

# 7 WIVES

2003

"As a Wife you suck,  
but as a waitress,  
you're the best  
baby!"



UBC's Best Literary

Non-Fiction

## Out of a Family of Athletes

I run down the stairs to the car, already pulling out of the driveway. “Didn’t I tell you I was going to run today?” I ask my rosy, guilty-looking family as I settle in the backseat.

“Did you have breakfast?” Mom asks. “You know, glycogen is a primary source of fuel for the body. You need to carbo-load before a race.”

“Did you sleep in that?” my sister asks, looking at my baggy sweatpants and T-shirt. “Mom, tell her she can’t run. She’s already out of breath!”

“Am not,” I say, holding my heavy breath.

“Remember,” Dad says, looking worried, “Running requires four major components: an-aerobic threshold, aerobic endurance, VO2 max, and efficiency. There are, of course, many other factors, but those four cover 80% of running-related performance.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but somehow I know it’s not a vote of confidence in my, as of yet, unseen athletic abilities. “After a summer tree planting, I am in shape.” I say, trying to convince them even though I haven’t jogged since my disastrous debut on the high-school cross-country running team. “I probably ran the equivalent of fifty kilometres every day this summer.”

“Yes, but how many *actual* kilometres did you run?” my sister asks.

I decline an answer.

We arrive at the Bruce Peninsula Provincial Park for the Annual Labour Day Weekend “Fun Run.” My dad, a well-known local triathlete, is organizing it this year. He proudly carries the trophy through the crowd to a make-shift stage on the sand dune next to the start/finish line.

I’m cursed with what you’d call an active family. By the time I opened my puffy eyes this morning, they’d jogged, showered and stretched. Mom’s an aerobic teacher, Tracy excels at every sport she tries, and Dad has run almost every day since he was twelve. They all apologize for me by saying, “She’s our absent-minded professor,” which is to say, I have no consistent activity

in life my life beside forgetting my keys and staring off into space for long periods.

Mom works the crowd and Tracy stretches with the women wearing expensive lycra shorts and sports bras. Their running shoes have see-through bouncy heels and are replaced every 800 kilometres. Everyone's thinking about the race ahead, but I'm walking into a highschool memory: I'd been flagged the first week of school by Mr. Martin, the cross-country running coach, who looked me up and down examining fat content and body frame. He declared that if I had anything close to my dad's oxygen uptake, I'd be winning the Provincials by year-end. After school, I did hill intervals with the team and took long wobbly runs through the muddy fields around Orangeville District Secondary School. I showed up for practice each day already exhausted, wishing I was at home eating crackers and watching 'Three's Company.'

"C'mon, Winegar! Pick up those scrawny ankles! Focus now! In through the nose, out through the mouth." Mr. Martin wouldn't give up. I broke his heart in my first and only season, repeatedly staggering cross-eyed and pasty-faced over the finishing line, once beating a woman who'd stepped in a groundhog hole and broken her ankle. Luckily, today's just for fun.

"Haven't you got your number yet?" Dad barks. "Come on! Get with the program, go talk to Uncle Art and he'll register you." He takes off on his bike to check the course flags and wait at the halfway mark for the 10 K run, which is a blessing for me because he won't be able to witness what's sure to be my stellar 5 K performance.

In the few minutes before the race, I get one of the energy bars my parents keep in the glove box of the car and attempt to masticate the black rectangle while gawking at the gorgeous chiselled figures in skimpy race-wear.

At the start-line, energy sparks off the lean competitors who jostle their way to the front of the pack. I remember Mr. Martin's advice: "As you line up for a race, shift gears and relax, joke, untense your muscles." I smile to a woman standing next to me. She shows the steely glint of her incisors, looks me up and down and steps ahead of me. Her pulse monitor beeps at a low purr while my intestines twist around the goo I've just eaten and my nerves feel like a net full of

butterflies. I remember more advice: *“You’re not competing against these people; you’re aiming for a personal best.”* And luckily, with my record, this shouldn’t be too difficult.

I’m not expecting a gun so when it goes off, I yell from fear. The people behind me climb onto my heels and I run from fear of being trampled. Back at the start-line the crowd cheers. Normally I’d be one of them, stretched out on a sand dune, sipping a latte and munching on donuts. What the hell was I thinking?

I make my way to the right-hand side to avoid being run over by a pack of feisty eight year olds. *“Racing too fast, too early causes a lactate build up, when your body begins to ache and your breathing becomes ragged. To correct your error go 5-10 seconds per kilometre slower.”* As my legs begin to tighten, I check my pace and join a group of four older women plodding along. I trail five metres behind, eavesdropping on their friendly chat. We leave the road and enter the forest. The terrain gets bumpy, then hilly. Cedar tree roots bend up through the path like tripwire.

*“In through the nose. Out through the mouth,”* Mr. Martin chides. *“There is a direct correspondence between oxygen usage and energy consumed, the maximum amount of oxygen per kilogram of weight that a person can use in converting fuel to energy represents the practical upper limit of energy available to an exercising muscle.”* My legs burn. It’s getting harder to take a full breath. Thankfully the happy chatter of the women ahead of me has stopped. They’re feeling it too.

“Is this the 5 K run?” one of the women in front of me asks the marshall standing at the fork in the road where the 5 and 10 K routes diverge.

“Yup, that’s the 5 K,” he says.

I can’t see which way he points but I follow the women, certain that at this slow pace there’s no way they they’d attempt a 10 K.

The path goes between two barbed wire fences that announce we’re entering land owned by the Bruce Nuclear Power Plant. On the left I see Lake Huron’s white caps and realize this

is the Point of land I've seen from the sandy beach but I've never been out this far before. My mind is attempting to build a map, when suddenly my toe catches in a root and I go wind-milling into the trees, my arms spinning and karate-chopping the old dry bush I land on, coming close to skewering myself on the spiky coniferous joints. I roll off the bush and land on the ground with a sound like a just-hit punching bag, *oomph*. A hole tears in my now dirt-smeared track pants. "*The more wasteful you are in terms of extra muscle activity, movement etc. the less oxygen is available for moving you forward.*" I calmly tell that fairygodfather of running in my head to shut the hell up.

The women I was trailing do not stop. I imagine that it will take me at least five minutes of running at a fast clip to catch them now. I brace myself against a tree and slowly return to my feet. That's when I hear a storm of feet coming at me and look up to see that pack of ladies coming back toward at me at a fast clip. "Oh my god, that's so nice. Really, I'm okay, you didn't..." I start to say, then pause as it occurs to me that I'm about to be run over. The women have opened up their stride and are charging toward me. I step aside just in time as they punch the air past me, leaving me in a whirlwind of settling leaves. This means the U-turn is right ahead and the end of the race must be imminent.

I run along to the U-turn. The terrain is swampy, then opens into a meadow. Before I see him, I hear, "Gorker!!! What the hell are you doing?" Dad's packing up the cups and water but the "You've reached the 5 K point!" sign is still propped on his bicycle. His eyebrows arch all the way up to the brim of his Tilley hat. I try to say something but nothing comes out. I grab a waxy McDonalds cup (which I believe contains water) and throw orange drink in my face. Dad looks stunned. I make a wobbly loop around the red pylon, salute him like an army soldier, then turn my back to him and enter hell.

There's no turning back now. Dad'll be so proud of me if I don't die, I think, and suddenly I feel great and the pace of my numb legs picks up. I look down at them, feeling strong, proud, and slightly delirious. This energy lasts for probably 1.5 kilometres. Just as it's beginning

to wear off, Dad catches up on his bike. “Gorker, what are you doing?” he repeats.

“Took... a... wrong...” I pause, realising my mouth is like a desert cave. *Anaerobic Threshold: The point when the oxygen a muscle requires is not completely provided by the air you breathe. Muscles switch from aerobic (with oxygen) to anaerobic (without oxygen) Lactic acid starts to build up and you go into oxygen debt. If not corrected you stop producing energy, feel pain, and in extreme cases, can collapse, act delirious etc.* I motion to the water bottle on his crossbar and he rides alongside while I drink down the stale plastic water. If I had the wind I’d like to ask how long the water has been in this bottle.

“You should drink your last water twenty minutes before a race,” he says.

I attempt to roll my eyes but am afraid I may lose my balance.

“Just hop on the back, I can double us,” he says.

It’s tempting but there’s no way I could keep my balance. It’s better if I just keep going. I shake my head and wave him on.

“Okay,” he says. “Suit yourself.” And then he’s off.

The path goes along the shore, white caps roar and a cold wind zips through the trees, uprooting the cobwebs. The orange McDonald’s drink dries into a sticky coating. My lungs heave and haul oxygen from my flailing extremities to my brain and failing eyesight. There’s a battle going on in every part of my body. In my stomach it’s between the dense wad of power bar and the sloshing mass of icky water.

For the remaining two kilometres I fight with every fibre to keep going forward. At one point, I stop to catch my breath but feel certain my legs will collapse so I keep going. My lungs and heart scream, “What are we being punished for!”

When I dizzily emerge from the forest and enter the parking lot, I can’t see that everyone’s looking at me, but I can feel it. I try to straighten my stride but my legs aren’t taking directives any more. It’s all they can do to keep from sinking to the tarmac like a two broken Popsicle sticks. As I get closer to the finish line, there are some faint cheers because their wait is finally

over. I'm no longer worried how my cuts, dirty pants and shiny orange face look. I've begun to feel an immense pressure in my stomach. About ten metres from the finish line I burp a bitter brown taste. The power bar has finally claimed the stomach as its territory and the water is looking for a way out. "Oh... look how pale she is," I hear from someone in the blurry crowd as I pass. As I cross the finish line everyone applauds for the brief moment before I fall on my hands and knees and vomit.

Next Labour Day, I'm sleeping in.