

THE GURGITATORS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by
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B.A., Louisiana State University, 2002
May 2005

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ABSTRACT

Hardy Runyan, an obese dishwasher from Louisiana, seeks to become a champion gurgitator through the guidance of Trina Hicks, a coach of competitive eating who's starving to reclaim her former glory. Armed with a stunted gag reflex and a stomach he can stretch to the skin, Hardy eats his way toward a showdown in which he dethrones the world champion of oyster eating.

THE GURGITATORS

FADE IN:

EXT. BANDSTAND - DAY

SPECTATORS gather before the kind of stage where we'd expect to see the bearded lady singing with Siamese twins. Instead, a flock of CAMERAMEN circle tables where pounds of BOILED SHRIMP have been heaped in trays.

Among the sparse turnout, there stands HARDY RUNYAN, 32. We all know this guy. He's the one who sours our mouths when he lurches through McDonald's carrying a greasy sack of cheeseburgers—the one who inspires us to nudge our friends and say, “Like he needs to eat more.” He wears striped socks and shorts with a waist that's stretched to its elastic limit. His gut pours out from under his shirt every time he depthroats his chilidog.

Behind Hardy, two MEN (30s) glare at each other as though their self-worth is at stake.

MAN #1

The others don't have the stomachs to compete so spare me the bullshit.

MAN #2

Sidewinder's overrated and you know it.

MAN #1

She's the undefeated, number one gurgitator in the world, and you call that overrated?

They turn away from their dispute to keep the tension from escalating.

Hardy sucks his chili-soaked fingers to the knuckles. He chugs his Coke in two gulps and wipes his sopping mouth with the back of his hand. He claps and whistles when

LEELAND PAIGE, a forty-year-old MC with the oomph of Richard Simmons, runs onto the stage accompanied by MUSIC that's a shoe-in for the next volume of *Jock Jams*.

LEELAND

Are you ready?

Six GURGITATORS march to the tables. With the exception of “SIDEWINDER” ABRAHAM, 29, a female Arnold Schwarzenegger among the guts and double chins, this group would give any buffet owner a heart attack if they all walked in at once.

LEELAND (CONT'D)

Welcome to this year's world shrimp eating championship. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a fierce group of gastro-athletes from near and far, and they're ready to push their stomachs to the limit. For you.

MAN #1 (O.S.)

Eat them up, Sidewinder! Let's go!

She steps away from her spot and responds to her fan with a taut-lipped salute. She then rips off her overalls to reveal a spandex BODYSUIT that sparkles with the colors of Old Glory. She flexes her biceps, pumps her fists in the air.

SIDEWINDER

U.S.A.! U.S.A! U.S.A!

The spectacle wows the crowd. Most of the crowd, anyway.

TRINA HICKS, 64, watches the scene as though a burp has surprised her with a splash of hot bile.

TRINA

Jiminy crickets.

She spits TOBACCO from the wad in her lip. A string of saliva catches her chin. She snags it with a calloused palm and wipes it on her jeans.

Hardy waddles after her as she shoulders her way through the growing number of ONLOOKERS.

EXT. MIDWAY – DAY

Hardy follows Trina past concession stands, dunking booths and ring tosses. His bosom heaves beneath his shirt.

HARDY

Coach Hicks!

The squeal jolts Trina to a standstill.

LEELAND (O.S.)

(in the distance) Things are clicking offensively for Sidewinder as she takes the lead at five pounds.

Hardy breathes in whistles while Trina takes the time to line her jaws with fresh tobacco. She has a GAP where her front teeth should be.

HARDY

I've spent a lot of time planning what I would say when we finally met.

TRINA

You want to spit it out or you just going to stand there stealing air?

HARDY

All that practice, and I don't remember a word.

TRINA

Performance anxiety's a hell of a thing it is. Happens to the best of us.

HARDY

Wait. I want you to know that you're my hero, as a gurgitator and a coach.

Trina continues on her way through the alley of VENDORS who flaunt stuffed animals and inflatable bats.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I've been a fan since you came from behind and beat Jack Logan. I don't think anyone's eaten that much mayo since.

TRINA

No one's come close.

HARDY

And all the champions you've produced. Flash Turner, Lillie Soileau, Dickey Lynch. Don't they hold something like forty-seven records altogether?

TRINA

Try sixty-one.

HARDY

It's inspirational. All you've accomplished. Are you out scouting talent?

Hardy wheezes with the effort of keeping up.

TRINA

The talent and the competition, for what it's worth.

LEELAND (O.S.)
(in the distance) That's ten and a half pounds for our resident patriot. Have you ever seen an athlete more determined?

HARDY
Could you slow down some?

Sweat glistens in the fat rolls that choke Hardy's neck.

EXT. PARKING LOT – DAY

They reach Trina's PICKUP, a collage of rust and dents.

HARDY
I've always dreamed of being a champion gurgitator. It's just now that I'm deciding to do something about it.

His sweaty shirt forms to his tits.

TRINA
You'd never stand a chance.

HARDY
That's not the encouragement I was hoping for.

TRINA
You don't know dick about competitive eating, do you?

Trina grabs two fistfuls of Hardy's stomach.

TRINA (CONT'D)
When your stomach's all stretched out, like yours is, it gives you plenty of room to fill but no room to expand, especially since you got a fat belt trapping everything in there.

HARDY
You should see how much I can eat at the buffet.

TRINA
It ain't about how much you can eat. It's about how much you can expand. That's the key.

HARDY
So what if my body's not well equipped. It will be. I have heart like you wouldn't believe.

TRINA

The most heart could do for you is make you a sprinter, meaning you might finish third or fourth in a six-minute run, but God they'd kill you in a good ten, twelve-minute marathon.

HARDY

I guess I'll be joining your gym for nothing then.

TRINA

It'd be a waste of your money. Look, I know what it is to have a dream and I know the pain it takes to give it up, but that's what you've got to do.

HARDY

But it's all I've ever done.

TRINA

Then you should be used to it. Besides, you got no clue how long it'd take to get you into shape. I don't think I'd live to see it. (a beat) It's a shame that defeated look of yours comes so natural.

HARDY

I've had a lot of practice.

Trina has to yank on her driver's side door to get it open.

HARDY (CONT'D)

Is it true that you swallowed your front teeth when they came out during competition?

Trina pokes her tongue in and out of the hole.

TRINA

Won that one, didn't I?

HARDY

The sport's not the same without you, Coach.

TRINA

I ain't your coach so don't go calling me that.

The rocks and oyster shells crackle under tire as Trina sputters away.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Hardy stands naked in the glow of his refrigerator. We would have ourselves a nice full frontal if his gut didn't cover his genitals.

HARDY

Whoever heard of a fat belt?

He fetches his dinner, a box of fried chicken, and he lumbers through a studio where you'll find torn candy wrappers and crushed Coke cans instead of pictures of family and friends.

He squeezes into his computer chair and maneuvers his ass until it slops evenly over the seat. He starts eating his chicken to the bone, cartilage and all.

With a leg in one hand and his mouse in the other, Hardy scrolls through PERSONAL ADS. He stops at a PICTURE of himself in which a smile squishes his eyes into slits. He double clicks the heading, which reads, "Are U the One 4 Me?"

HARDY

(under breath) Life of the party...Romantic dinners...Plenty of love to give. (a beat) Zero hits.

Hardy strokes his image. His finger leaves a smudge of chicken grease on the screen.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Hardy pants while scrubbing a pot clean of marinara sauce. He rinses it, towels it dry, takes up a plate of half-eaten RAVIOLI. He brings the dish to his mouth and scrapes in most of what remains. He dumps the rest in the trash.

Across the kitchen, CURTIS TOUPS, 46, pours olive oil in one skillet while cooking Alfredo sauce in another. He'd litter the entrees with strands of mullet if it wasn't for his hairnet.

CURTIS

(to Hardy) Hey, Pillsbury, need some help up here stat.

Hardy dunks two skillets in a sink full of grimy water.

HARDY

On its way.

While wiping the pans clean, Hardy spots a plate on which an untouched CHICKEN BREAST glistens in a light pesto. He shoves the entire piece of meat in his mouth and chews.

Curtis sprinkles crawfish in a bubbling florentine and pretends not to notice.

CURTIS

The weeds are growing, Pillsbury.

Hardy shuffles to the stove as quickly as his heft will allow.

HARDY

I met Trina Hicks.

CURTIS

Yeah? What'd she say?

Curtis pours the Alfredo sauce over a bowl of fettuccini.

HARDY

I'm gluttonous with talent. Her exact words.

CURTIS

I hate to tell you, but it doesn't mean much to say someone's talented.

Curtis reads the next ticket order.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

What is it with the fucking florentine?

HARDY

She wouldn't leave me alone until I let her watch me eat.

CURTIS

Of course you melted her with how well you performed.

HARDY

I took down forty-two chilidogs before she stopped me. She said I have the best hand-to-mouth coordination she's ever seen. Even offered me a free membership to her gym.

CURTIS

I know your story means a lot to you, Pillsbury, but I really need some clean spatulas up here. By the way, you let me know when you get hungry on the wash. I'll throw something together for you. Come on, man, your little habit's not exactly discreet.

HARDY

Every bite I take gets me that much closer.

CURTIS

To what I can't imagine.

HARDY

To becoming the greatest athlete this world has ever seen.

Hardy returns to his pile of dirty dishes.

INT. ICE CREAM SHOP – NIGHT

Hardy's triceps jiggle when he waves at MEREDITH LUNDLEY, 34, a hefty woman who has over-permed hair and an endless supply of sweatshirts embroidered with bunny rabbits. She sits on a stool behind the counter.

HARDY

Hey, you.

MEREDITH

Howdy.

HARDY

How's the white chocolate mousse tonight?

MEREDITH

I hate to say it, but it's a little watery. You-know-who made it.

HARDY

I bet he can't even finish a value meal.

Hardy snorts laughter through his nose.

HARDY (CONT'D)

That was a good one, huh?

He claps his hands and peruses the metal squares that brim with Gummy Bears, crushed Oreos, diced peanut butter cups. He steals quick glances of Meredith's love handles, which hang riddled with stretch marks over the waist of her pants.

MEREDITH

You should try the blueberry cheesecake. Blend it with vanilla. I think you'll just eat it up.

HARDY

I love a woman who knows her soft serve.

Meredith throws her hands to her hips.

MEREDITH

You stinker you.

She mixes two mounds of ice cream in a plastic bowl.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

The usual toppings?

HARDY

You know how I like it.

She jerks a can of whip cream back and forth.

HARDY

Have you eaten at Great Dragon yet?

MEREDITH

No, but everybody keeps telling me how big it is.

HARDY

The buffet itself would be fifty yards long if they lined all of the sections up. At least that's what they say on the commercials. But I can believe it.

Meredith drowns Hardy's dessert with thick squirts of melted chocolate. She tops it with a cherry.

STONEY WILLIAMS, 19, walks out of the back with the enthusiasm of a funeral. He's a would-be punk rocker who replaced the Y on his nametag with a sloppy R.

STONEY

It's your turn to clean the pissers, Meredith.

She pouts then trudges to the men's room.

Hardy watches the colossal movement of her ass. He squeezes the counter with a white-knuckle grip.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Curtis sets a bin of plates and silverware on the ledge of Hardy's sink.

CURTIS

Never ends, does it?

Hardy attacks a pasta-crusteD fork with a brilo pad.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

What's eating you, Pillsbury?

HARDY

Have you ever wanted to be anything more than what you are?

Curtis peels his hairnet off and shakes out of a clump of bangs.

CURTIS

Give up. It's what I did. Best damn decision I ever made.

HARDY

I can't swallow that.

CURTIS

It's the truth. I know exactly what you're going through, Pillsbury. Always wishing. Always hoping. Always speaking in the future tense. Life's too short for that kind of misery.

HARDY

I think you're full of shit. As usual.

CURTIS

Think what you want, but I'm the only one of us who's free. You want to know why that is? I'll tell you. I figured out the lie. Listen close now. We can't be whatever we want to be.

HARDY

Well I'm going to be a champion. Mark my words. I'm going to start training, I'm going to get into shape, I'm going to eat my opponents alive. And I'll tell you something else. When they raise my hand in victory, you'll be the first person I thank.

CURTIS

Accept the lie. Give up your dream. Be happy for once in your life.

Curtis resets his hairnet and returns to the stove.

Hardy jerks the bin closer. He runs glasses and spoons, saucers and knives, under a hissing faucet. He sets them wet and dirty among the dishes that are clean.

INT. GYM – DAY

Hardy stands awestruck at the sight of five GURGITATORS in training.

Two of them run on TREADMILLS that seem one use away from rattling apart at the bolts. Two others huff and puff through stomach crunches on MATS that are trampled flat. The last trainee, a clammy WOMAN in her late twenties, chugs her way through a GALLON OF WATER. Two empty JUGS lie scattered at her feet.

Trina circles the woman while keeping time on a STOPWATCH. She spits tobacco through the hole at the front of her mouth.

TRINA

Trick your brain, goddamnit! Don't let it think you're full.

The woman brings the gallon to her quivering lips.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Fill that hole! Fill that hole!

The woman loads her mouth with water, some of which oozes through her lips and drips off her chin.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Time!

She rips the jug from the woman's hand.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Two and a half gallons in three minutes? What is this to you, a leisure class? I mean, jiminy crickets, you got more potential than that.

WOMAN #1

But it hurts.

The woman cradles her swollen belly.

TRINA

Pain's what stops you from taking that extra bite, from keeping it all down when your insides feel like they're going to pop. Gurgitators can't know pain. Now hit the showers.

Hardy taps Trina's shoulder.

HARDY

Coach Hicks.

TRINA

Don't listen for shit, do you?

Hardy offers an ENVELOPE stuffed with cash.

HARDY

Here's the money I've been saving. I believe it's enough for a year membership.

TRINA

(to one of MEN performing crunches) Get your shoulders off the mat! You giving me lactose intolerance your form's so goddamn sloppy.

HARDY

Can I have a locker number?

TRINA

I guess I didn't make myself clear the first time we talked. The lockers here are for climbers.

HARDY

Climbers?

TRINA

That's right. If you ain't noticed, this is a gym, not a goddamn shelter for people trying to do the impossible.

HARDY

Nothing's impossible. Isn't that what you wrote in your book?

TRINA

Yeah. I said that once.

HARDY

To hell with it. Take my money. I'll do without a locker.

Trina shoves the envelope in her back pocket.

TRINA

You'll do without a coach too. I don't train people who could have been contenders but shit it all away on buffets and value meals.

HARDY

I'll train myself then.

Hardy shoulders his bag toward the locker room.

INT. LOCKER ROOM – DAY

Hardy plops down on a bench. He strains as though battling constipation when he reaches for his shoestrings. He starts to untie them when

FLASH TURNER, 56, whistles by with a mop in hand. His entire body has adopted a middle-age sag except for his jaw line, which still bulges with muscle.

FLASH

Don't give yourself a hemorrhoid.

Hardy wobbles up from his seat.

HARDY

It's an honor to meet you, sir.

FLASH

I scrub shit stains off the toilets. I don't think you need to call me sir.

HARDY

I'll always call you sir after how much sushi you ate in '94.

FLASH

Those days are dead.

He brandishes the mop.

FLASH (CONT'D)

So what's your story?

HARDY

I'm finally taking my shot.

FLASH

I've got to be honest. You have a hard road ahead. I'd say you're about ten years, two hundred pounds behind.

HARDY

Trina's made that clear. Between me and you, what's happened to her?

Flash mulls over his response.

FLASH

Self-doubt's a hell of a thing.

HARDY

Don't I know.

FLASH

It can really mess you up when you lose faith in yourself.

HARDY

Well I haven't lost faith in her.

FLASH

That makes two of us. To speak from experience though, it's hard accepting the fact that the sport you helped create has passed you by. Shit, I call it a sport. It's more of a freak show now, don't you think? Young bucks training for the fame, the notoriety. There's not much interest in the purity of competition anymore.

HARDY

Well maybe I can change that.

FLASH

You've got to get on that treadmill before you can do anything.

Flash whistles toward a shower that's a breeding ground for athlete's foot.

INT. OFFICE – DAY

A TROPHY CASE is the only piece of furniture not covered in dust or old newspapers. Its shelves are weighed with PHOTOS of Trina either stuffing her mouth or raising the fists of her champions. A WEIGHT BELT garnished with a plastic HALF SHELL sits alone on top.

Trina and Flash look out on the gym through a window. They watch Hardy as he stumbles over the treadmill's slowest speed. He wears a SWEAT SUIT, a HEADBAND, and a pair of WEIGHT GLOVES.

TRINA

Just when we got enough tomatoes in here.

She packs a lump of chew in the corner of her mouth.

FLASH

At least he cares about the sport. You know, there was a time when you would've admired his determination.

TRINA

There was a time when you didn't open your mouth unless you were eating.

Trina takes a picture from the trophy case. She pets its frame.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Ever wish you could re-taste that glory? That thrill?

FLASH

I miss it too, Trina, but, shit, you've got to let go.

TRINA

Easy for you to say. You didn't have no career-ending injury. (a beat) If I could only find a winner. I tell you. Things would be different around here they would.

FLASH

What's wrong with the rookies?

TRINA

They ain't championship material. Hell, you can see that.

FLASH

I thought that doing the impossible was part of the thrill.

TRINA

I can't win with them.

FLASH

Remember when you discovered me?

TRINA

Of course. I never seen someone eat so much goddamn pie.

FLASH

Remember what you said?

TRINA

There ain't no can't.

FLASH

That's right. God you were motivational then.

TRINA

Well that ain't me no more.

She shatters the picture against the sloping floorboards.

EXT. STREET – DAY

Three MEN (30s) stand huddled near the door of the gym, a brick building on which a sun-worn MURAL depicts a woman holding forks up in victory. Above the image, faded letters read, "Gut Busters."

MAN #3

Is it true the gym's closing?

MAN #4

That's an old rumor.

MAN #5

The shit hole needs to close. She hasn't produced a champion in years.

MAN #4

It's not Trina's fault you can't control your gag reflex.

MAN #5

She's past her prime. Face it.

MAN #3

Check out the beached whale.

Hardy steps out of the gym stretching his arms across his chest and behind his head.

MAN #5

I remember when I used to believe in Trina too.

Hardy waddles up the street. He practices the act of shoveling food to his mouth.

INT. ICE CREAM SHOP – NIGHT

Hardy still works on his form as he plods to the counter.

Meredith shakes a finger at him.

MEREDITH

What are you doing, you silly goose?

HARDY

It's part of the training.

MEREDITH

Training for what?

HARDY

Probably nothing.

MEREDITH

Hey, you turn that frown upside down, Mister. (a beat) Look. I got a new shirt.

Meredith models a black SWEATER decorated with PUPPIES and GLITTER.

HARDY

It's beautiful.

Meredith's cheeks turn cherry-red.

MEREDITH

You're going to love the white chocolate mousse tonight. It's real sweet.

HARDY

Like you.

MEREDITH

Silly man.

Hardy ogles her body's wiggle as she pours a perfect coil of ice cream, as she drenches it with his usual toppings.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

Ta-da!

Globs of whip cream and chocolate spill onto her fingers when she presents Hardy's dessert.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

Oh, poopy.

She pushes her fingers knuckle-deep into her mouth and slides them out clean but sticky.

HARDY

Meredith, I was wondering. What are you, you know, up to tonight?

MEREDITH

I thought I might try this great new recipe I got. It's for carb-friendly apple pie.

HARDY

I'd love to eat some of that.

MEREDITH

I can bring you some I guess.

HARDY

That'd be nice. (a beat) All right, then. Have a good night.

MEREDITH

Goodnight, Hardy.

He peels himself from the counter as though it were Velcro.

INT. STRIP CLUB – NIGHT

Hardy and Curtis sit along the catwalk. A WAITRESS in her early twenties delivers two bottles of beer. She wears little more than fishnet stockings. Curtis pays and hands one to Hardy.

HARDY

Not while I'm training.

CURTIS

More for me then.

Curtis snatches a dollar from the many that lie scattered on the stage. He holds it out to MIRANDA OLSON, a twenty-six-year-old stripper whose stomach bears the scar of a c-section.

She crawls toward him and uses her breasts to pick the money from his hand.

MIRANDA

Thank you, baby.

CURTIS

Anytime, sweet tits.

He steals another dollar when she slithers away.

HARDY

I'd love to know why I keep getting the cold shoulder.

CURTIS

You still caught up on that ice cream broad?

HARDY

Her name's Meredith.

CURTIS

For fuck's sake, Pillsbury, just ask her out.

HARDY

I go in there every day, tell her jokes, make her laugh, and nothing. She's not interested.

CURTIS

How do you know?

HARDY

They've never been interested.

CURTIS

You know what you need to do?

HARDY

Resign myself to masturbation.

CURTIS

Hell no.

Curtis slides the last dollar he took under the waist of Miranda's g-string.

MIRANDA

(to Hardy) You want a lap dance, big boy?

HARDY

No, thank you.

CURTIS

Of course he does.

She winks at Hardy then spins into a spread-eagle missionary position at the center of the stage.

CURTIS

Giving up on some bullshit dream is one thing. Giving up on pussy, that's crazy talk.

HARDY

So what's your advice?

CURTIS

People don't want to fuck you, Pillsbury. They want to fuck the person they think you are. So stop being yourself.

A STRIPPER in her thirties, whose thighs and ass are littered with cellulite, runs her manicure through Curtis's stringy mullet.

CURTIS

Watch the hair, darling.

STRIPPER #1

You ready for our date?

She takes Curtis's hand and leads him upstairs.

Hardy isn't alone for long as Miranda struts toward him from backstage. She climbs onto his gut-smothered lap.

MIRANDA

This part might give us some trouble.

Hardy's stomach resembles pizza dough as Miranda gathers it up to her crotch. She bounces up and down to test the grip.

MIRANDA (CONT'D)

That should do. Now.

She grinds her hips against Hardy's gut. The movement incites fleshy ripples.

MIRANDA

What do you do for a living?

Hardy fumbles his chubby fingers through her hair. She moves his hands to her breasts.

MIRANDA (CONT'D)

Your grip is so soft.

She breathes as though mid-coitus.

HARDY

I'm a champion competitive eater.

He cups her face, runs his fingertip along her jaw, over her lips.

MIRANDA

Don't touch me like that.

She guides his palms to the knot between her thighs.

MIRANDA (CONT'D)

Your mouth must be in incredible shape. To eat so much so fast.

HARDY

My mouth, my throat, my stomach.

MIRANDA

Does it hurt to have all of that food inside you?

HARDY

It only hurts when I don't.

Miranda's hand recoils when Hardy tries to pet it.

MIRANDA

You're the only people who know what it means to live. It turns me on.

HARDY

I'm the only people?

MIRANDA

Gluttons.

She feigns the trembling of an orgasm.

HARDY

I'm an athlete, not a glutton.

MIRANDA

Don't spoil the mood now, baby.

HARDY

Gluttony doesn't involve hand speed, jaw strength, and focus, okay? It's not a sport.

MIRANDA

Hush now.

She snuggles her face into Hardy's neck.

MIRANDA

Tell me what it's like to be a champion.

HARDY

I couldn't put it into words.

He caresses her back, massages her shoulders.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I promise you I'm hard.

MIRANDA

I know, baby. I know.

She kisses his cheek.

EXT. STREET – DAY

Hardy whistles breath through his nose while Flash locks the gym. Sweat drips from Hardy's chins and earlobes, soaks the fabric of his sweatshirt.

HARDY

How am I doing in there?

FLASH

You've got to lift your damn knees on the treadmill. You'll never have a cardio workout if you don't. You'll never build up your stamina either. God, Trina would kill me if she heard me tell you that.

HARDY

When do you think I'll be ready for water training?

FLASH

You'll get there eventually. I'm sure of it. You've got one of the biggest hearts I've ever seen.

HARDY

Too bad Trina refuses to see that part of me.

FLASH

That just means you've got to make her see it.

Flash pats Hardy on his cavernous belly button.

INT. BUFFET – NIGHT

Welcome to the pounding heart of America's obesity epidemic.

Hardy follows the overfed procession as it shuffles from green bean casserole to jumbo chopped beef, from chicken fried steak to vats of gravy.

INT. DINING AREA – NIGHT

Trina slurps chicken noodle soup through the space between her incisors. She takes notes while studying a WOMAN (40s) who blends her dinner into country-style mush.

ANGLE ON

the NOTEPAD, where Trina writes, "Graceful swallowing. Too much soda between bites."

After taking the last forkful down her throat, the woman dabs the corners of her mouth then hurries to the bathroom. She returns a moment later and signals a WAITER (20s) for her check. She pops a handful of BREATH MINTS.

ANGLE ON

Trina scribbling, "Bulimics never win."

Trina starts to peck at a Caesar salad when she notices a COUPLE (30s) eating ice cream on the other side of the buffet. She pays particular attention to the MAN, who laps at his two scoops with a feverish tongue.

The couple finishes their dessert and leaves the smoking section hand-in-hand. They take only a few steps before the man stops and squeezes his ass together to the sighs and crossed arms of his companion.

ANGLE ON

Trina's notes. She writes, "Irritable bowel syndrome equals elimination." She adds, "It's hopeless."

Visibly disheartened, Trina closes her notepad and stands to leave when she notices Hardy across the restaurant.

He maneuvers into a booth as though pregnant.

INT. BOOTH – NIGHT

Hardy lines his collar with a napkin. He spoons white gravy atop a slice of roast beef and folds the meat in half. He brings the entire piece to his mouth between a knife and a fork, but Trina approaches before he can eat it.

TRINA

Dickey Lynch.

HARDY

What?

TRINA

That's who you remind me of. You going to let me sit?

HARDY

Of course.

Trina slides into the booth and opens a can Skoal.

TRINA

Yeah, Dickey used to think it'd be easier to win competitions if he just went ahead and ate everything all at once instead of taking a bunch of little bites. He took home a lot of trophies with that style. Lost a lot too though. But anyway. You seem to eat like him. Move like him. You shoulder your food up in the exact same way.

Hardy digs into a heap of chicken potpie without regard for Trina's comments.

TRINA (CONT'D)

I know you ain't going to believe me, but I been watching you at the gym. You been working hard. Harder than any of the other rookies, that's for sure.

HARDY

Too bad it's all for nothing, right?

Trina spits tobacco in the ashtray, wipes her chin with the sleeve of her flannel shirt.

TRINA

Why you want to be a gurgitator, Hardy?

HARDY

Eating is the only thing I've ever been good at.

TRINA

That's a bullshit answer and you know it. Now tell me why.

Hardy sets his fork aside.

HARDY

My dad took me to the state fair every year before a heart attack took his life. It was the only thing we ever did together. I remember we'd stand front row at the eat-offs. I was amazed. I'd watch and I'd try to imagine what it must have been like on stage.

TRINA

It's a rush like no other.

HARDY

I'd try to imagine the feeling of my body taking charge, doing what others can only dream of. I wanted that feeling then, and I want it now. More importantly, I want to die knowing that I did something. That I didn't waste my talent.

He tears the napkin from his neck.

HARDY (CONT'D)

But, of course, none of that matters to you. As far as you're concerned, I'm nothing more than fat tub of shit.

Hardy rattles the table when he fails to rush out of the booth.

TRINA

Wait.

HARDY

What do you want?

TRINA

(lecherously) I want to see you eat.

After a moment's hesitation, Hardy repositions his gut behind a plate that features either a scoop or a ladle of every item on the buffet.

HARDY

Time me.

He snatches his fork.

ANGLE ON

Trina, whose eyes dart between her watch and Hardy's exhibition. She slaps the table and hoots, claps and laughs by sucking air through her missing teeth.

Off screen, we can hear the SMACK and GULP of ingestion.

TRINA

Time.

Hardy licks the plate clean.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Forty-five seconds. Hot damn.

She pokes the portion of Hardy's stomach that rests on the table.

TRINA (CONT'D)

You want to know what's beautiful in there? Raw potential. Now don't get all excited and give yourself indigestion. Potential means you're not worth shit. But at least we got something to work with.

HARDY

We?

TRINA

It's probably a huge mistake, but yeah.

HARDY

I'm not going to let you down, Coach. I promise.

Trina's hand slides into Hardy's pink grip.

INT. GYM – DAY

Hardy squeals with the effort of stretching his hamstrings. He can barely reach past his knees.

Trina pushes him down from behind.

TRINA

Get up.

Hardy tries to push himself from the ground but flops onto his back instead. His tits sag into his armpits as he wags his legs and arms in a futile attempt to gain momentum.

HARDY

I can't.

TRINA

Think you can win a competition with that word in your mouth? Trina, you can't eat eight pounds of shrimp. You can't eat forty-one dozen oysters. Bullshit! There ain't no can't. Say it.

HARDY

There ain't no can't.

He rolls onto his stomach.

HARDY (CONT'D)

There ain't no can't!

His ass hangs over the waistband of his sweatpants as he trembles to his feet.

The gym's other MEMBERS watch the scene discreetly from the corners where they jump rope, over the bars where they do pull-ups.

TRINA

Competitive eating is one of the oldest and hardest of sports. To win you got to have commitment and discipline. What's more, you got to have hunger. Now I ain't talking fill your belly up hunger. I'm talking about the stuff that makes a champion gurgitator. You got to want it, goddamnit. You got to want it more than you wanted anything in your life. And it's got to start here.

Trina grabs at Hardy's crotch but comes away with a fistful of stomach.

HARDY

Good luck finding them.

He dabs sweat from his neck and forehead.

TRINA

Let's put this on you.

She whips open a thirty-gallon TRASH BAG and tugs it over Hardy's body, which stretches the plastic to a gluttonous limit. She tears a hole in the bag and peels it open to the first roll of fat on the back of Hardy's neck.

TRINA (CONT'D)

You got thirty minutes on the treadmill. Now hit it.

Flash walks by carrying a spit bucket.

FLASH

(to Trina) You remind me of someone I used to know.

TRINA

Quit dragging your feet, Runyan! Can't you lift those goddamn drumsticks?

Hardy's cheeks puff outward with every desperate breath.

EXT. ALLEY – NIGHT

Trina leads Hardy past overflowing dumpsters and stagnant puddles.

HARDY

Are you telling me that people actually compete here?

TRINA

It's illegal and unsanctioned, but yeah.

HARDY

Illegal?

TRINA

Because of the gambling. And the occasional injury. But that don't happen often.

HARDY

I don't like this at all.

TRINA

Jiminy crickets, Runyan. Every sport has an underbelly.

HARDY

That doesn't mean I have to get involved.

TRINA

When you ain't got a minor league, you got to get your feet wet somewhere. You think I just started eating professionally overnight?

HARDY

Is this where your career began?

TRINA

Not here, but a place just like it. They're all over the country.

HARDY

Why's it unsanctioned then?

TRINA

Because there's no time limit, no paramedics, no rules. It's just a pure one-on-one battle of who can eat the most. I tell you what, the pros could learn a thing or two from the underground circuit.

HARDY

But I'm not ready to compete. That's all you've been telling me since day one.

TRINA

Ain't you got any confidence? Besides, most everyone here's an amateur gurgitator looking to make a name for themselves. Sounds familiar, don't it?

Hardy follows Trina to a metal door at the end of the alley. A burly DOORMAN (20s) stands before it.

DOORMAN

(to Trina) It's been a long time since we've seen your face around here.

TRINA

Missed it, haven't you?

She blows a kiss and smiles without regard for her missing teeth.

DOORMAN

You haven't changed.

His eyes travel from Hardy's chins to Hardy's stomach.

DOORMAN (CONT'D)

You think fatty has a chance?

TRINA

He wouldn't be here with me if I didn't.

The doorman steps aside.

INT. BASEMENT – NIGHT

Shirtless MEN gorge toe-to-toe at tables surrounded by GAMBLERS who roar support while waving handfuls of CASH. The competitors cram their mouths by the forkful, some with Spam, some with bacon, some with lemon meringue pie. The humidity of competition forms halos around the dim lighting, moistens the walls with condensation.

HARDY

These guys don't look like amateurs.

TRINA

They're not.

SPEAR HOGAN, a fifty-one-year-old whose fake tan matches the hue of his toupee, notices Trina from the post where he supervises a heated match. He approaches immediately and wraps her in an unrequited hug. He buries his nose in her ponytail and inhales.

TRINA

I'm here on business, Spear, so knock it off.

SPEAR

Always the heartbreaker. How long's it been? Five? Six years?

TRINA

Something like that.

SPEAR

At least since the injury. How is everything by the way?

TRINA

Healed up.

SPEAR

Sidewinder should have been banned for what she did.

TRINA

Don't ever mention that name around me again.

SPEAR

Fair enough. So what can I do for you?

TRINA

We're looking for a match.

Spear nods in Hardy's direction.

SPEAR

Think he's your ticket back to the top?

TRINA

We got to shrink up his stomach and work on his form—

SPEAR

Just get to the point, huh? Can he eat or not?

TRINA

He can eat.

SPEAR

All right, then. We'll put him on the first open table. (to Hardy) I hope you're hungry.

HARDY

I'm starving.

SPEAR

(to Trina) Want to have another whirl? For old time's sake.

TRINA

You know I'd bust open if I competed.

SPEAR

Guess you'll always be one up then.

TRINA

I'll always be three up.

Trina packs a lump of tobacco in her bottom lip as Spear walks away. She takes Hardy's arms and starts rubbing his triceps loose.

TRINA

I know what you going through right now. Your heart's pounding, your jaw's clenched, your stomach feels like it's wanting to digest a big ball of grease. I hate to say it, but there ain't much I can do to help you with all that. You just got to remember to stay focused. Keep your center of gravity even with the plate and never stop swallowing no matter what. Be fearless.

Hardy kneels to pray ala Rocky Balboa.

INT. BASEMENT – NIGHT – FIVE MINUTES LATER

Hardy sits at a table encircled with sweaty MEN who wield fistfuls of hundred dollar bills, who wet the air with spittle as they argue and bet.

GAMBLER #1

I'm giving five to one odds on the fatty.

GAMBLER #2

I'll take that action.

GAMBLER #3

You feeling strong, rookie?

Trina rubs Hardy's shoulders.

TRINA

Don't mind them none.

HARDY

Easy for you to say.

The crowd backs away from the table to make room for

BUCK LUCAS, 26, a bear of a man who roars and points at Hardy.

BUCK

Come on, pussy.

He slaps his own face.

BUCK (CONT'D)

Is that all you've got?

He swings until his cheeks glow red with hand-shaped welts.

GAMBLER #4

Two hundred on Livewire.

GAMBLER #5

You're on.

Trina leans into Hardy's ear.

TRINA

Don't let him beat you here (tapping the side of Hardy's head)
before he tries to beat you here (tapping Hardy's stomach).

SPEAR (O.S.)

Make way. Coming through.

He delivers two trays overloaded with COW TONGUE.

TRINA

(to Hardy)

Two things you need to know. If you puke, you lose. If you stop
eating, you lose. Other than that, it's no holds barred.

SPEAR

Are the eaters ready?

Buck's face twitches into a snarl.

Hardy stretches his neck and his jaws.

TRINA

(to Hardy) You can do it.

SPEAR

On the count of three. One, two, three!

Hardy and Buck grab at the tongue with both hands.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. ALLEY – NIGHT

Hardy staggers outside. Drenched in sweat, he lugs his stomach and gasps for air.

Trina follows.

HARDY

You set me up.

His bowels peel a soupy gurgle.

HARDY (CONT'D)

You knew I'd lose.

He spits drool as it forms in the corners of his mouth.

TRINA

Keep it down, Runyan. Let your body get used to the pain.

HARDY

Christ, I feel like I have a cinderblock in my guts.

TRINA

Some people say it's like giving birth. But I wouldn't know nothing about that. (a beat) How's your mouth taste?

HARDY

Like salt and bile.

TRINA

That's the taste of defeat. It's familiar to you, ain't it?

HARDY

I've lived with defeat for most of my life, but it's never tasted like this.

TRINA

Good. Now lick your pallet. The insides of your cheeks. Take a deep breath while you do it.

Hardy's tongue bulges against his lips and cheeks.

HARDY

It's disgusting.

TRINA

Yes. It is. I want you to hate that taste, Runyan. I want it to make you sick.

HARDY

That won't be a problem.

TRINA

Because defeat ain't an option. You need to say that to yourself every time you take a bite.

HARDY

Defeat ain't an option.

He burps a wet baritone.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Hardy fingers the bottom of a pudding-coated TUMBLER. He scrapes out an index full of

gluey VANILLA.

HARDY
(to himself) Defeat ain't an option.

He sucks his finger clean.

He opens his mouth for a spoonful of tomato basil soup when Curtis taps his shoulder from behind.

CURTIS
You got a visitor, Pillsbury.

HARDY
Who?

CURTIS
What's her name.

HARDY
You've got to tell her I'm not here.

CURTIS
Too late for that.

Hardy scrambles for any crevice that might accommodate his mass. He hurries to the freezer and locks himself inside.

INT. FREEZER – DAY

Hardy shivers among the pork chops, chicken breasts, and t-bones. He buries his hands in his armpits, clamps his jaws to stop his chins from trembling.

MEREDITH (O.S.)
Hardy, are you in there? Come on, now, don't be a sourpuss.

She knocks hesitantly.

MEREDITH (CONT'D, O.S.)
You're making me feel silly out here. Talking to someone who won't talk back.

Hardy runs his palm over the door as though he were caressing the body of a plus-sized woman.

MEREDITH (CONT'D, O.S.)

Okey dokey. I just wanted to let you know that I ate at Great Dragon last night and I saw that they're having a super two for one this weekend. Thought you might like to go. (a beat) I guess not. See you around the shop, you silly, silly goose.

Hardy fumbles at the door handle.

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

Hardy and Meredith shift uncomfortably at the sight of EMPLOYEES vacuuming the floors, rolling silverware in napkins.

HARDY

This is the quietest I've ever seen it.

MEREDITH

Oh, pooppy, I think they're closed.

HARDY

Nonsense. They don't close for another ten minutes.

A HOSTESS (40s) notices them while rushing to smear Windex on the buffet's sneeze guard.

HOSTESS

We're closed.

HARDY

It's 9:50. You guys don't close until 10:00.

HOSTESS

Give us a break. We all want to go home. Besides, we only have clams and egg rolls left.

MEREDITH

But my tummy's going—

She imitates the GROWL of an empty stomach.

HARDY

(to the hostess) We'll eat anything.

The hostess slogs toward them.

HOSTESS

You have ten minutes. After that, you got to leave.

Her eyes travel over Meredith's rotund features. The sight turns her lips south at the corners.

HOSTESS (CONT'D)

(to Meredith) You're banned for life if we have to get the mop again.

Meredith's cheeks flush with embarrassment.

INT. DINING AREA – NIGHT

Hardy and Meredith eat from plates that contain enough food to permanently damage most digestive tracts.

Hardy tongues a CLAM from its shell. He then scrapes several onto his plate and assembles them across one of a dozen EGG ROLLS.

HARDY

(under breath) Defeat ain't an option.

MEREDITH

What are you saying, goose?

HARDY

It's nothing. Just something my coach wants me to do before I eat.

MEREDITH

Your coach?

HARDY

I'm training to become a competitive eater.

HOSTESS (O.S.)

Nine minutes!

MEREDITH

You mean like the people on TV? Just when did all of this start, you stinker you?

HARDY

I've wanted to be one since I was about eight or so. It's just now that I'm following my dream.

MEREDITH

What's that like? Following your dream?

HARDY

It gives me a reason to open my eyes in the morning. First time I've ever had that feeling.

MEREDITH

I wish I could experience that.

HARDY

Why can't you?

MEREDITH

I never had a dream.

She bites her lips to keep the tears from spilling down her rosy cheeks.

HOSTESS (O.S.)

Seven minutes!

HARDY

It was hard getting into the sport, you know. No one wanted to train me because I'm so fat. They said I wouldn't stand a chance against thinner competition.

MEREDITH

That would have devastated me.

HARDY

It didn't bother me. If anything, it's given me motivation to prove I'm no bum. That I have the stuff to go pro.

MEREDITH

So someone's finally given you the chance?

HARDY

To say the least.

Meredith claps.

MEREDITH

Oh, goody.

HOSTESS (O.S.)

Five minutes!

HARDY

Yeah, well, it's too bad I'm not very good yet.

MEREDITH

You and your pooppy mouth.

HARDY

It's the truth. Things aren't going to stay that way though.

Meredith smashes two EGG ROLLS together. She tries to fit them down her throat, but she chokes.

Hardy leaps to her aid with surprising agility. He pats and rubs her back until she stops coughing.

HARDY (CONT'D)

You okay?

MEREDITH

Yes.

She wipes the slobber from her chins.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

Thank you.

Hardy notices that he still rubs her back. He yanks his hand away.

HARDY

Sorry. (a beat) Are you having a good time?

MEREDITH

I can't think of another place I'd rather be.

HOSTESS (O.S.)

Two minutes!

HARDY

You know, I may not be the thinnest person, but I can put down some food. Want to know how I first decided to become a gurgitator? My dad, we used to go to competitions all of the time. Anyway, being as big as he was, he told me that I had better learn to do something with my genes or else no one would ever know I was alive. Said I probably wouldn't be alive for very long anyway.

MEREDITH

My parents never told me anything.

HOSTESS (O.S.)

Time!

Meredith packs her mouth with two more egg rolls. She pretends to choke.

EXT. STREET – NIGHT

Hardy and Meredith waddle down the sidewalk.

MEREDITH

Sorry I took so long in the bathroom.

She uses a TOOTHPICK to scour under her fingernails.

HARDY

That's fine. Want to take a breather?

MEREDITH

Please.

They stop in the fluorescent glow of a BAKERY.

HARDY

Some people are sweet by nature. I think you're one of them.

She pinches Hardy's cheek.

HARDY (CONT'D)

Some people think that being sweet is a weakness. A disease even.

MEREDITH

They're the silliest of the silly.

HARDY

I think so too.

Meredith cringes like a waitress trying to explain why the entrees are an hour late.

MEREDITH

I don't understand why anyone would want to be a, what's that word again? Gurgitator?

HARDY

Yeah. To be honest, I've been thinking a lot about that lately. Especially after seeing how some of the great ones have ended up. Seems like a racket where you're almost guaranteed to be forgotten after you hang up your fork.

Hardy leers at a display case full of doughnuts and cheesecake.

MEREDITH

Hey, I'm still here.

HARDY

The pain's the worst thing about it all. The day after a competition, you feel like you've been turned inside out. Your stomach hurts, your throat hurts, even your teeth.

MEREDITH

Why do you do it if it hurts?

HARDY

It'll take some time, but I'll adjust. (a beat) Want some dessert?

MEREDITH

I should probably be going home.

HARDY

Oh, come on. We can go back to my apartment and eat some ice cream.

MEREDITH

No. I need to go.

HARDY

I promise you I have flavors you've never heard of before.

MEREDITH

Maybe some other time, Sweetie.

HARDY

Take a good look at me. Do I look like someone you can trust?

Hardy extends his hand.

HARDY (CONT'D)

Of course, I do. Come on.

They entwine their chubby fingers.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Meredith lingers near the door while Hardy swipes his counters clean of POPSICLE STICKS and empty BOTTLES of Yoo-hoo.

HARDY

We don't have to eat ice cream if you'd rather something else. I know you must get sick of it after a while.

MEREDITH

I think I'm full.

HARDY

I have Twinkies and Oreos too. You find it hot in here?

Hardy struggles to pull his shirt over his head. His breasts and gut spill out like exhibitionists when he manages to take it off.

Meredith's eyes drop to her twiddling thumbs.

HARDY (CONT'D)

That's better.

He lumbers to his couch.

HARDY (CONT'D)

Want to sit?

MEREDITH

I don't think I'm hungry anymore.

HARDY

Why don't you come sit down? It's a lot more comfortable here. Besides, there's a draft in the kitchen. I don't want you to get sick.

Meredith scans the apartment.

MEREDITH

You don't have any pictures?

HARDY

No. I find they just get in the way.

He pats the cushion next to him.

MEREDITH

Do you have a phone?

HARDY

I don't think I'd ever use one. Who do you need to call?

MEREDITH

No one. I guess.

Hardy breathes as though practicing Lamaze before pushing himself from the couch.

Meredith backs into the doorjamb as Hardy nears the refrigerator. He opens the freezer and removes three gallons of ICE CREAM.

HARDY

Look. I have almond coffee crunch, triple chocolate banana, and strawberry cotton candy.

MEREDITH

I've never had the almond flavor.

Hardy grabs a tablespoon from a drawer. He digs up a gluttonous amount of ice cream.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

I've eaten too many carbs already today. I think I should leave.

HARDY

What's wrong? My apartment too dirty? You don't like me?

MEREDITH

It's not that.

HARDY

What is it then? Please tell me.

MEREDITH

I don't feel right being here. I'm uncomfortable.

HARDY

I'm just as uncomfortable, Meredith. You think I've had a woman in my apartment before?

MEREDITH

I don't know you well enough. I think we're moving too fast.

She reaches for the doorknob, but Hardy catches her hand. He pets the dimples that have replaced her knuckles.

HARDY

Please don't go. Please.

He offers her the spoon.

Meredith squeezes her lips together.

HARDY (CONT'D)

Your skin reminds me of vanilla pudding. I want to lick it.

MEREDITH

Stop lying to me.

HARDY

I've never lied to you. Never will.

The ice cream melts down Hardy's arm in streaks.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I want you to take a bite. Just one nibble. That's all.

MEREDITH

But your blinds are open.

HARDY

Let them see.

Hardy passes the ice cream over Meredith's lips. She shudders.

MEREDITH

Be gentle. I'm a virgin.

Hardy eases the spoon into her mouth.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

That was delicious.

They hold each other in a massive union of flab.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT – DAWN

Hardy and Meredith snore side-by-side. Their stomachs keep the bedspread from covering their feet.

The ALARM CLOCK blares at 4:00 a.m.

RADIO DJ (O.S.)

(filtered) It's going to be unseasonably hot, folks. We're looking at a high of eighty-five with ninety-two percent humidity. Looks like we're getting a taste of summer in March.

Hardy gropes for the clock and shuts it off. He peels himself from the crater at the center of his

bed.

Hardy drags his feet over a trail of torn Twinkie wrappers that lead from the bed to the kitchen. Tubs of ice cream lie scattered and empty on the counters, as do two packs of Oreos.

Hardy opens his refrigerator and guzzles a bottle of chocolate milk.

EXT. STREET – DAWN

Wearing a SWEAT SUIT and TENNIS SHOES, Hardy shakes his legs and arms loose. He heaves each foot onto the wall of a nearby building and stretches his calves and hamstrings.

He power walks up the street while bringing his hand to his mouth as though in the middle of a frenzied competition.

EXT. STREET – DAWN – 30 MINUTES LATER

With sweat streaks forming down his back and stomach, Hardy lurches on. He still practices the act of eating though he does so with far less energy.

He pauses before the bakery that enraptured him during his date with Meredith. He walks inside.

EXT. STREET – DAWN – TWO MINUTES LATER

Hardy leaves the bakery cradling a PAPER BAG in the nook of his arm. He rummages through it and pulls out a JELLY DOUGHNUT.

He eats half of the doughnut in one bite and resumes his exercise.

EXT. MUSEUM – DAY

Hardy wheezes before a set of formidable STEPS. Sweat trickles from his fingertips as though they're leaking faucets. A variety of FILLINGS stain the neck and sleeves of Hardy's sweatshirt.

Hardy surrenders after taking only the first step.

EXT. BANDSTAND – DAY

Trina and Hardy maneuver their way through a crowd of PEOPLE who wield either CAMERAS or POSTERBOARDS. They stop near a MAN (30s) whose sign reads, "Eat Like a Champion Today."

Trina glances at it then scoops a dried-up knot of tobacco from her mouth and flings it to the ground.

TRINA

(to Hardy) I wish I could do a better job telling you what it's like up there. Especially when you got fans like this one.

MAN #6

Open your throat, Kieu! Don't chew so much this time.

TRINA

It's something you can't imagine. People clapping, actually cheering your name if you can believe it. You'd almost think you belonged if they didn't make you feel superhuman.

Trina nods toward the stage, where five GURGITATORS who cover the spectrum of body types rock nervously behind pyramids of BABY BACK RIBS.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Which one of them would be the most immediate danger to you if you was up there in the middle of things?

HARDY

The woman who looks like she weighs as much as my thigh.

TRINA

Shit no. She's the biggest threat, but she ain't the most immediate. Ain't you been learning anything?

Hardy reassesses the competitors.

HARDY

The fat man.

TRINA

Right. Now why is that?

HARDY

As a sprinter, he should know that the only chance he has is to eat as much as he can as quickly as he can. Once he's full, he just has to hope that no one else is able to take down as much as he did.

TRINA

That's his strategy, sure. But how's that a threat to you?

HARDY

It's because of the pace he'll set. If I try to keep up with him, I'll spend too much energy, and I won't be any good for the long haul.

TRINA

Right. Don't you ever let an opponent determine how fast you eat. Once you do that, you're no longer in control of your game. You lose that, you lose everything. (a beat) Goddamn fatties are the worst.

HARDY

Why do you say that?

TRINA

Because they do everything backwards. Leading with the size of their stomachs mostly. Trying to fill up while the rest of us all try to expand. Their form's no goddamn good neither. They're the southpaws of the sport.

HARDY

Maybe we can use that to our advantage?

TRINA

Or maybe we can concentrate on why we're here, huh? Now tell me, if you was up there, what's your plan of action against the toothpick?

The guitar-driven introduction to "EYE OF THE TIGER" suddenly booms over the loudspeakers as the MC (30s) dashes onto the stage dressed in the GARB of a RINGMASTER.

MC

I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, what is it about human nature that makes us strive to defy the odds? To defy logic? Is it the thrill of victory? Is it the modest cash prize? Is it the free food, the exposure? It's about all of those and more. It's about eating more, having more, loving more, living more. Make no mistake, life is for the living, and the dead are dead, and we're alive here, right? Who is the most alive?

The crowd erupts with applause and camera flashes.

MC (CONT'D)

Cut the music. (a beat) Before the contest starts, I'd like to introduce someone who knows what it means to live. Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together for a woman who embodies the spirit of stomach-centric sports, the world's number one gurgitator, Sidewinder Abraham!

Sidewinder marches onto the stage dressed in a REFEREE'S UNIFORM. She strains into a muscular pose and holds it while the crowd ahs at her presence. She then tosses mini

AMERICAN FLAGS to those at the front of the stage.

Trina gnaws her bottom lip into the space between her teeth.

EXT. BACKSTAGE – DAY

Trina and Hardy push and shove to hold their spot along a barricade, where throngs of FANS stretch cameras and autograph books over the shoulders of those who try to do the same.

The frenzy holds little interest for Trina, who glares at the scene before her.

Two amused PARAMEDICS (20s) press stethoscopes against the throat and stomach of the FAT MAN (30s) whom Hardy eventually noted as the most immediate threat.

PARAMEDIC #1

Just try to relax, sir.

PARAMEDIC #2

Take a deep breath now. Good.

Behind them, three downtrodden GURGITATORS (30s) stand poised to vomit around a trashcan.

GURGITATOR #1

We did our best. That's all anyone can ask.

GURGITATOR #2

I could have done better. I could have eaten more.

GURGITATOR #3

Your only option is to move on. That's all any of us can do now.

KIEU LEE, 36, a woman whose scrawny frame seems one morsel away from snapping with the heft of her distended stomach, holds a trophy under Sidewinder's congratulatory arm. They stand before CRAIG FULLTON, 42, a reporter whose voice fluctuates with well-rehearsed interest, and a CAMERAMAN (20s), who bears his equipment like he seems to bear his job.

SIDEWINDER

(to Craig) I'd like to welcome Kieu to the gastric elite. She deserves all of the recognition and accolades that come with being a champion of the sport.

CRAIG

Kieu, tell our viewers at home how it feels to collect your first win on the professional circuit?

KIEU

It's like nothing I've ever felt before. To work so hard for so long and to finally have it pay off. I never thought this day would come. (to the camera) Hi, mom!

CRAIG

(to Sidewinder) With competitive eating's sudden rise in popularity, how do you respond to accusations that some of the athletes are using steroids?

SIDEWINDER

A cheap shot artist, huh? I should crack your head.

She slaps her thighs together.

SIDEWINDER (CONT'D)

For the record, that's the most ridiculous allegation I've ever heard. First of all, I've never used steroids in my life, even when I was a bodybuilder. Second of all, they wouldn't do anything to enhance your ability to eat. If anything, they might hinder it. This sport's all about form, buddy, all about coordination. But, hey, if you want to print lies and make a name for yourself, be my guest.

CRAIG

Would either of you be opposed to mandatory drug testing?

KIEU

Anything to keep the sport from being tarnished.

SIDEWINDER

My word should be enough. Next topic.

CRAIG

Where does our new champ go from here?

KIEU

Right back in the gym. The world oyster eating championship is less than two months away.

SIDEWINDER

And available on pay per view.

CRAIG

(to Kieu) Are you up to the challenge of competing against a legend?

KIEU

I don't know. She's the best.

SIDEWINDER

I promise to take it easy on you.

She spans Kieu's ass.

CRAIG

One last question. Kieu, are you full?

KIEU

I could go twelve more rounds.

CRAIG

(to the camera) You heard it here, ladies and gentlemen. The words of a champion. Craig Fullton for Diamond Sports.

Sidewinder turns Kieu toward their fans. The women smile and wave.

SIDEWINDER

Enjoy it, Charlie. It's the last time you're going to feel like a winner for a while. I'm going to eat you raw in the front of the whole world, and you know it.

Kieu holds her trophy up for all to see.

EXT. BACKSTAGE – DAY – TEN MINUTES LATER

Sidewinder scribbles an autograph for the last remaining fan, a WOMAN in her fifties who wears a shirt that's AIRBRUSHED with a portrait of the world's number one gurgitator.

WOMAN #2

You're a joy.

SIDEWINDER

As long as my opponents don't think so, I'm in good shape.

The woman wraps Sidewinder in a bear hug.

WOMAN #2

Thank you for all you do.

Sidewinder sheds herself from the woman's arms.

SIDEWINDER

I would have quit a long time ago if it wasn't for support like yours.

She starts to slip away but collides into Trina.

TRINA

Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just go ahead and whoop your ass.

SIDEWINDER

I'm glad to see that you've moved on with your life. Who's the fatty?

Visibly apprehensive, Hardy stands a few feet behind his coach.

TRINA

None of your goddamn business, that's who. (to Sidewinder's fan)
This look like a circus?

The woman runs away.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Why ain't you told everybody how it is you keep winning?

SIDEWINDER

You know as well as I do that I'm not on steroids anymore.

TRINA

That ain't what I'm talking about.

SIDEWINDER

You had your run at the top. Now it's time for me to have mine.

TRINA

Me and you both know you only got to the top because of what you did to me. And you only stay at the top because you keep eating against fatties and set-ups.

SIDEWINDER

The sport's better off without you, redneck. Admit it.

TRINA

You turned competitive eating into a freak show. You're a disgrace. You always have been.

SIDEWINDER

Did you ever compete in a sold out arena? Did you ever make ESPN's top ten list?

TRINA

You better back off, dyke.

SIDEWINDER

No, you didn't. (a beat) It must kill you to know that there's no one out there who can beat me. That there never will be.

Hardy suddenly stands erect.

HARDY

I could take you.

SIDEWINDER

Aren't you a little inexperienced to be chiming in?

TRINA

This is between me and her, Runyan.

SIDEWINDER

By the way, porker, I've destroyed every gurgitator who's come out of her shitty little gym. Sure, they've won a lot of titles, but never against me.

HARDY

I'll face you anywhere, any time, for nothing.

TRINA

You got no idea what you getting into.

SIDEWINDER

Listen to her, fatty. She doesn't even have the guts to give it a shot. I can't believe I just told Hicks she doesn't have the guts.

Trina swings but misses. Hardy restrains her.

Sidewinder's physique swells to the challenge.

SIDEWINDER (CONT'D)

(to Hardy) You want it, you got it.

HARDY

If you're so ready to prove you're the best, why don't you do it now?

SIDEWINDER

Only in sanctioned competitions.

HARDY

Name it.

SIDEWINDER

May. New Orleans. The world oyster eating championship.

TRINA

That ain't enough time to get him ready.

SIDEWINDER

That ain't my problem. (to Hardy) You're going to learn what pain is.

She plunges through the herd of CAMERAMEN who had gathered to catch the moment.

TRINA

What the hell you doing, Runyan?

HARDY

You told me to be fearless.

TRINA

Fearless, not stupid.

HARDY

I want to take her down.

TRINA

Well you can do it without me. I don't want this no more.

HARDY

What are you saying?

TRINA

I got to spell everything out for you? I quit.

The cameramen encircle Hardy, whose breasts heave with the sigh of defeat.

INT. MEREDITH'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Hardy, Meredith, and Curtis watch television in a living room that's wall-to-wall with porcelain BUNNY RABBITS. Hardy and Meredith chomp on cookies. They flirt by nudging each other with their elbows.

ANGLE ON

the television, where Hardy and Sidewinder stand behind PODIUMS on opposite sides of a stage.

REPORTER #1 (O.S.)

Sidewinder, what do you look to gain by accepting the challenge of an unknown gurgitator?

SIDEWINDER

I'd like to begin by thanking our troops overseas. They make our way of living possible. God bless America.

Her statement meets with murmurs of approval.

SIDEWINDER (CONT'D)

As far as Mr. Runyan goes, I'm happy to be a part of a sport that gives everyone a chance to be somebody. It's the American way.

REPORTER #2 (O.S.)

What are your feelings about your challenger's odds?

SIDEWINDER

He has as much a chance of winning as anyone.

ANGLE ON

Curtis, who takes a long pull from a PINT of gin.

CURTIS

Chance my ass. You're going to get clobbered.

MEREDITH

Hardy needs our support right now you, you, stinky man.

HARDY

Will you two knock it off? You've been at each other since we got here.

Meredith sticks her tongue at Curtis.

ANGLE ON

the TV screen. Hardy's eyes dart nervously among the reporters.

MEREDITH (O.S.)

Ah, you look so scared, Sweetie.

REPORTER #3 (O.S.)

Hardy, what's your plan of action against such an accomplished athlete?

HARDY

I'm not sure. I mean, Sidewinder, she's number one. I guess I'll just have to do the best I can. It's all I can ask of myself.

REPORTER #2 (O.S.)

How long have you been a gurgitator?

HARDY

About a month.

The reporters chuckle.

HARDY (CONT'D)

But that doesn't mean I won't be ready.

REPORTER #3 (O.S.)

What do you say to rumors that you're training yourself for the May showdown?

Hardy chews over his answer.

HARDY

No comment.

REPORTER #1 (O.S.)

Hardy, Hardy, tell us. What made you decide to challenge the undisputed champion of oyster eating?

HARDY

It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

REPORTER #1 (O.S.)

Do you believe in miracles?

HARDY

I believe in myself. I hope that's enough.

Hardy blows a swift kiss to the camera.

ANGLE ON

Hardy in the living room. He kneads Meredith's doughy thigh.

HARDY

That was to you, babe.

The comment reddens her lips and cheeks.

MEREDITH

You silly goose.

CURTIS

For fuck's sake.

He drinks deeply from his bottle.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

So, Pillsbury, you're finally doing it, huh?

HARDY

I hate it when you drink like this, Curtis. Come on.

CURTIS

I think you're an idiot for what you're doing. You know that?

HARDY

I do now.

CURTIS

Is it worth it? I mean really. When you know you're going to lose. Think all the pain it's going to cause you. Like you're not unhappy enough as it is.

MEREDITH

I make him happy.

CURTIS

(mocking) That so?

HARDY

Yeah. It is. Why don't you just go home?

Curtis caps his bottle.

CURTIS

I'm only looking out for you, Pillsbury.

HARDY

You've got a funny way of doing it. I guess you always have.

CURTIS

Yeah? Well, don't look to me for any more help.

HARDY

I'm not looking to anybody for help. I got myself into this. I'm going to get myself out.

MEREDITH

I'm here for you.

HARDY

I know that better than I know anything.

CURTIS

(to Meredith) Want to do us all a favor and mind your business? (a beat, to Hardy) You're afraid, aren't you?

HARDY

I'm not afraid of anyone or anything.

Curtis finishes his gin then staggers outside.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I'm sorry you had to see that, Sugar Pie. It's been a long time since he's been an angry drunk.

MEREDITH

He's a stinky, stinky man.

HARDY

He doesn't mean it.

He kisses Meredith's cheek.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I've got to go.

MEREDITH

But why?

HARDY

I want to hit the gym early tomorrow. Come on, walk me out.

Meredith mopes toward the door.

EXT. HALLWAY – NIGHT

Hardy and Meredith hold hands on the threshold of her apartment.

HARDY

I'll come over after you get off work tomorrow.

MEREDITH

That'd be super.

HARDY

I hope I didn't embarrass you too much by blowing you that kiss.

MEREDITH

Never.

Hardy's eyes fall downcast.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

What's the matter?

HARDY

You know how I said I'm not afraid?

MEREDITH

Yeah.

HARDY

I am.

He shuffles to the stairwell like a server shouldering a voracious amount of food.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Hardy opens his refrigerator and removes a half-eaten BURRITO of monstrous proportions. He peels back the foil and gnaws off a mouthful.

Someone KNOCKS on his door.

Hardy opens it to find Trina fidgeting with a can of Skoal.

TRINA

You mind if I come in? Talk to you a bit?

Hardy moves to let her pass.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Nice place.

HARDY

What can I do for you?

TRINA

Ain't you going to ask me to sit?

Hardy sweeps a chair free of crumbs.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Thanks. (a beat) I seen you on the television tonight. Showed a lot of guts. Hell, I been in this racket for thirty some odd years, and I can't hardly remember the last time I seen a gurgitator show so much guts.

HARDY

Stop buttering me up.

TRINA

I'm just trying to tell you you did real good. You showed hunger for the first time since we met. It made me proud to know you.

Hardy finishes his snack with one massive bite.

TRINA (CONT'D)

If you don't mind me telling you, it ain't good to eat like that during training. Got to reserve your stomach for exercises.

HARDY

(mouth packed with food) Why are you here?

TRINA

I want you to know what you up against.

HARDY

I'm listening.

Trina takes a PHOTO from her pocket and unfolds it.

TRINA

Here. That's a pic from my first win. I ate four cherry pies before anyone else could eat one. Got only a hundred bucks and a ribbon, but, hey, it was a start. Anyway, I only competed as a pro for eight years because of that cunt you eating against. She took it all away.

Hardy opens a JAR of strawberry jelly. He digs out two fingers worth.

TRINA (CONT'D)

That ain't no good for you. Ain't you listening?

HARDY

I listen to my trainers.

TRINA

Yeah, well. I beat that dyke fair and square, I tell you. Ate forty-one dozen oysters to take the title, to set the record. It didn't make her too happy if you can imagine, so we got into it after the match. She stomped my guts in.

Trina lifts her shirt to reveal a SCAR that runs across the length of her shriveled waist.

TRINA (CONT'D)

I'm no good no more. I'd pop open if I tried to compete.

Hardy lets his jelly-choked fingers drop to his side.

HARDY

I always thought you retired after that win because you had nothing left to achieve as a gurgitator. At least that's what you said.

TRINA

I was full of shit. You got a bottle I could spit in?

Hardy scans his counters. He spots a Coke bottle by his microwave and hands it over.

TRINA

Thanks.

HARDY

Look, Trina—

TRINA

Call me Coach.

HARDY

I'm sorry all that happened to you, but what does it have to do with what I'm up against?

TRINA

It's got everything to do with it. Everything.

Trina stands and takes the picture from Hardy's clean hand. She folds it reverently, then grabs

his shoulders. The flab envelops her fingers.

TRINA (CONT'D)

You up against a killer, a wrecking machine. All she's good for is eating. Eating and eating and eating. Shit, she'll eat you to death in three minutes. Less than three minutes.

Hardy wedges his fingers back into the jelly jar.

HARDY

You think I haven't heard that already? You think I haven't thought of it myself?

TRINA

You know what makes her most dangerous? She's been at the top for years now, and she's still hungry. Starving even. Fame ain't done nothing to lessen her edge.

HARDY

What's the point?

TRINA

The point is you can't win.

HARDY

There ain't no can't.

TRINA

This time, just this once, there is.

HARDY

So what am I supposed to do? Just give up like I've always done? Call another press conference and announce my retirement?

TRINA

It's an option.

HARDY

I'm only interested in one option. Showing Sidewinder who can eat the most.

TRINA

If that's the case.

Trina tugs the jelly from Hardy's grasp.

TRINA (CONT'D)

You going to fight her hard, Runyan. And you going to lose. But if lose is what you want, I'll be there to do it with you.

She tries to hug him, but she can't reach her arms around his shoulders.

EXT. STREET – DAWN

Hardy practices the act of eating as he power walks up the deserted street outside of the building in which he lives. He puffs a lungful then starts jogging.

A MAN (60s) watches Hardy's blundering form pass by while picking up trash from the sidewalk. He smirks then stuffs a garbage bag to capacity with to-go boxes and torn condom wrappers.

EXT. STREET – DAWN – THIRTY MINUTES LATER

Hardy, barely walking now, stops before the bakery where he purchased doughnuts on his first early-morning "run."

He ogles the doughnut holes and the éclairs, the blueberry muffins and the petit fours.

He steps toward the entrance but stops and carries on with his exercise.

EXT. STREET – DAWN – TWO MINUTES LATER

Hardy gasps toward an obese HOT DOG VENDOR (30s) who prepares his wiener-shaped stand for the day's business.

VENDOR

Surgery's the only hope you got, buddy.

Hardy's legs start to give way. He falters through several steps but regains his balance.

EXT. MUSEUM – DAY

Hardy hoists his feet up the stairs one laborious stride after the other.

When he reaches the top, he tries to breathe with his hands above his head, but a cramp traps his arms by his side.

He sways through a moment of rest then forces himself to hobble down the steps toward home.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Hardy delivers a stack of skillet to Curtis. He walks as though his legs are made of wooden boards.

CURTIS

Feeling stiff today, Pillsbury?

HARDY

What's it look like?

Hardy can barely speak through the mass of GUM in his mouth.

Curtis reaches under his apron and fishes out a FLASK.

CURTIS

Might help you, huh?

HARDY

When'd you start that habit again?

CURTIS

It doesn't matter.

Curtis takes a quick pull.

Hardy notices strands of HAIR boiling in a pot of spaghetti noodles.

HARDY

Better not let the boss see you without your hairnet.

CURTIS

What's with the gum?

HARDY

It's part of the training. Strengthens the jaws.

CURTIS

You're really going through with it all?

Hardy adds two more sticks to his jam-packed mouth.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

So what's the story with you and that ice cream broad? Things going well?

HARDY

What did it look like?

CURTIS

You're really into her, huh?

HARDY

Yeah, I like her.

Hardy uses a dishrag to wipe the pink saliva that outlines his lips.

CURTIS

I don't get it.

HARDY

What's there to get?

CURTIS

What you see in her.

HARDY

All that matters is the apology you owe her.

CURTIS

For what? Telling you the truth?

HARDY

Something like that.

Hardy turns toward his sink. He grimaces with each stiff movement.

CURTIS

What about me, Pillsbury?

HARDY

What about you?

CURTIS

You think I don't have dreams? Aspirations?

Curtis grabs a handful of crawfish from the prep line and shoves it in his mouth. Chewed up tails spill over his lips as he continues his rant.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

You think I don't want to do something with my life? That I never wanted to be anything more than this? You think I don't want to be loved? Like I'm so repulsive. I could be good to someone, damnit. But of course you don't see all that. All you care about is yourself. That's all you've ever cared about.

He tops the crawfish with two fistfuls of diced onions.

Hardy accepts the culinary challenge. He spits his blob of gum in a nearby trashcan and moves Curtis aside. He slides before him the plastic containers that overflow with ingredients such as

sun-dried tomatoes, chopped green peppers, boiled shrimp, and smoked tasso.

ANGLE ON

Curtis, who guzzles gin from his flask while watching Hardy eat. His eyes widen as the off screen tempo of Hardy's PANTING increases.

Hardy finishes in a matter of seconds.

He stands over the empty containers and juts his breasts out as if to say, "Want some more?"

CURTIS

You may be a champion yet.

Hardy opens another pack of gum.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Hardy lies naked in the dip at the center of his bed. Meredith slathers his body with BEN GAY.

MEREDITH

This stuff is sticky icky. Smells too.

HARDY

Makes me feel better though. God I ache all over.

MEREDITH

Hey, Sweetie, if it doesn't hurt too much, I need you to lift your stomach so I can get your thighs.

Hardy seizes his gut with both hands and pulls back.

HARDY

Love bug?

MEREDITH

Yeah?

HARDY

What does it look like?

MEREDITH

Kind of like a soggy French fry. It's cute.

Meredith squirts more of the ointment in her palm and massages Hardy's calves.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

Will you check my blood pressure when this stuff dries? My heart's pounding today.

It's a strenuous task, but Hardy manages to sit up.

HARDY

I've been thinking.

MEREDITH

About what?

HARDY

When all of this is over, maybe we can do something, you know, to live healthier.

Meredith pouts.

MEREDITH

You think I'm fat.

HARDY

We're both fat. But that's my point.

He holds her hands tenderly.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I've never felt anything as special as what we have together, and I don't want it to stop. I want that more than I want to beat Sidewinder.

MEREDITH

You're just saying that.

HARDY

No, I'm not. I'm serious. If we don't do something, this feeling isn't going to last because we're not going to last.

MEREDITH

What do you have in mind?

HARDY

I don't know. Some kind of diet maybe.

MEREDITH

Well the Atkins thing is a pile of poop.

HARDY

We'll think of something.

Meredith eases Hardy back to his pillows.

MEREDITH

You just hush now and relax. You've got a championship to win.

She squeezes the rest of the Ben Gay across Hardy's stomach and rubs it in.

INT. OFFICE – DAY

Hardy and Trina sit huddled in the glow of a TELEVISION.

Hardy chews gum and watches with severe concentration.

ANGLE ON

the screen, where Sidewinder devours corncob after corncob after corncob.

Trina stands and paces the room, although her attention remains transfixed on the TV.

TRINA

Notice the time. We're only a minute into competition, and she's eating like it's the last lap. Yeah, she got an interesting style she does. Once that whistle blows, she barrels right through the food like a fatty. But she got the insides of a toothpick. That really throws off a lot of her opponents. But not us.

HARDY

Why do they call her Sidewinder?

TRINA

It's from this move she perfected as a bodybuilder. Dumb as shit if you ask me. Her real name's Rebecca. (a beat) Look there. You see that?

ANGLE ON

Sidewinder standing with her arms crossed while the GURGITATORS around her continue with their desperate efforts.

Trina shakes her head.

TRINA

See how she toys with her opponents. Lets them think they have a chance. That always drove me crazy. (a beat) Hey, Runyan, check out the timer. How much they got left in regulation?

HARDY

A little over five minutes.

TRINA

How many contestants are there?

HARDY

Two outside of Sidewinder.

TRINA

Now watch this.

ANGLE ON

the TV. The two gurgitators Hardy mentioned suddenly flee the stage with their hands over their mouths. Sidewinder keeps eating.

Trina loads up with fresh tobacco while Hardy loads up with fresh gum.

TRINA

She already won the competition, but she keeps going. You see, she doesn't just want to win, she wants to destroy. She wants to make it so that her name lives forever in the record books. It's ruthless.

Trina stands in front of the video.

TRINA (CONT'D)

I know I don't need to tell you, Runyan, but when you climb on that stage, you going to be eating against the best gurgitator in the world. Now like I said before, you going to lose. But at least you going to do it well.

HARDY

I was always under the impression that losing is losing.

TRINA

You ain't going to be embarrassed. How about that? In fact, you going to threaten her. You going to make her eat for her life. You want to know how? Because we're going to kill that gag reflex. We're going to stretch your stomach to the skin, and then we're going to stretch it some more. You going to be a very dangerous athlete. The kind Sidewinder hates.

Inspired by Trina's words, Hardy rushes into the gym.

INT. GYM – DAY

The place buzzes when Hardy steps out of the locker room in his usual workout attire. Some of the rookies nod in respect. Others glare for a moment then return to their push-ups and stomach crunches.

Hardy strides energetically toward a table where Flash arranges five heads of cleaned CABBAGE.

FLASH

I hope you're hungry.

HARDY

I'm always hungry.

FLASH

You might be singing a different tune after this exercise. You see, cabbage takes a while to digest, so it sits in your stomach longer than other types of food. You eat a bunch to stretch your insides, to get them used to having a load crammed in there.

Hardy stands with his legs shoulder-width apart, bends his knees to achieve a center of gravity. He grips the table to find leverage over the spread of vegetables.

FLASH (CONT'D)

Eat up.

Hardy sways from foot to foot as he chews and swallows cabbage by the handful. He gropes the table's edge in a futile effort to maintain his balance.

TRINA (O.S.)

Stop! Stop it right now!

She charges toward them from across the gym.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Jiminy crickets, Runyan. That's one of the clumsiest stances I've ever seen I tell you.

She pulls a piece of STRING from her pocket and hands it to Flash.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Tie his knees together with a half a foot of slack. Make it tight so he can't break it.

Flash jumps to the task.

HARDY

What difference does balance make?

TRINA

It makes all the difference in the world, you uneven son of a bitch. You got to be level to get the food down right. To keep it going down. Like I told you before, you're just like Dickey. All over the place. That string solved his problem and it'll solve yours too.

FLASH

When you can eat and hold your stance, you'll find yourself with all the balance and coordination you need.

TRINA

And when you get there, it means you mastered the most important part of the sport. Form. Now give it a shot.

ANGLE ON

Trina and Flash as they watch Hardy train.

FLASH

(in Trina's ear) Don't you wish you had his guts?

TRINA

I feel like I do. (to Hardy) Hot damn, Runyan, keep that pace up. You doing great.

She whistles through her missing teeth as a sign of support.

EXT. STREET – NIGHT

Hardy bounces on the balls of his feet while Trina locks the gym.

TRINA

You making us all proud in there, Runyan.

HARDY

Thanks, Coach. I'm giving you my all.

TRINA

That's good. Real good. God, I feel ten years younger.

The wrinkles around Trina's eyes and mouth tighten into a scowl.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Before you go, I got something I got to ask you.

HARDY

I'm all ears, Coach.

TRINA

What's this I hear about you and some ice cream dame?

Hardy blushes and shrugs.

TRINA (CONT'D)

I'm only going to say this once, so you better have the shit out your ears. Love is weakness, and gurgitators ain't got room for it.

HARDY

But I like her a lot.

TRINA

Eating to win. That's what you're living for now.

HARDY

Come on, Coach, you know how it is when you meet someone special.

TRINA

I know what it takes to dust off six thirty-two-ounce bowls of mayo. That's about it. So no more grab assing.

HARDY

What difference does it make if we know how the competition's going to end? What difference does any of this make for that matter?

TRINA

Philosophizing ain't my job. Coaching you is. (a beat) Try to get some rest, huh? We got a long day of water training ahead of us.

Hardy scuffs his feet up the sidewalk.

INT. MEREDITH'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Hardy joins Meredith on the couch. He carries a bin filled with ICE CUBES. He chokes the first one down without chewing.

MEREDITH

What kind of silliness is that?

HARDY

Stretches the esophagus.

Hardy swallows the second cube with greater ease. He notices a saucer on the coffee table. It holds a mammoth slice of TURTLE CHEESECAKE.

MEREDITH

Do you know what today is?

HARDY

Saturday?

Meredith punches his arm.

MEREDITH

Silly goose. I'll be right back.

Hardy gulps through more of the ice while Meredith leaves the room.

She returns a moment later wearing a SILK ROBE. She waves an ENVELOPE and a WRAPPED GIFT.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

It's our one month anniversary. Did you get me anything?

HARDY

I'm so sorry, Lovebug, but I completely forgot. I've just been so consumed lately.

Meredith stifles the budding tears.

MEREDITH

I understand. (a beat) Here. Open what I got you.

Hardy shreds the wrapping paper to reveal an ICE CREAM MACHINE.

HARDY

Oh, Honey, it's beautiful.

Meredith claps and bounces up and down, rattling the saucer on the coffee table.

MEREDITH

I figured since ice cream brought us together, it'll keep us together. And look, read the side. You can make yogurt with it too. For when we go on our diet.

HARDY

I love it.

He lays a sloppy kiss on Meredith's lips.

MEREDITH

Read your card.

Hardy opens the envelope and pulls out a HEART-SHAPED CARD made of CONSTRUCTION PAPER. He starts to read it.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

No, no, silly, do it out loud.

HARDY

(reading) To the sweetest man I have ever known, here are the reasons why you are my Pooh bear. You are huggable and loveable, you are cute and cuddly, you have the world's greatest smile, you have the softest pair of hands, you wear your heart on your stomach, you are filled with passion, you enhance every moment I'm alive.

Hardy dabs tears from the corners of his eyes.

HARDY (CONT'D)

(reading) I never take a breath without feeling thankful that I've met you. Happy anniversary. Love, your Lovebug (a beat) That's the best card anyone's ever given me. Especially since you made it yourself.

MEREDITH

Now for your real present.

She struggles to her feet and unties her robe. Letting it slide to her ankles, she exposes a body that bears striking resemblance to Hardy's sagging nudity. Her black LINGERIE sinks into the

flesh of her hips and thighs, shoulders and back.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

What's the matter?

HARDY

Nothing. You look absolutely delicious.

MEREDITH

I've got just the thing to get you in the mood.

Meredith takes the saucer from the table and forks off a chunk of cheesecake.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

I know how much you love the chocolate and the caramel.

Hardy's cheeks and chins swing as he shakes his head.

Meredith stomps the floral rug beneath her feet.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

Don't be a sourpuss on our anniversary.

HARDY

Sweetie, I want to more than anything. Believe me. But I can't during training.

MEREDITH

Of course you can.

She arranges her gut atop Hardy's so that she can straddle his lap.

HARDY

Don't tempt me.

Meredith wags the cheesecake in front of his lips.

Hardy clamps his jaws and dodges the fork.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I'm serious, Meredith. I can't fool around. Not during training.

MEREDITH

It can be like our first time.

She smears the cheesecake all over her chest and stomach, into the crevices of her groin.

HARDY

I need to keep my strength, babe. I've got to stay focused.

MEREDITH

You care more about your stinky sport than you do about me. It's been like that ever since that silly, stupid Sidewinder came into our lives.

HARDY

You know that's not true.

MEREDITH

Yes it is.

HARDY

Come on. Let's snuggle.

MEREDITH

No way, José.

She squeals with tears and flees the room.

Hardy pours the rest of the ice cubes down the front of his pants.

EXT. STREET – DAWN

Hardy jogs past the bakery without even the slightest glance at the treats inside. He brings imaginary forks to his mouth in rapid, fluid movements.

His exercise smacks of a vigor we've yet to see from our out of shape hero.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Hardy's jaws work away at another mouthful of gum. He scrapes a plate clean of flattened and half eaten lasagna.

CURTIS (O.S.)

I see you gave up on that nasty habit.

Hardy turns around to find his friend dressed in street clothes.

HARDY

(muffled with gum) I have to save my stomach for the exercises.

CURTIS

What?

Hardy tongues the gum into the corner of his mouth, where it bulges against his cheek.

HARDY

I said I have to keep my stomach empty. It's part of the training.

CURTIS

That's got to be giving you horrible cramps.

HARDY

They're part of the process. I've gotten pretty used to them by now.

Where the hell have you been?

CURTIS

Cashed in on some vacation time so I could get a few things straight. You mind if I talk to you?

HARDY

You already are.

Curtis pulls his mullet into a fragile ponytail.

CURTIS

You know I've never been one to say I'm sorry.

HARDY

I don't see any reason for you to start now.

CURTIS

There's plenty of reason. Plenty. Because I was full of shit. I guess I just saw you out there doing it and it drove me crazy. Made me mad at myself for never having the balls to take a shot. But all that's changing.

He produces a SHOEBOX from behind his back. He opens it to show off a polished set of TAP DANCING SHOES.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

I'm leaving for New York this afternoon. I start school next week.

HARDY

Congratulations.

CURTIS

I owe it all to you, Pillsbury.

HARDY

Come on, Curtis. I'm just a fat man with a dream.

CURTIS

You're an inspiration. I wanted you to know that. And I wanted to tell you thanks. You make us proud out there now.

He pats Hardy's stomach, causing it to jiggle in its apron.

INT. GYM – NIGHT

Hardy swills his way through a GALLON OF WATER while Trina keeps time.

TRINA

You going to be a hole that keeps on spreading, kiddo. It don't matter how much we put in there, and it don't matter what gets in our way. Ribs ain't going to stop us. Organs ain't going to stop us. Shit, your skin ain't going to stop us neither. You going to be able to eat nails.

Flash stands nearby with a towel draped over his shoulder and a spit bucket in his hand. He scrutinizes Hardy's throat.

FLASH

Quit filling your mouth then swallowing. It makes you lose time. Open your throat and let it all flow down.

Hardy gags and drops the gallon when he sees

Meredith, who hovers in the doorway. She seems too hesitant to enter but too ashamed to leave.

Hardy runs to her.

TRINA

(to Hardy) What I tell you about that fucking carb counter?

Hardy's and Meredith's bodies slap together in a hug of passion and flab.

HARDY

I've missed you so much.

MEREDITH

God, I've missed you too.

They smother each other's lips and chins with kisses.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry for how pooppy I've been acting.

HARDY

I'll give it all up, Lovebug. If that's what you want, I'll do it.

MEREDITH

I only want you to do one thing for me.

HARDY

Name it.

MEREDITH

Eat her alive.

Trina makes a thunderous echo when she claps her hands.

TRINA

What are we waiting for? Let's get to work!

Hardy throws his plump fists in the air.

SMASH CUT TO:

BLACK SCREEN.

We hear the first booming notes of "GONNA FLY NOW." The TRUMPETS stir within us a sense of perseverance and triumph, feelings that build with every note until they surge into an awe-inspiring conviction that no distance is too far to run, that no mountain is too high to climb, that no amount of food is too large to eat.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. MUSEUM - DAY

The SONG persists as Hardy runs up the first few steps,

INT. GYM – DAY

as Hardy's tits and belly heave while he jumps rope,

INT. GYM – DAY – ONE HOUR LATER

as Hardy exercises his gut on a mat under Trina's watchful eye,

TRINA

In and out. In and out.

Hardy sucks his stomach in then pushes it out, sucks it in, pushes it out.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

as Hardy swallows ice cubes two at a time,

EXT. MUSEUM – DAY

as Hardy still runs even though he's halfway to the top,

INT. GYM – DAY

as Hardy guzzles water,

INT. GYM – DAY – ONE HOUR LATER

as Hardy devours a head of cabbage while Flash keeps time,

FLASH

You're going to kill her!

Hardy gives him a thumb's up.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

as Hardy crams his mouth with stick after stick of gum,

EXT. MUSEUM – DAY

as Hardy reaches the top of the steps then bounces around with his fists raised in victory.

He's as ready as he'll ever be.

INT. HARDY'S APARTMENT - DAWN

Hardy and Meredith lie in bed. Meredith snores and sucks her thumb while Hardy stares at the ceiling.

HARDY

What if everybody's right?

Meredith's eyes open sleepily. She wipes the drool from her thumb's pruned tip.

MEREDITH

What's that, Sweetie?

HARDY

What they say about Sidewinder. That I have no shot of beating her. What if everybody's right?

MEREDITH

Don't think like that, Pooh bear. That's a stinky way to think.

HARDY

Who do I think I am challenging the best gurgitator in the world? I must be out of my mind.

He brushes Meredith's finger away when she tries to shush him.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I've watched the videos. I've seen her in action. She doesn't have a weakness. I can't win.

MEREDITH

What are you going to do then? Just quit the day of the competition after all of the work you've done? That would make you the silliest goose in the world.

HARDY

I'm not going to quit. I'm going to go in there and eat as much as I can. And if I lose, it's all right. I'm supposed to lose. Because all that matters is that I tried. I can live the rest of my life knowing that I didn't just sit back and not do anything. Championship or no championship.

MEREDITH

You'll always be my champion. Now try to get some rest.

She scoops Hardy's head into her armpit and strokes his scalp until they both fall asleep.

INT. ARENA – NIGHT

FANS fill the seats to capacity. They wave both poster boards and American flags. Their voices blend into a cacophony of excitement.

On the arena floor, we see a STAGE on which CAMERAMEN vie for the best angles around tables where dozens and dozens of RAW OYSTERS have been stacked atop each other in trays.

A BANNER flaps above them. It reads, "Welcome to the World Championship of Oyster Eating."

INT. SIDEWINDER'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Sidewinder wraps her wrist with adhesive TAPE. With the exception of the MUFFLED ROAR that filters down from the arena, the COARSE PEELING of the tape is the dominant sound. It seems heightened by the silence and the intensity.

INT. HARDY'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

The environment is identical to Sidewinder's locker room.

Flash tapes Hardy's wrist while Trina massages his triceps.

TRINA

(to Flash) Not too tight now. His arm'll need the circulation.

Meredith fights to hide her worried look.

INT. SIDEWINDER'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Sidewinder works on her other wrist. The depth of her BREATHING matches the RIP of the tape.

INT. HARDY'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Flash tapes Hardy's other wrist while Trina kneads his fingers and his palms.

TRINA

Don't you be afraid to switch up arms in the middle of competition. If your right tires out, give it a break just like we practiced.

Hardy breathes deeply and loudly. He winks at Meredith, who responds with a nervous smile.

INT. SIDEWINDER'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Sidewinder inhales half a bottle of NOSE SPRAY in each nostril. She breathes and seems satisfied with the intake of oxygen.

INT. HARDY'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Trina shoves a bottle of nose spray up Hardy's nostrils. She squeezes each time until her fingers turn white.

TRINA

Take it all in, Runyan. You ain't going to be able to use your mouth to breathe so you got to make sure your nose is clear. Don't want to lose time gasping through your mouth between bites.

FLASH

(to Hardy) Breathe for me.

He wraps his arms around Hardy's waist and lifts the athlete's diaphragm.

INT. SEWINDER'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Sewinder stretches her jaws by opening her mouth wide enough to house a fist with ease.

INT. HARDY'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Flash digs his fingers into Hardy's jaw muscles.

FLASH

With the oysters, you should be swallowing more than you're chewing, but we got to get the jaws loose. Got to get the blood flowing.

Meredith gestures to Hardy that he's number one.

INT. SEWINDER'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Sewinder balls her fingers to a fist. She eases it into her mouth, up to the tape job at her wrist. She never flinches, never gags.

INT. HARDY'S LOCKER ROOM – NIGHT

Trina slides a PLASTIC GLOVE onto her hand.

TRINA

(to Hardy) Just relax now, Runyan. We don't want a repeat of the first time.

Hardy opens his mouth so that Trina can slide her fingers down his throat. She pulls out without a hitch.

TRINA (CONT'D)

Go get her, kiddo.

Flash approaches Hardy with a gift.

HARDY

What's this?

Hardy opens the box.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I can't wear this, Flash.

FLASH

It's just a robe.

HARDY

It's not just a robe. It's your colors.

FLASH

It'd be an honor for me to see you in them.

Off screen, we can hear Meredith's signature SQUEAL. We can hear her blow the snot from her nose.

INT. HALLWAY – NIGHT

Hardy, Trina, and Flash start down a hallway lined with SECURITY GUARDS. Hardy bounces from foot to foot in a black robe that has a fiery lightning streak down the center of its back.

SIDEWINDER (O.S.)

Hey, fatty!

Hardy whips around to see Sidewinder marching down the hallway wearing an AMERICAN FLAG as a cape.

SIDEWINDER (CONT'D)

You shouldn't have showed up tonight. You're finished before you even start.

TRINA

We'll settle this on stage.

She tries to usher Hardy along.

SIDEWINDER

(to Hardy) You need to stop listening to that has been. She's finished. She's through. You don't stand a chance. I'm the baddest eater this world has ever seen.

HARDY

You don't look so bad to me.

SIDEWINDER

What'd you say, rookie? I'm going to make you wish you'd never sucked your mama's nipple.

Hardy and Sidewinder charge each other with raised fists, but the guards intercept them. They restrain the two gurgitators with outstretched clubs.

INT. ARENA – NIGHT

Two STAGESIDE COMMENTATORS sit behind a spread of MICROPHONES and closed circuit TELEVISIONS.

COMMENTATOR #1

We'd like to welcome all of you to the world championship of oyster eating, one of competitive eating's premiere events. And for the first time in the history of the sport, we're being broadcast on pay-per-view television. Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to welcome a lifelong friend and a veteran commentator, Chris Lawton. Chris.

COMMENTATOR #2

Thank you, Burt. The electricity's in the air tonight as the feud between world champion Sidewinder Abraham and newcomer Hardy Runyan has added an element of drama to tonight's event.

COMMENTATOR #1

It certainly has, Chris. Some say the rookie won't make it past ten dozen oysters. Vegas odds have him at eight. By the sounds of the crowd, it seems our first contestant is approaching.

ANGLE ON

Kieu Lee as she trots to the stage, where

Leeland Paige, the MC from the competition that first brought Hardy and Trina together, stands dressed in a tuxedo. His formal manner is in sharp contrast to his behavior the first time we met him.

LEEELAND

Ladies and gentlemen, she made a name for herself earlier this year when she set a new world record for the most ribs eaten in ten minutes. From Seoul, Korea, please welcome the rising star of competitive eating, Kieu Lee!

The crowd responds politely. However, their cheers quickly spiral into hisses and boos when

Buck Lucas heads toward the stage with his leg-sized arms held out wide. A MAN (50s) escapes the security rail and runs toward Buck holding a marker and a program.

MAN #7

Mr. Lucas, can I have your—

Buck punches the man in his mouth, sending him to the ground like a limp noodle.

Although he seems rattled by what he saw, Leeland makes nothing of the incident.

LEELAND

Our next contestant hails from the Windy City. Holder of six world records, including the title for most chicken nuggets eaten in twelve minutes, give a big New Orleans welcome to Buck “Livewire” Lucas.

The heckling intensifies. Buck eats it up, waves it toward him with outstretched hands.

ANGLE ON

the commentators, who watch Buck with wide eyes.

COMMENTATOR #2

Did he deck a fan on the way to the stage?

COMMENTATOR #1

I believe he did, Chris. Isn't the first time we've seen that unfortunately. Ah, it sounds like our newbie has finally made his entrance.

ANGLE ON

Hardy, Flash, and Trina. Hardy and Flash wear faces that could slice through the most burnt hunk of steak while Trina, mouth crammed with tobacco, seems surprisingly awestruck by the fans in attendance. The sport has certainly transformed since she last coached in a championship showdown.

Hardy's right eye swells with the beginnings of a contusion.

On stage, Leeland seems to have grown more accustomed to his role as announcer.

LEELAND

In the land of opportunity, everyone has a chance to become a champion. Ladies and gentlemen, it's my privilege to introduce to you a man who's taking his shot before all of us tonight. Please welcome your friend from down the bayou, Hardy Runyan!

Hardy remains tight-lipped and focused despite the applause.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Look at the determination in the rookie's eyes. He definitely has something to prove.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Indeed. I can't wait to see what he has in store for us.

Buck bumps Hardy from the side.

BUCK

Didn't get enough the first time? I guess I'll just have to whoop you again.

Hardy remains impervious.

The arena suddenly explodes with applause.

COMMENTATOR #2 (CONT'D, O.S.)

The deafening noise can only mean one thing, Burt.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

You're right, Chris. The champion has arrived.

ANGLE ON

Sidewinder, who dances toward the stage waving an oversized American flag.

SIDEWINDER

U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!

Her bottom lip is purple and engorged with blood.

COMMENTATOR #1 (CONT'D, O.S.)

Looks like our last two competitors met up backstage.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Chalk it up to the beauty of competitive spirit.

Leeland moves to avoid Sidewinder's flag when she climbs onto the stage.

LEELAND

Our final contestant needs no introduction.

Sidewinder waves the flag within inches of Hardy's face.

SIDEWINDER

The fatty's out in three minutes! Out in three!

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

The champ's making her prediction.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

She may be speaking too soon, Burt. I think there's more to our challenger than meets the eye.

LEELAND

The number-one-ranked gurgitator in the world, she's won a record straight fifty-three competitions, ten of which have occurred on this very stage. New Orleans, please join me in welcoming the nation's most patriotic athlete, Sidewinder Abraham!

Sidewinder flexes her muscles until they look as though they're on the verge of bursting through her skin.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

I don't think she has an ounce of fat on her body.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

What an impressive sight.

Hardy's attention holds steadfast on his stack of glistening oysters.

TRINA

(in Hardy's ear)

There you go, Runyan. Just stay focused.

Hardy swallows vigorously, over and over again.

ANGLE ON

the commentators, who speak directly to the millions watching at home.

COMMENTATOR #1

The stage is set for a real barnburner. What's your prediction, Chris?

COMMENTATOR #2

Of course I have to give the advantage to Sidewinder, but I'm expecting fierce opposition from some of her challengers. We don't know much about Hardy Runyan, but we do know that Buck Lucas is a force to be reckoned with.

COMMENTATOR #1

Yes he is. And let's not forget Ms. Lee. She's really starting to hit her stride as a competitive eater.

COMMENTATOR #2

I'm afraid I have to disagree with you, Burt. I don't mean to belittle the achievements of anyone in the sport, but the people she competed against in Texas were not on the same level as those she's facing tonight. I think she'll need to grind her teeth a bit more before she'll be a real threat.

COMMENTATOR #1

Finally, Chris, I have to ask since it's received so much attention. What do you say to claims that Runayn's in this strictly for the novelty?

COMMENTATOR #2

Did you get a look at their faces? That's no novelty. Those two flat out don't like each other.

COMMENTATOR #1

Well there you have it, folks. Let's check in with our announcer.

ANGLE ON

the stage, where the competitors stand poised to eat.

We can hear the anticipation in Leeland's voice.

LEELAND

Are you ready? (a beat) In compliance with international rules, the contestants can only compete with the allotted forks. They will not touch the shells, and they will not lift the trays.

Hardy drops to his knee and prays.

Sidewinder smirks at the sight.

SIDEWINDER

Your rituals won't save you now.

TRINA

(to Hardy) Come out swinging.

LEELAND

They cannot succumb to any urges contrary to swallowing or they will face immediate disqualification. Anyone in defiance of these rules will be eliminated from the contest. Let the countdown begin. Ten, nine, eight, seven—

The contestants snatch their forks from the table.

CROWD

Six, five, four, three, two, one!

The gurgitators dig in. Hunched over their trays, Hardy, Buck, and Kieu eat oyster after oyster after oyster.

SCOREKEEPERS, one per contestant, count the empty half shells. They scurry back and forth between the tables and the SCORECARDS.

While her opponents eat as though the life of a loved one depended on their success, Sidewinder maintains a pace that's indicative of overconfidence.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Moving smoothly but slowly, the champ seems to be stringing the other contestants along. I can't tell, Chris. Is she baiting her opponents, or has she not prepped as well as she has in the past?

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

She doesn't look the best she's ever been, that's for sure, but we've seen this technique from her before. Remember the asparagus championship last year when she came back from an intentional three-pound deficit?

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

I certainly do. Ah, look. The champ is smiling. She's obviously toying with the competition.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Probably trying to give the viewer's their money's worth.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Runyan takes the lead at five dozen.

ANGLE ON

Hardy, who shovels oysters in his mouth four at a time. It's the first we've actually seen him compete, and it's every bit as extraordinary as we've been led to believe.

Trina kneels where she can monitor Hardy's performance.

TRINA

You can do it, Runyan. You got the goddamn power.

She gushes with exhilaration, a feeling that's taken her years to recapture.

Hardy's eye drifts to Sidewinder, who's still yet to turn it on.

Flash whips his towel on the ground.

FLASH

(to Hardy) Her pace means nothing to you.

SIDEWINDER

Throw in the towel, fatty. That goes for the rest of you too.

TRINA

Eat shit, dyke.

Sidewinder puts her fork down and sips on her bottled water while the others near eight dozen.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

It doesn't look like the champ's mental game is having much effect on her opponents.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

They're pushing ten dozen while she holds steady at five.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Wait! There she goes.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Looks like she means business now.

ANGLE ON

Sidewinder. She eats with blistering ferocity as she scoops up six oysters at a time and swallows them with ease.

SIDEWINDER

(mouth filled with oysters) Better watch out now!

In the front row, Meredith covers her mouth in shock at Sidewinder's awesome display.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

There's the champion we're used to seeing.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

I hate to say it, but it'll be lights out for the others if she maintains this pace.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Lucas currently holding onto first.

ANGLE ON

Buck. Flushed and sweaty, he punches his forehead before every oyster he strains to eat.

BUCK

Come on, fucker!

Hardy makes a sudden charge and ties Buck at fourteen dozen.

Trina seems barely capable of containing the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

TRINA

(to Hardy) Breathe deep. And keep your chin up. Keep it up, goddamnit!

Hardy lifts his head and forks more oysters in his mouth.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

You know I hate to admit it when you're right, Chris, but unless she has a burst of eating, it looks like Kieu is in fact outmatched and outclassed.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

She'll eventually be a threat, but that day's about six competitions ahead of us.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Believe it or not, but Sidewinder's nearly caught up with our resident black belt at eleven dozen.

ANGLE ON

Kieu as she squeezes her eyes and yelps with every bite. She grimaces every time she swallows.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

It won't be long now before Kieu's out of this thing.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

And how about our rookie here?

Hardy rips through his dozens quicker than they can be replaced.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Surprising and impressive.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Even if he loses, he's proven that Trina Hicks still has some mileage in her as a coach.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

It's great to see that a legend of the sport can still find a way to be competitive.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Kieu's down!

ANGLE ON

Kieu. She lies face-first across the table. Her torso makes desperate gasps for air. With drool cascading off her chin, she pushes herself to her feet and picks up another oyster.

COMMENTATOR #1 (CONT'D, O.S.)

She's down, ladies and gentlemen, but she's not out.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

What a testament to the spirit of gastro-athletics.

Kieu dumps the oyster in her mouth, but it doesn't stay there for long. She spits it out and staggers off the stage hugging her stomach.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Lee's out at thirteen dozen.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

A truly sub par performance. It's back to the gym for her.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Lucas still holds onto first at seventeen dozen, but Runyan's not far behind.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Neither is Sidewinder who's catching up at fifteen dozen.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Ten dozen oysters in the time it took the others to eat five. Can you say wow?

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

I certainly can, Burt.

ANGLE ON

the gurgitators who remain. They're far from slowing down.

INT. GYM – NIGHT

The MEMBERS of Gut Busters sit clustered around a television. They grip each other's

shoulders and sit on the edges of their seats.

CLOSE UP

on the woman whom we earlier saw in the midst of water training.

WOMAN #1

(under breath) Come on, Hardy. Win it for all of us.

She gnaws on her fingernails.

INT. ARENA – NIGHT

The battle rages on.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

It looks like it's anybody's ball game as Lucas and Runyan go tit for tat.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

As soon as one starts to pull away, the other catches right up.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Tied at twenty-nine dozen. The determination of these athletes is astonishing.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

You have to wonder, Burt, if the champ didn't underestimate the competition.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

She may have. Will her strategy pay off, Chris? It remains to be seen.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Don't look now, but the champ's taking it up another notch.

ANGLE ON

Sidewinder. She whirls her arm in the same fashion as Apollo Creed before throwing a devastating right hook at Rocky's face.

SIDEWINDER

Here it comes. Better watch out. It's going to hurt.

She consumes oysters with blinding speed.

Hardy quickens his pace, but Buck falls behind.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Seems Lucas is slowing some. Is he reaching his end?

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

He may have put the brakes on, but he looks determined to keep eating.

Buck pounds his head on the table.

BUCK

Fight, you pussy. Fight!

He loads his mouth with oysters. Juice oozes over his lips and down his chin. He curls his hands to fists and swallows. A mistake.

He flees the stage with both hands over his mouth.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Lucas gave it is all, but when push came to shove, he just didn't have it in him.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

He leaves with thirty-one dozen oysters under his belt. A commendable effort.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

A commendable effort indeed. And then there were two.

ANGLE ON

Meredith, who peeks at the competition through the fingers that cover her eyes.

MEREDITH

Come on now, Hardy. You eat up. I believe.

She jumps up from her seat.

MEREDITH (CONT'D)

I believe!

On stage, Sidwinder spits an oyster against the side of Hardy's face.

SCOREKEEPER

That won't count.

SIDEWINDER

Give up before I rearrange your insides. Your coach knows a little something about that.

Hardy's scorekeeper flips his count to thirty-eight dozen.

Sidewinder's flips hers to thirty-seven.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Her approach may be unorthodox, but you've got to give it to the champ. She knows how to keep herself in the running.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

What intestinal fortitude.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

But let's give credit where credit is due. This rookie's something special.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Right you are. I haven't seen a first timer do this well since Trina Hicks toppled Jack Logan.

Sidewinder ties Hardy at forty dozen oysters.

ANGLE ON

Leeland as he takes up the microphone.

LEELAND

Ladies and gentlemen, we have one minute left in regulation.

The arena ROARS.

Meredith shrieks when Hardy stops and clutches his abdomen.

ANGLE ON

Hardy. He teeters on the verge of falling over. Perspiration beads all over his neck and face.

HARDY

I can't do it.

He groans in pain.

Trina grabs him by his chins.

TRINA

There ain't no can't! And there ain't no pain!

FLASH

No pain.

TRINA

No pain.

HARDY

No pain!

Hardy dives back into the contest.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Tied at forty-one dozen with forty seconds left in regulation.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Folks, this is one of the greatest exhibitions of stamina and guts that I have ever witnessed.

A SNAP can be heard after Sidwinder swallows eight oysters at once. She screams and clasps her ribs. BLOOD drips from her mouth between bites.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

I believe the champ has suffered some form of internal injury.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

The paramedics might have to get involved. You hate to see that happen to any athlete.

Sidwinder shields her side with her elbow and continues eating.

LEELAND

Thirty seconds.

The scorekeepers up the count to forty-two dozen much to the crowd's earsplitting approval.

Both gurgitators slow but refuse to stop.

TRINA

Leave it on the stage, Runyan. All your love, all your hate, all your spirit, all your strength. Now's the time.

LEELAND

Twenty seconds.

Hardy and Sidewinder stand toe-to-toe on gelatinous legs.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

That's forty-two and half dozen oysters for the rookie.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

The champ just matched him.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

I've never seen a clearer example of man's unconquerable spirit.

They eat as though controlled by the strings of a bone-weary puppeteer.

LEELAND

Ten seconds.

CROWD

Nine, eight, seven—

Sidewinder's hand trembles as she brings another oyster to her bleeding mouth.

CROWD

—six, five, four—

Hardy throws his head back to get the next oyster down.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

That's forty-three dozen for Runyan.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Sidewinder can tie him here.

CROWD

—three, two, one!

Sidewinder drops her fork and collapses into the table.

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

Runyan wins! Runyan wins!

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Not so fast.

IN SLOW MOTION

Hardy's last oyster starts to seep from one of his nostrils.

Trina and Flash reach out as though trying to cork it in while

Meredith covers her face with her sweater.

In a moment of soul-draining fortitude, Hardy snorts the oyster back up.

LEELAND

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a new champion and a new world record!

The arena explodes with roaring cheers.

COMMENTATOR #1 (O.S.)

Hardy Runyan has shocked the world!

COMMENTATOR #2 (O.S.)

It's a Cinderella story like no other.

ANGLE ON

Trina and Flash as they catch their jellied champion from falling down.

Sidewinder glares at Hardy as the PARAMEDICS (30s) come to her aid.

SIDEWINDER

I want a rematch!

HARDY

I'm retired.

Red-faced with the effort, Trina and Flash stand Hardy up straight as Leeland approaches with the spoils, a CHECK for \$5000 and a WEIGHT BELT exactly like the one in Trina's office. The announcer raises Hardy's arm.

LEELAND

Congratulations, Hardy. It was a hard fought—

Hardy pushes Leeland aside and fights his way through the mounting number of SPORTS MEDIA. He's spotted the only thing he wants in the world.

Hardy climbs down from the stage and rushes to the front row, where Meredith's tears cascade down her cheeks.

MEREDITH

I love you, I love you, I love you.

HARDY

I love you.

They lock each other in a hug that couldn't be broken for anything in the world.

EXT. BUFFET – NIGHT

The name “GREAT DRAGON” drones in neon above a crowded parking lot. The MARQUIS underneath flickers its promise that “HARDY RUNYAN EATS HERE.”

INT. DINING AREA – NIGHT

Hardy and Meredith gorge on a spread of lo mein, Mongolian beef, fried rice, and egg rolls.

The MANAGER (60s), a man who seems willing to eat food from the floor if it would make the customers happy, scampers to their table.

MANAGER

Is it to your liking?

HARDY

Absolutely delicious. Best Chinese food in town. You can quote me on that.

MANAGER

I will. I will. (a beat) Please, you let me know if there's anything, anything, I can get for you.

Meredith giggles.

HARDY

We're fine. Thanks.

MANAGER

Anything at all. You let me know. It's on the house.

HARDY

That's not necessary. We'll pay.

MANAGER

I won't hear of it. You are an honored guest, and honored guests eat for free.

Meredith pets Hardy's hand after the manager hastens to the kitchen.

MEREDITH

My little champion. (a beat) Are you really going to retire?

HARDY

I only have one thing left to live for.

MEREDITH

Such a stinker.

Hardy almost flips the table when he uses it as support.

He lowers himself to one knee.

Meredith fails to wave the tears from her eyes.

HARDY

Lovebug, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

MEREDITH

I love you so much.

HARDY

Will you have gastric bypass surgery with me?

MEREDITH

Yes. Yes, I will.

Meredith fetches Hardy's head to her bosom because he can't get up from the floor.

INT. HALLWAY – DAY

Two NURSES (30s) wheel Hardy and Meredith down a sterile corridor.

The couple holds hands limply from the gurneys where they lie sedated and prepped for surgery.

Their hands flop apart when the nurses wheel them in different directions.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – NIGHT

Hardy's eyes flutter open to a roomful of FLOWERS, BALOONS, and TEDDY BEARS.

He squints at a SMALL CARD that sits atop his stomach.

Hardy's groggy fingers pry the envelope open.

CLOSE UP

on Hardy's fingers as they grope sleepily over the card that falls out. Two PUPPIES grace the cover. Above the chocolate lab, a HANDWRITTEN ARROW points to the word, "You." Above the yellow lab, another arrow points to the word, "Me." The inside reads, "Here's a

little reminder that someone on the fifth floor loves you.”

Hardy presses the card to his heart and falls asleep.

INT. GYM – DAY

Hardy, ONE HUNDRED POUNDS LIGHTER, strolls nostalgically through Gut Busters Gym. Of the little equipment that remains, everything seems stagnant from lack of use.

TRINA (O.S.)

I was hoping you'd come by.

She stands in the doorway of her office holding a box full of paraphernalia from her days as a gurgitator.

HARDY

So it's true then?

TRINA

Yup. She's closing. (a beat) I can't believe what you done to yourself. I figured you'd stay in the game for at least another year or two.

HARDY

The doctor had a big talk with me about that before the surgery. I had to sign a contract stating I'd never compete again.

TRINA

I guess that means we got something else in common now.

Hardy steps onto one of the dilapidated treadmills.

Trina sucks laughter through the hole in her mouth.

TRINA (CONT'D)

You were shit on that thing at first.

HARDY

Yeah.

He shakes his head to suppress his tears.

HARDY (CONT'D)

I want to thank you, Coach, for all you helped me do.

TRINA

It's you I should be thanking. Flash too. We'd of never gotten another taste of glory if you hadn't come our way. (a beat) You know, this place ain't got to close down.

HARDY

I had thought about that.

TRINA

Well?

A TEENAGER dressed in athletic clothes peeps through the main entrance.

TEENAGER

Hello?

TRINA

Over here.

Fascinated by his surroundings, the boy stumbles toward Trina and Hardy. His eyebrows nearly touch his bangs when he recognizes Hardy.

TEENAGER

You're Hardy Runyan.

TRINA

The one and only.

HARDY

And you are?

TEENAGER

My name's Phil Buford, and I'm the next world champion of competitive eating.

HARDY

What makes you so sure?

TEENAGER

I can eat more than anyone I know.

HARDY

It's not about how much you can eat, son.

Trina walks toward the door.

HARDY (CONT'D)

(to Trina) What are you going to do now?

TRINA

I'll figure something out I'm sure. Who knows? Maybe I'll write another book. I ain't got shit else to do. (to the teenager) You're in good hands, kiddo. I'll be looking for your name in the sports section.

Trina tosses Hardy the keys to the gym.

FADE TO BLACK

VITA

Scott Gage was born in Franklin, Louisiana, on September 10, 1980. He attended Louisiana State University as both an undergraduate and a graduate student. While working on his master's, he served as Assistant Director of LSU's Writing Center, and he taught courses in both composition and creative writing. He also held various editing positions at *New Delta Review*. At the spring 2005 commencement, he will receive his Master of Fine Arts in creative writing.