklyn on The Fourth. I mean, it's kind of un-American, don't you think, a Japanese guy dominating a uniquely American food on a day commemorating American independence?"

"Sounds like something my dad would say."

"It's torture is what it is." He takes a deep breath and drains half of his beer in one gulp. "I know you become physically ill whenever I show you this stuff, but this one's different. I want you to watch this promo with an open mind, okay? Don't say a word, don't run out of the room, and don't puke on the table. Bill will shoot us both. Just watch and give it a chance." He pauses. "Picture yourself as the one thing I know you will soon be."

"Which is?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

His eyes light up like blowtorches. Danny Fleck points at me from across the table and says, "Spinks Webb, you might not realize it yet, but you are destined to become

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the greatest competitive eater in the history of the world. That's how much talent I think you have."

"I said keep it down in there," Baghdad Bill shouts, louder this time, followed by a series of hacking coughs that make his head turn an eerie shade of purple.

Danny winces. "Sorry, Bill, won't happen again." Then he points to the laptop and clicks the play button.

"Why's Bill wearing a wrestling singlet?" I whisper through cupped hands.

Danny presses pause and whispers, "Beats me, but he's getting weirder every day. Yesterday he told me he killed at least five of Saddam's look-alikes during a raid in '03. He's never said stuff like that before. And get this. He's usually really careful with his steroid stash, always keeps it locked inside his closet, right? Well, now he just leaves the stuff in plain view on his dresser. I'm finding needles in the bathroom, like, once a week."

"Last warning, civilians," Bill yells.

Danny flinches and nearly knocks over his beer bottle. "Jesus, Bill. Sorry, okay?"

Bill says nothing, but his scalp turns from purple to red, a human mood ring. The veins throb like a series of rushing rivers. His head now resembles a highly volcanic planet. I decide not to mention any of this to Danny.

Danny presses play and signals for me to be quiet. "Watch and learn," he whispers. "You'll be competing against these people sooner or later."

I pretend to watch, but in reality I'm looking slightly to the left of the screen, focusing instead on one of four walls stained yellow from years of smoke. Danny's so engrossed with the highlight video that he fails to detect my lack of interest, so I simply follow his lead, laughing when he

laughs, grunting when he grunts, and so on. I tune out the obnoxious announcer and accompanying music by listening to the baseball game.

The video lasts sixty seconds. I fail to view a single frame. When it's over, Danny taps my forearm. "Well, what did you think?" His smile is as wide as I've ever seen it.

"It was interesting," I say. "Not bad."

"Pumps you up, doesn't it? Makes you feel like Rocky."

"I guess."

"That's what I've been waiting to hear!" Danny stands and claps his hands together once. The table shakes. Somebody from the apartment below raps on the ceiling. "I knew you'd come around, Spinks. This is great. I have a surprise for you." He turns and enters the narrow kitchen, where he opens the refrigerator and reaches inside. Baghdad Bill mutes the TV and stubs out his cigarette in an ashtray.

That's when the unmistakable sulfuric smell of peeled hard-boiled eggs, one of my favorite foods, emanates from the fridge and fills my nostrils, causing me to look back toward Danny, who walks toward me with a clear glass bowl full of at least a dozen soft white eggs. My stomach rumbles. Saliva coats the inside of my mouth like paint.

"Welcome to your first official training session," Danny says, sliding back into his chair and pushing the bowl toward me. "At least give it a shot, Spinks. I made your favorite. Try and fail, but don't fail to try."

"And what is it you want me to do exactly?"

"That's it," Baghdad Bill screams. He props himself out of the recliner and walks toward me, a menacing sculpture of steroid-enhanced human flesh stuck inside a

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camouflage wrestling singlet made for a much smaller man. He reminds me of Mr. Clean having a roid rage in spandex. “Danny wants you to speed-eat the eggs, idiot. Why the hell else do you think I’m sitting home on a Saturday night? All he keeps talking about is how much you can eat.” He hovers over me and wags a tobacco-stained finger in my face. “So start eating, little man.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Liar,” Danny says. “You haven’t eaten since lunch. You said so yourself when you walked in.”

“He’s right,” Bill says.

Gazing up and maintaining eye contact with a muscular man wearing a wrestling singlet is not an easy thing to do. However, I force myself to do so, saying to Bill, “What’s it to you if I can eat fast, anyway?”

Bill and Danny exchange looks. Then Bill says, “Not much, really. But I have a bet with Danny. I say you’ll always be a complete, no-talent loser. But Danny here claims you have a skill that will finally get you out of Westland and take your mind off of that Penny girl.”

I glare at Danny. “You’re betting on my ability to become a competitive eater?”

Danny shrugs. “Just trying to help you discover yourself.”

Baghdad Bill says, “So eat the eggs, toothpick, or I’ll put you in a full nelson you’ll never forget.” He slaps his broad shoulders with his palms and crouches, ready to grapple.

Danny says, “Do it, Spinks. See what you’re made of. Picture yourself beating Takahashi and wearing the Mustard Belt at Nathan’s on The Fourth. ESPN will love you. America will love you.”

There's a silence.

"I guess I have no choice," I finally say, eyeing Baghdad Bill, who looks more than ready to put me into a submission hold.

I shake my head, grab two eggs, and stuff one inside of each cheek. Then I bite down hard, breaking each egg in half and enjoying the taste of the dry yolks as they crumble and join the soft whites on a rapid journey down my esophagus. After a quick swig of PBR to wash down any flecks of yellow and white that might remain, I grab two more eggs and shove them in, repeating the process.

Danny looks at his watch. "There you go, Spinks! That's four in less than a minute. Keep it up, big guy." He gives Bill a look. "Told you he was for real."

"Anybody can down four eggs, Fleck," Bill says. "Especially a lard-ass like you." To me: "Keep it moving, Webb. I have places to be."

I reach for eggs five and six and shove them into my mouth, slamming my molars through the center of each, only this time I struggle to get the slimy yellow and white wad down my throat. I close my eyes and make a pained face. Then I place my palms over my stomach and lean back in my chair.

"Dude, you okay?" Danny asks.

I open my eyes and swallow hard, getting the last of the meal down. "I think so, but I can't eat another bite." Danny looks defeated. I raise my eyebrows and shrug. "Sorry, man. I know I can eat a lot, but I have to take my time. I don't know how guys like Takahashi do it."

"Told you he was an amateur," Bill says. "How's he supposed to down seventy hot dogs in ten minutes if he can barely eat six eggs in two?"

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“Seventy hot dogs in ten minutes?” I ask. “Is that the record?”

Danny nods. “Yoshimi Takahashi. Sometimes I wonder if he’s even human. Okay, Bill, as much as it pains me to say this. You win.” He reaches for the bowl and cradles it in his left arm. Then he digs into his front pocket and tosses a twenty to Bill, who snags it in mid-air.

“Guys, I don’t feel so hot.” I stand and maneuver around the hulking Baghdad Bill, careful to avoid physical contact. “See you tomorrow, Danny.”

“Later,” he calls from the kitchen. “I’m not giving up on you, Spinks. I still think we can develop your skills. You’ll be there on The Fourth. You can hang, man. I’m telling you. You can hang.”

“Yeah,” Bill says and laughs. “You can hang with all the other losers in this city. Good luck finding a talent, Webb, because it’s obvious you have none.” He flexes his biceps, both of which bulge into globe-like masses. “Bet you wish you had a pair of these, huh?”

Standing in the open doorway, I turn and say, “Nice outfit, Bill. Where’d you get it, Male Strippers-R-Us?”

I bolt down the stairway and hear Danny’s roaring laughter from the apartment. As I exit the building, Baghdad Bill yells from the top of the stairs: “Yeah, you better run, Webb. I took out five of Saddam’s look-alikes back in ’03, so I sure as hell don’t sweat you.”

I jog to my car and smile, proud of the impromptu acting job I was able to perform this evening, because what neither Danny Fleck nor Baghdad Bill know is that I never felt sick at all. In fact, I could have easily eaten at least ten eggs in less than two minutes. I know this because I’ve done it before, more than once.

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However, the last thing I want to do is give my best friend false hope.