PROLOGUE

The four William Giraldis, circa 1978, in Manville, New Jersey

The illness began with a week of all-around lethargy, how you feel when an influenza first gets into you. Soon the headaches commenced – not the forehead pain you have with dehydration, or a behind-the-eyes throb from reading in muted light, but a panging all along the anterior of my skull. Over the span of several days, the panging migrated into the base of my neck. Then the waves came, whole days of dizziness, followed by a stiffening, a gradual inability to turn my head right or left. A body-wide infection now, something toxic thriving in my blood. About twelve days into this, I blacked out in one of my high school's hallways, slumped against someone's locker. I was fifteen years old that autumn, a sophomore. Friends lifted me from the floor and I woke in the nurse's office, my vision tipped and tinting the world into grays.

Then I was on a bed at my grandparents' house, in a darkened room, unsure how I'd got there or how long it had taken, no longer well enough for fear. A minute or an hour later my father was dashing me across town to a doctor who'd recently opened a private practice. We hadn't had a steady family doctor in years; since my mother had left our family when I was ten, my father, a carpenter, couldn't afford medical coverage. He carried me into the office that afternoon, a boneless waif over his shoulder, this doctor knew right away what was killing me.

'Meningitis' sounded terminal. The doctor instructed my father to take me *directly* to the hospital, and it was his italicized *directly* that convinced me of my coming doom. He himself would hurry there to perform the spinal tap. I'd once seen a horror movie that had a character infected with meningitis, a wretched young woman, her spine stuck to the outside of her skin – she looked fossilized. So I'd soon be dying of a slow and grisly *living* decomposition, rabid unto death. Supine and panting in the backseat en route to the hospital, I asked my father, 'What's a spinal tap?' He said, 'I think they just tap on your spine with a little rubber mallet,' and I didn't realize that he was trying to be funny. Soon I was unconscious again, yet somehow still aware of being suspended in a capsule of fever and hurt.

A spinal tap: a too-large syringe inserted between lumbar vertebrae and into the spinal cord in order to extract the colorless liquid, called cerebrospinal fluid. Meningitis is an infection of that fluid, which causes an inflammation of the membranes, the meninges, that bodyguard the brain and spine. The most common causes are imperial germs called Coxsackie viruses and echoviruses, although herpes and mumps can also bring on the malady. Some of the germs that lead to meningitis can also stir up such infamous problems as tuberculosis and syphilis. Most meningitis targets are children in their first five years of life, but I was fifteen – I could not comprehend what was happening. If you're among the lucky unlucky, you have the viral sort and it will be caught before it causes too much destruction. But if you're among the unlucky unlucky, like the girl in the horror film I remembered, then you have the bacterial sort

that isn't caught soon enough and you end up dead.

Here's how a spinal tap happens when your doctor knows what he's doing: you fetal yourself on the table, knees tight up into your chest. The doctor canvasses your lumbar vertebrae for the best place to harpoon you. He then harpoons you and pulls the plunger to extract the fluid. That's not what happened to me. My doctor-for-a-day pricked and pierced this essential part of me but couldn't extract the fluid. He hadn't told us he was a spinal-tapping virgin, but that's exactly what he was.

I remember looking over at my father, leaned against the heating unit beneath the window, his balding head aslant, his face a mask of stoical consternation, bulky, hirsute arms crossed at his chest in what seemed defiance of this new fact upon me. I imagine he was thinking two things. The second thing was *That looks like it hurts* (and he'd have been right about that), but the first thing was *How am I going to pay for this mess?* It was a good question.

My doctor shot a few more holes into my spine, and that's when my father asked him, 'Why won't it work?'

'I… don't… know,' he said, with those odious pauses between terms.

'You don't know?'

'I just… don't… know.'

And my father said, 'You want me to try it?'

I managed to say no, please, no. He would have handled that needle as if it were a nail, he the hammer, I the lumber. Because he was a master at building things, he sometimes believed he could do anything that took two hands and the right will. His own threshold for suffering was not my own.

He had rare use for doctors, hospitals, aspirin. His stomach did, however, keep Rolaids in business in the years after my mother's abandonment: he'd buy the economy bucket of three hundred wafers and finish it in a month.

My doctor at last surrendered and then talked with some hospital personalities about getting an expert to perform the spinal tap. Benumbed and dim-witted, not fully conscious, I remained on the table with the feeling in my teeth of having just chewed tinfoil. And then – in one hour or two, I couldn't make sense of the clock – in glided the expert. She was a neurologist with the dauntless manner of someone who knows she's an alloy of brilliance and beauty. Dressed in a plaid skirt, white blouse, and heeled shoes, cocoa hair wrapped up in a fist at the rear of her crown, her complexion like typing paper: just seeing her was enough to let me know that I was about to be resurrected.

My father and my failed doctor stood nearby as this neurologist, with the skill of a master who's long been spinal tapping, drew out the fluid everyone needed to see. The feeling that rippled through me when this life juice left my body? An authentic euphoria: my headache fled, my arthritic neck unloosened, my muddy vision cleared. And I thought three short words: *she fixed me*. It felt like love, like an overdue embrace by the maternal revenant.

I sat up then, as out-and-out amazed as I'd ever been in fifteen years, and I inched off the table, feet timidly finding the floor. I grinned at my father because I thought we'd be returning home now, resuming our lives now. I took a solitary step, and, with that dope's grin still stuck to my mouth, I promptly blacked out in a hump at my father's mud-

stippled boots. I'd spend the next two weeks in a hospital bed, everyone vexed as to why my vertigo and murderous head pain would not relent.

I had the viral stamp of meningitis instead of the bacterial, and the doctors insisted this was good news – good news that would sentence me to bed as I got more and more waifish, all angles and knots. Each day a retinue of doctors and attendants filed into my room to examine charts and shake their beards and ponytails at me. They took so much of my blood I suspected they were selling it. They wheeled me up and down those antiseptic hallways for PET scans and CAT scans and other scans that showed them nothing, and there was even talk of another spinal tap until I sobbed them out of that plan.

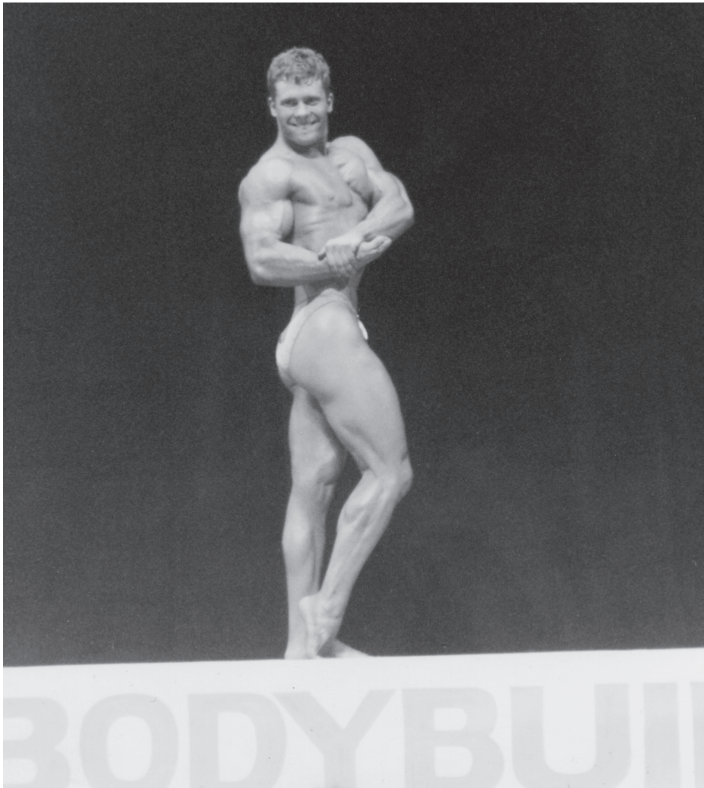
Some pals came to visit, others did not. The news in my high school said that what I had was deadly and contagious both. When I was released two weeks later – uncured, an enigma still – my father left his construction site at lunch time to pick me up. I was 110 pounds. My spinal column still ached in the places I'd been punctured, and my father, specks of sawdust in his forearm hair, said, 'You don't look better even a little.' I wasn't. Another two-week bed sentence awaited me when I got home, and by the time I could stand up without blacking out, it had been more than a month. My grandmother, Parma, was certain that I'd been crippled for life.

After seeing another physician, we were no wiser. Perhaps the persistent vertigo and head pain had been caused by an imbalance of spinal fluid, possibly because my body had been sluggish in producing more after the extraction. Perhaps

it was temporary nerve damage from all the freewheeling needlework. Parma felt livid enough to suggest that we sue the doctor, but the suggestion meant little: she knew that my father wasn't the suing kind. When the hospital bills began their monthly assault on our mailbox, they were the new topic of Parma's anxiety. At my grandparents' house, the nightly dinner conversation was usually freighted with dread of one ilk or another. Parma lived in a constant smog of worry that either my siblings or I would be hit with a disease, my father wouldn't be able to pay the bills, the hospital would seize our house, and we'd be living on the corner in a cardboard box with the local hobo. Somewhere in her bustling imagination, Parma believed that there were agents for the hospital who would raid our house and heave us out onto the lawn.

After my meningitis, my father arranged to send the hospital a hundred dollars a month until the hulking sum was paid off – it took seven years. He kept a list of his payments in a black-and-white composition notebook, and, a decade later, after his violent death in a motorcycle crash, I found the notebook in a blue bin and wept with it there on my lap.

BOOK I



The author, on stage, Point Pleasant, New Jersey, 1994

Youth ends when we perceive that no one wants our
gay abandon. And the end may come in two ways:
the realization that other people dislike it, or that we
ourselves cannot continue with it. Weak men grow older
in the first way, strong men in the second.

– Cesare Pavese

I

Eight months after meningitis, in the late spring of 1990, recently heart-thrashed by my first girlfriend, scrapped for a football star, weighing barely a buck and a quarter, spattered with acne, both earlobes aglitter with silver studs and my hairdo a mullet like a lemur's tail, and here is what happened to me:

In the deadening heat of a May afternoon, stultified by sadness and boredom, I wandered over to my uncle Tony's house and found him weightlifting in the pro-grade gym he'd installed in one half of his cobwebbed basement, AC/DC yawping from a set of speakers. The song? 'Problem Child.' Tony lived across the street from my grandparents, where my father, siblings, and I ate dinner each weeknight, and so I'd known about his gym – he'd built and welded most of it himself – but never had a reason to care about it. Earnestly unjockish, I'd long considered myself the artistic sort. I kept a notebook full of dismal poems, song lyrics, quotes from writers I wanted to remember. My hero was the reptilian rock god Axl Rose. Filthy and skinny, he

looked hepatitic and I thought I should too.

But there in my uncle's basement, my sallow non-physique mocking me from a wall of cracked mirrors, I clutched onto one of the smaller barbells and strained through a round of bicep curls, aping my uncle, who for whatever reason did not laugh or chase me away. And with that barbell in my grip, with blood surging through my slender arms, entire precincts inside me popped to life. Engorged veins pressed against the skin of my tiny biceps, and I rolled up the sleeves of my T-shirt to see them better, to watch their pulsing in the mirror.

Wordlessly I did what my uncle did, trailed him from the barbells to the dumbbells to the pulley machine, trying to keep up, mouthing along to the boisterous lyrics. And in the thirty minutes I spent down there that first day, I had sensations of baptism or birth. Those were thirty minutes during which I'd forgotten to feel even a shard of pity for myself. I didn't know if I was lifting weights the right way, but I knew that I had just been claimed by something holy. I'd return to his basement the following day, and the day after that. I'd return every weekday for two years.

I see it clearly now: I was prompted by more than a need to stave off my melancholy, prompted by forces I couldn't have anticipated or explained. There was the obvious motive, a desperation to alter my twiggy physique, transform it into a monument worthy of my ex-girlfriend's lust, a kind of revenge so important to shafted teenage boys. The footballer for whom she'd ditched me? Just two weeks before I wandered down into my uncle's basement, he'd rammed me against a classroom door, said for me to meet him outside, 'so I can

teach you a lesson,' and I was too shaken to ask him what lesson that might be, since *he* was the thieving scoundrel between us. Of course I didn't meet him outside; he'd have ruined me in a fistfight. He and his pals called me exactly what you'd expect them to call me: *pussy, sissy, faggot.*

There was also the chronic memory of that month-long meningitis, the successful shame of my body's failing, the need to fortress myself with muscle in order to spare my father the high cost of my weakness, to preempt whatever disease might choose me next. But the mightiest motive, the one not entirely apparent to me? To obtain the acceptance of my father and uncles and the imperious grandfather we called 'Pop' – to forge a spot for myself in this family of unapologetic, unforgiving masculinity.

Before we return to that basement and those weights, there are certain essential details you need to know about where and how I was raised, details that will help explain how bodybuilding was for me both impossible and inevitable, and how it developed into an obsession that included brutalizing workouts, anabolic steroids, competitions, an absolute revamping of the self.

My hometown's name, Manville, lets you know precisely what you're getting: pure Jersey. A town of plumbers and masons, pickup trucks and motorcycles, bars, liquor stores, and football fields, diners, churches, and auto repair shops, and a notorious, all-nude strip club once called Frank's Chicken House. Go to central Jersey, ask any working-class guy over thirty about Frank's Chicken House, and he'll point the way: the town of Manville, right off Route 206, fifteen

minutes from the sylvan spread of Princeton, a town straight from the blue notes of a Springsteen song.

Manville was no Princeton. A meager two and a half square miles of low-lying land, the town is bordered by the Raritan River at the north and east. Roughly once a decade, it gets swallowed by an end-times flood. It was named for the Johns-Manville Corporation, which produced asbestos building materials that ravaged the lungs of its many workers. The manufacturing plant, defunct by the time I was a child, sat on Main Street, blocks-long behind rusted fences, vacant but for the spirits of the dead flitting through those empty spaces in search of better air to breathe.

It was one thing to grow up in this blue-collar zip code, and quite another to be raised by men for whom masculinity was not just a way of being but a sacral creed. I've seen photographs of Pop from 1945, sepia shots made more flaxen by time, thick cloth-like rectangles of paper, curled under at the edges. Pop is sixteen years old in these shots, on a jagged rock wall by the bridge, high above the water. He's with his closest pal, Ed Stowe, both in swimming trunks, both heavy with muscle. They are weightlifters, bodybuilders, backyard boxers, and they've come to this rock wall by the river to peacock the results of their training, to flex their suntanned brawn for posterity. Stowe is Thorish, tall, broad, and blond, while Pop has a powerlifter's density. He resembles the era's ideal of muscular, masculine beauty, Steve Reeves, he of the *Hercules* films, one of the first famed American bodybuilders.

Pop and Stowe do indeed look like men in those photos I remember, not teenage boys. Such confidence and well-honed bulk, square faces shaded with stubble, no magenta

sprays of acne. Among his assorted boasts, Pop often recalled shaving in the sixth grade, when the other boys were still tickled by cartoons and waiting for pubic hair. As a teen, Pop had muscle and body hair that let him pass for twice his age, and later they earned him the moniker 'Magilla Gorilla' from one of my crueler boyhood friends.

Pop always spoke of Stowe in a reverential tenor lifted by swells of sorrow. He believed Stowe was part genius, 'ahead of his time' when it came to the particulars of weight training and exercise, nutrition and health. One of Stowe's maverick ideas was that the human body has the ability to cure itself of any illness. It needs neither medicine nor food to recover from whatever malady has attacked it. Sips of water, perhaps a wedge of grapefruit, but otherwise you did not burn the body's energy sources on digestion and you did not further pollute it with laboratory concoctions. You left the wise body alone and waited while it purged the pathogens. Ed Stowe died of starvation in the Arizona desert where he'd gone to consult some turbanned guru of wellness. 'Ahead of his time' is morosely exact: he leapt forty years into the future, straight into the hole of his grave.

When Pop first told me about Stowe, I was twelve years old, with my best pal at the time, and when we biked off into the Manville gloaming, after Pop finished with his stories of Stowe, my pal asked me, 'Did you see your grandfather got tears in his eyes when he was telling us about that guy?'

'Bullshit,' I said. 'No way.'

'There was a tear,' he said. 'I saw it.'

And I said, 'Pop doesn't *have* tears.'

One of my earliest memories of Pop, circa 1978, when

I was three: he cable-tied a one-foot rubber doll of the Incredible Hulk to the grille of his pickup truck. He'd drive around Manville with this green doll scouting the way, and whenever he stopped at our house to visit, he'd exit his truck with the Hulk's dramatic growl and upper-body flexing.

But it was Spider-Man for me. Not Superman and not the Incredible Hulk, those mesomorphic wall-punchers leaving messes of people and property. There was a finesse to Spider-Man, such sleekness and stealth. That liberating mask was the clincher; you could see the faces of Superman and the Hulk, and I thought that a woeful disadvantage. The Spider-Man of the late '70s barely had a bulge anywhere under his fitted suit, even where he couldn't have helped but to have one. Unmuscled, he immobilized foes without harming them, and that seemed to me, at three years old, a noble thing.

Children are natural obsessives. For a month I'd been wearing Spider-Man pajamas throughout the day and making web-shot sounds, my wrists aimed at relatives. To reward this obsession, my family arranged for someone to costume himself as Spider-Man and come to our house. When from our front walkway I saw him approach me in an unwise amble I mistook for menace, I wept and howled and frantically climbed up my father. This must have been disappointing; I was no brave little boy.

Later that year I was in an operating room about to be anesthetized, about to have tubes inserted into my ears. My canals weren't draining; my family had thought I was disobedient but I was just deaf. The doctor asked me this asinine question: 'Would you like a needle, or would you like to blow up a balloon?' and I answered as any child would.

This duplicitous doctor then set a black mask over my face – I remember it descending like night – and four cool hands staked me to the table by my ankles and wrists. Just before the gas unleashed its sleep, I strained to snap free, and my thought was not of Spider-Man web-whirling through the heights of a metropolis, but of Pop, of that great green beast called Hulk.

Pop and my father and two uncles admired weightlifters and footballers, wrestlers and boxers, lumberjacks, hunters, woodsmen. Celebrants of risk, they valued muscles, motorcycles, the dignified endurance of pain. Their Homeric standards of manhood divvied men into the heroic or the cowardly, with scant space for gradation. Heroes were immortalized in song, cowards promptly forgotten. This wouldn't have been an issue growing up except that I wasn't like them. I was made of other molecules, of what felt like lesser stuff. As the firstborn son, as the fourth William Giraldi, the pressures were always there, the sense of masculine expectation always acute. But I was the bearer of patrilineal traditions in name only, insufficiently macho and no doubt under suspicion as a potential pansy.

In his 'Calamus' sequence, Whitman is 'resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment.' This is a tale of men because my mother left us when I was ten years old, and so our upbringing fell solely to my father and his family. I realized what was happening between my parents about a year earlier. Lying on my bed one night, in the sudden dark of autumn, the deadened limbo of Sunday evening, I listened to my parents quarreling downstairs. Their voices floated up to me as if from a television set in a closed room; I could

make out just the occasional word, sometimes a phrase or clause. But the individual words didn't matter; their tone conveyed it all. Disturbances were coming.

When the voices stopped after an hour, and when I heard the door to my parents' bedroom click shut, I slid from bed, crept downstairs to see what clues I could find left over from their quarrel. There, in the dark of our kitchen, lit only by the weak bulb above the stove, my father sagged in a stool at the counter. At first I didn't notice him there, but then he said my name, and I went to him, feeling caught at something, caught *in* something, but I couldn't say what, couldn't identify the new web in which he and I were now stuck.

Unsure of how the separation would play out, this is what he said to me: 'No matter what happens, I'll always be your father.' The following year my mother would be gone, and without balking my father would fill both roles. There is a tale to tell about my mother, too, I know, and perhaps one day I will earn the mercy to tell it, but she is absent from these pages because she was largely absent from our lives, and that absence helped to place me in the hard clamp of the paternal.

Tony brought me to my first bodybuilding show just after my parents' divorce, when I was too young to assimilate the spectacle or understand why it mattered. Sitting in that auditorium, encircled by muscle, by a wall of aftershave, I felt the breath of panic on me, the prelude to a raid of anxiety. I told Tony I needed the bathroom, thinking that he'd let me go alone, that I could take several minutes to shake off whatever was attacking me. A ten-year-old, it seems, can be unmanned among the manly. Instead, I pulled him away

from the best part of the show and stood uselessly at the urinal while he leaned against a sink, looking at his watch.

This was when the men of my family still thought it possible that I might evolve into an athletic worthy, maybe a soldier, someone more daringly masculine than what I showed signs of becoming.

There's something else you should know at this point: all through my childhood and adolescence, I had a literary quest under way in hiding, a counterlife carried out quietly on my own, at libraries or at yard sales, whole grocery bags of paperbacks for a dollar. My family didn't have any regard for literature, for the pursuits of language, and was never timid in letting that be known. When Pop once spotted me with a paperback of Poe's poetry, he said, 'I got a poem for ya: Bart Bart laid a fart,' and his chortle sucked all the air out of the kitchen. Physicality mattered; the rest was wasteful. So I cannot fully account for how my draw to literature was possible in a household that was not just unliterary but nonliterary, one in which poems and plays were considered ravingly femme.

A maternal uncle seldom seen – contentedly unmasculine, a committed bachelor, everything about him contrary to the Giraldi male, his apartment an asylum of art books, journalism, Steve Martin records – sometimes brought me to the Manville library when I was a boy of seven or eight. He'd noticed my interest in the Greek god Pan; I'd been detecting it in the trees and weeds, its silhouette at the rear of our property, in the shrubs behind our garage, its flute, horns, and hooves. This uncle led me in researching the

agglomerate of Greek gods and goddesses, and it was there at the Manville library, in its squat beige-brick structure at the center of town – I've never forgotten that air-conditioned scent of books, the brew of old leather and new paper – that I found *The Iliad,* a shortened version with ink drawings of those androgen-loaded heroes, their developed muscularity and pronounced thoracic arches.

Later, on Monday and Wednesday nights in winter, the seventh and eighth graders met for basketball practice in our Catholic school's gymnasium. Short and slight for a seventh grader, with no chance at all of succeeding at the sport, I was nevertheless stupefied by the acrobatics of Michael Jordan: he seemed a celestial vision, a beauty made, not born. Pop had erected a hoop above the garage to help me out, and even rigged a floodlight to a pole so my pals and I could practice after the early dark of December, the neighborhood night alive with the crisp thudding of the ball against concrete.

My father never said as much, but he must have considered my basketballing aspirations a bit deranged. Uninterested in the overt masculinity of football or wrestling, trying to conceal an effeminate bookishness, I must have thought that basketball would let me pass as an athlete. I spent most of our team's Saturday morning games where I belonged: on the bench, tying and retying the laces of my unscuffed sneakers.

Once a year for a week, a book fair arrived at our school, wheeled stalls set up in a recessed part of the hallway. The nuns gave us several minutes each day at the stalls, but I never had the money for books, never felt my father could spare the ten bucks, and so I never asked him. From the

way Parma fretted over my father's debts, beggary seemed always about to descend on us. On the nights of basketball practice during the week of the book fair, while the taller players echoed and squeaked across the waxed maple of the gymnasium, I snuck down the darkened stairwell to the rolling steel gate that blocked me from the main section of the school. The book stalls were there, lit only by the scarlet glow of the exit signs – my red-light district – and if I yanked up the one damaged side of the gate, I could crawl beneath it and cat-burgle the books I wanted.

Loading my duffel bag with illustrated, abbreviated versions of Poe and Verne, and glossy paperbacks of Greek myths and North American legends, didn't feel at all like thievery to me. It felt like a private and mandatory search for self: private because I couldn't share it with my family (and because the ardent interiority of reading is by definition a private endeavor), and mandatory because I'd somehow, against my social class and family ethos, begun to understand that within the dimensions and dynamism of language lay not just a balm for confusion or curiosity, but some form of deliverance for me. A religion more vibrant and sanative than what I was being sold by the Catholic clergy six days a week.

The convent sat adjacent to our school, and the nuns would sometimes corral seventh- and eighth-grade boys to lug a bureau, or ascend into the attic to retrieve boxes, or brave the damp basement for a ceramic Nativity scene. They once chose me and another boy for such a task, and on the way out I saw, there in the sitting room, sun-dappled by the window, an elderly nun I'd never seen before, her face a road

map of creases and clefts, her posture one of European eons, nun shoes like blocks of black wood. A visitor from Sicily, she sat reading the Gospels aloud to herself in a tongue of some other age, Greek or Latin, I didn't know.

I stayed to listen to this startling rhapsodist, to the opulent prosody of whatever she was saying. I could see that she owned the verses by memory because although the Bible was splayed on her lap, her eyes remained shut for minutes at a stretch. She seemed held as if by some welcomed hex. What was that called, that inner billowing I felt just then at the sound of her verses? Why should I have registered such intimations of joy at what I could not comprehend? But I *could* comprehend it: as a braid of wisdom and beauty. A mystery, a religion that meant poetry, a poetry that meant hope. At eleven years old, I had hope for something, *from* something, I could not begin to articulate. But I understood that it had to do with the intricate rhythms of her language and what those rhythms meant, the spaces into which they were trying to reach. At the beginning of *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene writes, 'There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.' This must have been a moment when the future was making itself known to me, the partial realization that language would become my life.

By the time I reached high school, I'd figured out that my family was wrong about literature, that if books weren't exactly happiness, they were – to employ Stendhal's definition of beauty – the *promise* of happiness. Once in high school, I was lucky with my English teachers, discerning women who registered my interest and nudged me in the right direction:

toward Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor and Vonnegut, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* .

In light of all that, my meningitis at fifteen was an embodiment of my role in the family, of the inner fragility they'd long spotted in me. Not that I was forever sickly, but that I was a weakling always with a book in my hand, an unmasculine and romantically vulnerable softie. The meningitis was a month during which I was at my feeblest, literally unable to stand beneath my own weight, but it was a month that in some ways exemplified my entire life to that point. And so when I wandered down into my uncle's basement that May afternoon, I had a stack of troubles quivering within, including the humiliation of having no mother, a humiliation helped by my father's own shame of not being able to hold onto his wife. I was not wholly conscious of those troubles, but this I knew for certain: I needed to make my own creation myth, to renovate my pathetic vessel into a hero's body.

II

In conscious emulation of Pop when he was young, my uncle Tony got serious about weightlifting in his twenties. Like my father, he'd been a wrestler in high school, then earned a black belt in karate. I can recall the poster of Bruce Lee tacked up in his basement, behind the punching bag and speed bag, the bloody scowl of the great martial artist as he's about to punt an enemy. Tony had always seen himself as too unmuscled (he hadn't inherited Pop's effortless bulk), and so, after wrestling and karate, weightlifting seemed the natural next step for him.

In the 1980s, he trained with some hardcore Jersey bodybuilders – animals who squatted six hundred pounds, the barbells bending across their backs as if they were rubber – at elite bastions of brawn that were more dungeon than gym: cracked mirrors, leaky pipes, buckets for puking, heavy-metal music that rattled your bones. No place for the hausfrau or noodle-limbed executive. Realms of self-torture where the 150-pound dumbbells never needed dusting.

When I joined Tony in his basement that first day, he'd

just begun bodybuilding again after a four-year hiatus, one occasioned by the demands of children, but also by the burnout that came from years of harsh training. To train as he did Monday through Friday, and to do it without the accelerant of steroids, after nine-hour days of a carpenter's toil, the hauling of lumber and pounding of nails, up and down a ladder with hundred-pound stacks of shingles at a noontime hot enough to make tar run, all while he was trying to preserve calories so that his muscles could repair, so that he had enough fuel for another racking session at the gym that day – seven years of that will wipe a man out.

Once my uncle understood that I was committed to bodybuilding, once he realized that I wasn't going to go away – it was summer now and I had little else to do – he accepted me as his partner. We trained together every weekday from three thirty to five o'clock, ninety iron-handed minutes, and he taught me the draconian habits he'd learned at those Jersey gyms in the '80s. Uncles provide boys an avenue of freedom that fathers never can, a welcome into the saltier, slightly more pernicious arenas of adulthood.

As the middle brother, Tony was quieter than my father, less antic, and compared to my uncle Nicky, he was not as daring. Nicky once rode his two-stroke Rickman dirt bike down the hallway of Manville High School – I'm told it sounded like the apocalypse. It often works out that way: while the oldest brother gets all the independence and the youngest brother gets all the attention, the middle brother, strained between the two, retreats inward. Not strafed by divorce and debt and three kids to manage alone, he was more available than my father.

Five days a week he and I performed an enactment of that old initiation rite, everywhere in myth and fact, of the grown male escorting the adolescent into manhood by way of challenging tasks. This is what our routine looked like, a three-day cycle:

Monday: Chest and triceps. (Four sets, heavy weight, low reps.)
Tuesday: Back and biceps. (Four sets, heavy weight, low reps.)
Wednesday: Shoulders and legs. (Four sets, heavy weight, low reps.)
Thursday: Chest and triceps. (Three sets, lighter weight, higher reps.)
Friday: Back and biceps. (Three sets, lighter weight, higher reps.)
Monday: Shoulders and legs. (Four sets, heavy weight, low reps.)

It took several weeks for me to learn the myriad exercises for each body part, how to train properly, heavy enough without getting hurt. My uncle was more patient than I'd thought possible. During straight-bar bicep curls: 'You gotta widen your grip on the bar. Too narrow like that and all the pressure's on your forearms. You gotta feel it in your bis: squeeze your bis at the top of the rep. Don't swing the bar, either. Bend your knees half an inch, arch your back.'

During squats: 'Don't go down so far or you won't be able to get back up. You want your hamstrings about parallel with the floor, maybe just an inch deeper. Don't lean forward,

either, or you'll fall over. Stay straight up and down. Keep your head up or you'll fall forward. Keep the bar across your shoulders, not on the back of your neck.'

During bench presses: 'That grip is too wide. You see the grooves here in the bar? Line up your grip in those grooves. Too wide like that and you're not working the center of your chest, you're working your armpits. You want muscular armpits?'

During dead lifts: 'You heave the bar from the ground up. Never start with your back or you'll wrench your spine out of place. Start the lift in your feet, your legs, and then unfold with your back, but always an arched back. Head up at the mirror, always head up. A smooth motion, never jerky.'

Near the start of our training together, during a bout of seated dumbbell curls – 'Twist your wrist inward at the top of the rep so the bi *squeezes*' – I performed the first set easily enough with twenty-five-pound weights. When it was time for my second set, I grabbed the twenty-five-pounders again, and Tony said, 'What are you doing?'

We looked at one another in the mirror; he was behind me with a bottle, half water, half orange juice. I said, 'My second set.'

'You just did ten reps no problem with those puny things. You could've done twelve. You wanna grow or not? Get the thirty-pounders.'

And I made the mistake of saying, 'These twenty-five-pounders feel pretty good, though.'

'They feel pretty good, huh? We ain't down here to feel pretty good. We're down here to feel pain. And if you can do ten to twelve reps in any exercise, then the weight ain't high

enough. And if the weight ain't high enough, you ain't ever gonna grow. The aim is six to eight reps. So grab the thirty-pound dumbbells, and if you can do ten reps with those, then grab the thirty-five-pounders. Quit pussyfootin' around.'

Each week mirrors reflected the wizardly transformation: the rounding of my deltoids and pectorals, the filling of my biceps, the pronounced horseshoe of my triceps, a thickening and broadening of my back, trapezius muscles bumping up from both sides at the base of my neck, quadriceps sweeping out from my waist in two directions, hamstrings and calf muscles beginning to protrude. Muscle pounds sticking, strength increasing within my very grip, the graduation from thirty-pound dumbbells to forty-pounders to fifty-pounders, sliding more plates ('wheels' was our name for the largest, the forty-five-pounders) onto the bench press, the shoulder press, squats, straight-bar and preacher-bar curls, spitting and moaning, grunting and goading one another with *come on* and *three more* and *push it out*. It was a partnership of inspiriting pain.

Thursdays and Fridays were often slightly less intense because, if we'd trained heavy enough Monday through Wednesday, each body part would be too sore to be blitzed again. That soreness was the goal. It meant we'd been barbarian enough, meant the deep, slowtwitch muscle fibers had been properly damaged during exercise, a kind of controlled demolition by the expansion and contraction that happen while weightlifting. Soreness is a signal that you're growing, because that's how a muscle adds mass: during the reparation process, the amino-acid rebuilding of torn tissue. When I woke each morning and wasn't in pain from the previous day's workout, I berated myself until three thirty

when it was time to try again, much more savagely this time, a cussing ninety minutes of severity that erased the backslash between pleasure and pain.

You don't get strong and big while bodybuilding; you get strong and big while resting from bodybuilding. The more you rest and eat, the more you grow. With a gutful of egg protein, I fell instantly asleep each night before eight thirty, and my slumber was so consummate, so weighted, I'd wake in the exact position in which I'd blacked out. No pill, no bottle, no smoke or aerobic intercourse has ever allotted me the immovable slumber that occurred after a session of hellward training. I've been missing that subterranean sleep for twenty years.

What happened to me in the fluorescent corner of that basement was a literal empowering, a structural overhaul. All that summer, those initial results, the evolution I witnessed, manifest in my every step, each time I moved, a solidifying, an engorging I could feel in bed with me as I slept, how the growth was noticed by others, complimented, admired: it all produced an elation I hadn't suspected was available to me. I'd bumbled into being devirginized a year earlier and even that gift, the rapture of sex, could not compete with the fortified sense of self I gained in that basement.

One evening after a workout, I walked two blocks, shirtless, to a convenience store for a quart of milk to drink, and in the tunnel beneath the rails I passed an older girl from our neighborhood, seventeen or eighteen now, someone I'd been looking at half my life. Her name began with a V, and because of her, V still seems to me the most erotic letter in our alphabet. She was forever walking across town trailing

smoke and hairspray, walking with purpose, to keg parties and the apartments of leather-jacketed men, I imagined, hoop earrings like bracelets, her purse a satchel of secrets beneath the freckled whiteness of her lovely arm. What wonders that purse must have held: cigarettes and pager, lipstick and birth control pills, gum wrappers with phone numbers inked onto them.

When we passed in the tunnel that day, she stopped and said, 'Billy?' I said yes, and she said: '*Giraldi?*' And when I said yes again, all she said was 'Whoa,' and she stood squinting at me through mascara-laden lashes and the smoke pouring from both nostrils. A week later she'd let me inside her bedroom, that pink and perfumed cave of happiness, Bon Jovi and his chest hair applauding from one wall, a crucifix chastising from another, I trying not to weep from the perfect joy of being invited there. A woman's bedroom and body would always feel that way to me: an invitation inside a chapel for the privileged.

In the 1977 docudrama *Pumping Iron,* Arnold Schwarzenegger, still and forever the doyen of bodybuilding, likened a workout pump to an orgasm. I suppose that's right if he meant an orgasm in reverse: the eruption, the explosion, is inward. Just as an orgasm is an aim of sex, a pump is the aim of the workout. Without it, you feel you've been a radical disappointment to your body. But despite the near ecstasy of those pumps, I cared more for what was permanent, for what I could carry with me through my days, my frame armored against the world's maleficent forces, all those things and people out to crush me. Only those with some sense of coming threat seek refuge in weightlifting.

Buried somewhere in *War and Peace* is an image I've never forgotten: our body as *a machine for living*. What I sought then was a machine much better than the malfunctioning one I had, hoping that it would make life's certain disturbances more endurable, much the way a luxury car makes highway clutter less irksome. And 'machine' is the ideal term, because the grotesque men I studied in magazines and aspired to join looked like a mash-up of the mechanical and the human.

Like my uncle, I was slight with a rapid metabolism, and so had lots of trouble adding that armor. The high-calorie force-feeding was harder than the bench presses and bicep curls. For breakfast: a dozen hard-boiled egg whites in a bowl of oatmeal. For lunch: two cans of tuna fish with four slices of wheat bread and a head of broccoli. For supper: a mound of pasta topped with a grilled chicken breast and flanked by a pile of spinach. Before bed: a quart of weight-gaining protein shake, chocolate or vanilla, chalky or viscous or both, some with the consistency of sawdust. And if I puked it all up, as I often did, I blended another and tried again.

On the weekends: all of the above plus grilled sirloin and potatoes. (Tony once told me, 'When you eat beef, you eat steroids,' and I liked the way that sounded.) And between those meals: muscle-making protein bars as appetizing as sand, added to expensive handfuls of multivitamins and amino acids and tart energy boosters. I was never not eating, never not bothered by *having* to eat. If you think it's difficult to abstain from food, try glutting yourself when you aren't even a little hungry, when you've already consumed more calories in one day than a regular person requires in three. From May to August I'd mushroomed from 125 pounds to 145 pounds,

from angularity to rotundity, and because I'd been training so steadily, because I was so lean, my body fat percentage so low, those were pounds with a marbled, fluted density.

My uncle's basement was a ritual space now, our altar of iron at which we offered libations of sweat. From a poster on the wall, we were silently supervised by a deity: the bronzed and golden-locked bodybuilder Tom Platz, his legs so downright brontosaurian – shredded, ripped – he looked engineered by some sinister geneticist. That term, 'ripped,' has infiltrated the common parlance and seems to mean anything from 'muscular' to 'strong,' but we mobilized it to mean only taut skin – skin like parchment, the diaphanous vellum of Bibles – that reveals vascularity and deep-edged muscle separation: no subcutaneous fat, so the muscle tonus shows, the lines and ruts of muscle fibers.

The bodybuilder's regalia helped lend the enterprise its pageantry. We wore T-shirts that looked painted on, sweatpants that bowed through the thighs and tapered at the ankles, wide leather lifting belts to protect the lower back, and weightlifting shoes made by Otomix, well padded and flat-soled. You wanted to be anchored during an exercise, your feet part of the floor so you wouldn't wobble with two hundred pounds in your hands. We used wrist wraps for heavy weights, not just for dead lifts but for chin-ups too, for barbell shrugs, for bent-over barbell rows or T-bar rows, pull-downs and low-pulley rows. The wrist wraps made the metal part of your arms, and then you didn't have to worry about the bar slipping from your damp grip. Your hands will fail before your back does.

My uncle and I didn't gab as we trained, or in those brief rests between sets. This was battle, not frolic. But if we gabbed before and after, we gabbed of professional bodybuilders, those gods and heroes, self-made monuments, aberrations, the *Übermenschen* among us, men superior to the unmuscled rabble of the world. Men with alien ways who puked and bled in search of Mount Olympus. Men who shunned the wimpy Christian ideal that puts a pretty soul above the perfection of physical form. Men who were magnificent Greeks, idolizing male beauty, believing that the bold exterior was an embodiment of the bold interior. Hercules, Achilles, Atlas: just look at them.

Unholy monks of muscle, these men possess the brand of focus that has allowed ascetics to float free of their bodies, except that their focus necessitates a further filling of their bodies. Bodies forged into outrageous artwork, 3-D anatomical charts startling enough to spook Andreas Vesalius, the father of anatomy. Part athlete, part artist, they have the training habits of the hell-bent. Muscle tissue is their clay, their choreography. Triumphant Greco warriors whose no-pain-no-gain credo is Christic to its core: you must rove through hell to reach your heaven. Every professional bodybuilder becomes a nutritionist and chemist, a ritualist and rebel. Masters of nature, they achieve their own apotheosis. To exist in that world of extremity is to leave the rest of us behind almost completely.

Remember how Ovid begins his *Metamorphoses*: 'My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind.' Waiting in the checkout line at the supermarket, you've noticed them on magazine covers,

Muscular Development and *Flex*. You've no doubt picked one from the rack and fanned through it while you waited, to mock, I know, but the curiosity tickles a space in you much deeper than the nothingness of scorn. The unexamined feeling is revulsion; you impulsively dislike the otherworldly aesthetics of them, their suggestion of a hubristic tampering with nature. Their vascularity, earthworms wriggling over striated muscle, and their terracotta complexions, their scant workout garb, penile mounds in spandex, their stern faces orgasmically determined, the imponderable mass of them. Everything looks as if it's about to erupt.

Peer more closely at that curious spot in you, just below the mocking and scorn, and see if there isn't a driblet of respect for the discipline, the religious training and dieting habits required to obtain that eurythmic muscle, the harmony of the whole neck-to-ankle machine. When you're looking at the best pro bodybuilders in the world, you're looking at a balance of form only a handful of human beings will ever achieve. Peek at the world champion, Phil Heath, and see how the linguistics of his body are closer to a poet's than an athlete's. No one, it's true, is born with those aesthetics, and that's why you must think it freakish and wrong. But art isn't born either. Art is built. In his absurdist novel *Body,* the inimitable Harry Crews christens bodybuilders 'the mysterious others,' and 'the mad imaginings of a mad artist.' Start thinking of these men as part artist, part athlete, and not as drug-stuffed showboats, and you might start to feel a subduing of that scorn.

I never possessed the freakish potential to look anything other than athletically normal. I was muscular and round

and hard, yes, but not *huge,* the term of choice, the erroneous term, used to describe a commonly muscled man. The pros, the Phil Heaths and Kai Greenes of the world, are both muscular and huge, but *muscular* is otherwise not the equal of *huge*. I was always lean, unmassive, even when I was at my largest and strongest, which was not very large and not very strong, not by bodybuilding standards. In clothes I resembled most other males my age. Still, we trained with only that goal: strong and big. Why else would we have put ourselves through such arduousness as that?

Each week contained at least one round of dead lifts and squats, exacting, injury-prone exercises that also, Tony often said, 'separate the men from the boys.' That was important, as you might imagine: the separation of the men from the boys. He was also fond of saying, 'Squats and deads will show you why you're afraid of the dark' – a bit of machismo that meant *These exercises are monsters most guys can't handle*. Pop once told me: 'If you do dead lifts, you'll never have back pains in your life,' and I never have. While most men strove for convex biceps and domed pectorals because they looked good bouncing down the boardwalk at Seaside Heights, Pop had always focused on his legs and back: 'Your legs and back are what carry you around. You ain't strong if your legs and back ain't strong.'

Squats and dead lifts were to be feared as much as any monster, but tame the monster, make it yours, and then upon you is bestowed great powers. We frequently spoke in those mythical tones. And we called dead lifts 'deads' because, like all underground enterprisers, we relished the argot, but also because after a round of heavy dead lifts, we were virtually