

Adrian Kelly



paperbytes

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First + Two



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19 Kenwood Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6C 2R8

paperbytes@paperplates.org

www.paperplates.org

First

THE OLD LETTERING, *Cook's Fine Chocolate*, has faded, but the new sign on the expansion, WORLD'S FINEST, still tells the truth, says *The Herald*. "Aye, no doubt about it," says Jacob's dad, "that factory's world friggin' famous in Ontario," its prize-winning products, thick bars, and chocolate-coated almonds, sold by school bands and Lions Clubs across Canada, even in New York and Australia now. Filling Jacob's bedroom window in the new duplex near the edge of town, the factory is the first thing he sees in the morning. And at night, its blinking lights and shadowy stacks like a demon king's castle, it's the last thing Jacob looks at before he lies in bed and can hear his name within the factory's pulsating hum.

Then there's the smell. Like hot chocolate some days, burnt cocoa on others, when people in Cookston sniff and wince and make jokes about drunk chocolateers. But Jacob holds day-old clothes up to his nose, takes long deep draws. Loves it most when mixed with *Health Hustle* sweat. Mrs. Stapely hates the *Health Hustle*. Huffing, puffing, and pulling at the neckline of her long dress, she always makes the class sing a hymn right after, tells the students that their souls need exercise too. Small price to pay, thinks Jacob, who sits in aching anticipation of 10:55, when, for fifteen precious minutes, he gets to watch a sweat stain spread between the legs of Heather Wakefield's polyester pants as she bends over right in front of his face, everyone twisting, stretching, and jumping to the day's top tunes. Jacob drowns out the intercom when his favourite kicks in. "JERIMIAH was a bullfrog!" *Ba-da-DUM*. "WAS a good friend o' mine!" Mrs. Stapely tries not to laugh, calls Jacob a precocious attention seeker. He shrugs, says he just likes to sing. "Even hymns, Mrs. S."

After “Jubilate” or “Jesus Loves the Little Children of the World,” everyone’s still hot and sweaty. Jacob inhales as the factory’s smell creeps through the gaps in the old school’s windows, and – he swears he can see it – swirls between all the bodies, under Heather Wakefield’s legs, then points right at him. His mouth wets itself. Swishing spit over, under, around his humming tongue, Jacob forgets about hymns, even sweat stains, looks out the corners of his eyes at Aaron, Lyle, and Chris. Smiles and winks. All of them, he knows, thinking about Sunday.

Sacred Chocolate Sunday, they say. And it’s all theirs. Murph’s chosen.

Nobody in Cookston says much about Murph, and that’s just fine with Jacob. Murph doesn’t talk to anyone, either, but after what happened to Bobby Lawlor, the guys’ mothers told them to stay away from him. Murph used to be on Bobby’s paper route. Bobby had to huff the big bag up three long flights of creaky wooden stairs in the old building above Pro Hardware, said he always got the creeps in the

dark hallway, one bulb hanging from the ceiling and a stinky bathroom at one end. But on collection day the money was always in a little envelope outside Murph's door, sometimes with fifty cents tip. Bobby would grab the envelope, turn the nine on Murph's door back up to six, and huff it back down, done. But one day the envelope wasn't there, and the door was open a crack. Bobby said he heard sniffing, smelt burnt meat. He peeked through the crack. A leather sofa, stuffing coming out the arm. A TV with bent rabbit ears and a photo on top. Murph, but younger, Bobby said. In a suit. Beside a pretty woman in a big hat. Kid between them. Then Murph suddenly standing there in his undershirt, staring red-eyed down at Bobby, rubbing his belly. He asked Bobby to come in. He stood just inside the door, said Murph reeked. When he went into the kitchen, Bobby bolted, paper bag dumped. His mom made him quit the paper route, called Lyle and Aaron's moms. They told Lyle and Aaron to stay away from the old kook.

Jacob's mum probably would have told him the same thing. But his dad, he never got a call, never mentioned Murph. Like he never knew he existed. Murph's supposed to be a little scary, Jacob told the guys. He's the Great Factory's Guardian Golem. You gonna do what your mother tells you all the time? It worked. But Jacob knew the guys wouldn't be able to stay away from free chocolate for long. Or from the game.

On Sunday mornings Jacob rounds them up, and they pedal across town, Jacob's jealousy over their bikes – brand new, with motocross gas tanks, shocks and fenders – forgotten. On Sundays, Jacob, wearing his Ready Ranger backpack – complete with bullhorn, walky talky, flashlight, view scope, and star charts – is Group Leader. He's had the backpack for years, used to go in the woods at night with his dad and Aidan, communicate in Morse code flashes. He can barely buckle it now, but the guys still think it's cool.

In Alpha formation, Jacob at the point of the V, they streak down Booth St. hill into the factory's parking lot, empty but for Murph's

old Valiant. Checking for Chippers, who'd roll them for the chocolate, and other spying eyes, they coast round the back, dump their bikes on the other side of the train tracks at the base of Dead Man's Hill. "Okay," says Jacob. "Action mode. Bobby, secure the perimeter."

"Aw jeez, why do I always –"

"Do it, fats," says Aaron.

As Jacob and the rest of the guys squat behind one of the big blue dumpsters, Bobby huffs and puffs to either side of the building, peeks round, scans the slope of Dead Man's, and returns red-faced. "Perimeter intact," he says breathless, pumping and sucking on his inhaler.

"You sure, tubs?" says Lyle.

Bobby nods between big breaths.

"Just two pumps, idiot," says Chris. "Mom said." Bobby gives him a raspberry.

Jacob laughs, pats Bobby's shoulder, and winks. "Good work, Bobby," he says, frowning at Chris. Bobby puffs up, Chris looks

down. “Okay everybody,” snaps Jacob, “Ninja mode.”

They pad and spin toward the single door to the left of the big pick-up and delivery bays. “Okay, Bobby,” says Jacob, “secret knock.” Bobby shakes his head.

“You get to do it,” Lyle says, pushing Bobby forward, “because we make you scout.” Jacob looks at Lyle. Even he and Aaron get the shakes by the time they get to the door.

“Go ahead, Bobby,” Jacob says, “you do it better than anyone.”

Bobby, eyes wobbling, knocks. *Bap, b-b-bap, bap bap.*

Always a wait, a long one, when Murph, they know it, is just the other side. Jacob’s heart drumrolls.

The door cracks open.

Game on.

“Yes, what can I do for you boys?” Murph drones, bloodshot eye and blotchy bald head visible in the crack.

Chris nudges Bobby. “C-can we have a tour of the factory?”

“Don’t do tours on Sundays. Especially not for strange boys like you. Not from around here, are you?”

“Yessir we are, you bet.”

“Well I haven’t seen you around town. How do I know you won’t come in here and maybe hit me on the head. Tie me up and rob the place. I think I’m gonna call the cops ...”

Jacob’s cue.

“We know the sacred secret words,” he says.

“You know the sacred secret words, a sorry-looking boy like you?”

“Yep.”

“And what would they be, young son? Get them wrong, and I’ll throw your little friends in the vats, and you, I’ll ... I’ll chain you up in the dungeon

The first time they ever tried to get in, Murph said he’d never let them unless they knew the sacred secret words. On following Sundays Jacob tried a few things on the spot, and the door was closed

in their faces. Then he thought of Mrs. Stapely – *apply yourself, Jacob* – and came up with a hodgepodge of Brothers Grimm and Edward Gorey, Mordecai Richler, and nasty Roald Dahl. But the guys didn't know that, and it sure impressed Murph. Lyle and Aaron try to look bored, pretend not to care, but Jacob knows they know that without the words, without all of it, every step and syllable, they won't get in. Door closed. Game over.

Jacob always tastes this moment. When he can feel, can see, Lyle and Aaron's coolness draining from them like blood, filling him. He waits still more, until he feels the knowing in them that the weirdness they feel is right to be there. Their tight jaws, Chris's slack mouth, Bobby's pursed lips – *say it, smarty, say it, we need to get in*. Murph's waiting, wide open eye, his slow breath. This is my game, thinks Jacob, I'll show you how to win. He withdraws the weathered scrap of construction paper from his pocket. Murph's eye closes. "Tell me then," he says so low they can barely hear, "tell me the secret sacred

words.” Jacob barely has to look down.

*Daddies tell us tales and mommies read old poems
About the great green troll in the grim dark woods:
“He’ll beat you and eat you and gnaw on your bones
And make a great broth of your young boy’s blood.”
But with yes saying eyes we smile inside and
Keep dreams of trolls and hidden treasures alive.
Now mommies are gone and daddies don’t care
As little boys wander in the woods all alone,
Looking for pleasures and treasures to share,
For the troll-king’s castle, his chocolate home.
Lost in the woods they would surely have died,
Then the gate stood before them, opening wide.
And there great Murpheous, troll-king, appeared:
“Come in here my boys, where it’s warm inside
Sweet treats I’ll give you, to soothe all your fears.”*

Murph's eyelid peels open. He sticks his spotty head out. Looks left, right. "Quick boys, in. But remember, this is –"

Our little secret, all the guys say.

The "tour" begins.

Super-wide hallways with gleaming surfaces for twenty-footer sock foot slides. Murph's slow explanations of production processes lost in shouts and laughs echoing off mile-high ceilings, through rooms big as churches where shiny vats connect to valves and pipes that snake and steam and gurgle. While the guys run around and look at their short fat reflections in the vats, Jacob talks to Murph, who puts his thumb and finger in his mouth and hoots. "Okay, my sons, this young man would like to go upstairs."

"Aw man, McKnight," whines Aaron, "you always wanna go up there. Justa buncha offices."

"Room for everyone's tastes here, my sons" Murph says, patting Jacob on the head, flashing a yellow grin. Jacob grins back, gives him

a wink. Murph's his ride to the top.

"Okay okay," says Aaron, head hung. Every step. Every syllable.

Outside the elevator, Jacob eyes the long, shiny chain attached at one end to Murph's belt loop, the other buried in his pocket. Slowly he slides it out. Jangling. "I hold the keys," he says.

"All the keys to the castle," says Jacob.

Murph selects the secret special key, inserts it in the panel. Pauses.

"Open sesame," says Bobby.

Murph cranks his wrist.

Bing.

They file in.

The ride is short but always gives Jacob a *willy-woop*. "Willy-woop up," he says to himself, then *bing*, the doors slide open.

Murph leads them into a long hallway, much narrower than those on the main floor, but covered in cushy grey carpet that always smells new. Turning left, they walk past doors – OPERATIONS, MAINTENANCE,

MARKETING & FINANCE – all the way to the end of the hall. They turn right down a short hallway, its walls hung with framed posters from the factory's past – *Cook's Finest, From Our Family to Yours* – and new awards with big gold seals in the corners. At the end of the hallway are double doors, black. Narrow seam bisecting the big letters. DIR|ECTOR.

“Nobody knows much about him,” said Aaron after the takeover, “’cept he’s a super-rich wop.” But everyone knows he drives a Jag – “XJS, twelve cylinder, cracker of a car,” said Jacob’s dad – and lives in a huge house on a hill outside Peterborough. Can’t see in the house, though, all the windows tinted black. Aaron says he has Dobermans. Guards. Jacob’s dad doesn’t know about that, but whenever they drive by he says, “Aye, son, no doubt about it, that guy’s bloody Mafia.”

Jacob thrills. “You really think so, dad?”

“Son, this Beefabloodyrioni or whatever his name is, shows up out of the blue and buys Cook’s just like that? C’mon, man.”

“But *The Herald* said the factory was gonna close. That he saved it.”

“It’s the workers saved the factory, son, not his highness up there. He’s barely around. Know where his ‘family’ lives?”

Jacob shrugs.

“Guelph,” says his dad, nodding knowingly.

Jacob always looks back at the house through the wagon’s rear window. Like a castle, he thinks. No one can see in. Get in. Impregnable.

Every week Murph’s got new names for the Director. “Well, here’s where Shithead runs the whole show, fellas. Take a guess on how much ’ol Cocoa Puff here makes.”

Just to spite Murph Jacob says, “I bet it’s at least twenty-five *thow*.”

“That and a few more bucks to boot, you can bet your ass on it, my young son.”

“Do you think he read lotsa books when he was a kid, Murph?” says Jacob. Aaron rolls his eyes.

“Suppose so,” says Murph.

“Like Dickens maybe? *Great Expectations* or *Oliver Twist*?”

“Yeah probably, ’cause he just sits in there all day and pulls his little dickens is what I hear. Probably never had to work for a dollar in his goddamn life. Spoiled frickin’ dago, eh, my sons?” Jacob stays quiet while the other guys laugh and try not to look scared. Jacob knows Murph lays it on a bit for them, but knows he also changes before the doors. Gets a little nasty, but also sad like. Sometimes Jacob gets an ache in his guts for Murph, like he does for his dad, but Jacob doesn’t hate the Director. He’d like to be one. Sit in the towering black chair he must have. Jacob imagines Professor Xavier’s Control Room from *The X-Men*. A huge desk with lights and intercoms and buttons. Screens all around. At home in his room, Jacob cuts out squares of paper, draws borders around them and tapes them to the walls, so he can monitor everyone. He takes the microphone from his tape-recorder and, chest stuck out, chin drawn in, booms: “Hey, you there! Yes, you! Lyle O’Brien, in Sector 7! Report to my office immediately!”

Jacob wants to open those doors. But Murph says he can't let them in. "Maybe next Sunday, boys, if you're good enough."

Jacob stares at the letters. "Director," he whispers to himself. Bobby shuffles his feet. Aaron nudges him in the ribs – "Let's go" – reminding him why they take the tour in the first place.

"Okay, boys, there you go, not too much now," Murph says in the staff room back downstairs, lifting lids off big green bins full of chocolate-covered almonds and broken sections of bars.

The guys dig in. "Not so much, hog," Chris tells Bobby, eyeing Murph. They start walking back toward the rear door, staring down at their hoards. Murph strolls behind, swinging the long key chain in big circles, *swoosh ... swoosh*. And whistling. High-pitched echoes everywhere.

Jacob and the guys walk a little faster. Look at each other sidelong. How big, how empty the hallways suddenly are.
Swoosh, swoosh.

About twenty feet from the back door, the last lines. “So. Who’s gonna give me a kiss for their chocolate today? Anyone gonna give me a little kiss?” *Pucker pucker, smack smack* go Murph’s lips.

His big arm over their heads like a huge branch or beam, holding open the door by a crack.

“No kiss today?”

Bobby’s cheeks quivering, Aaron blurts out, “Yeah right, man!” The guys pile out, Bobby left behind, wheezing, “Wait, you guys, wait, wait!”

Bikes at the secured perimeter, they head for the high ground of Dead Man’s. About half way up, the laughter comes, so hard they’re bent, gasping, trying not to drop almonds. At the top, they flop down, divide their take.

Trade you six almonds for that piece ...

Sure.

You break I pick ...

Okay.

Sitting in a circle, staring at the sky, and chewing. *Munch munch.*

Even Murph forgotten.

At least until next week's *Health Hustles*, when over the Bee Gees Jacob swears he can hear *Come back, my boys, come back*, when he thinks of pleasures and treasures to share, of those big black doors, and the office behind. He has to get in there.

The following Sunday, it finally happens. Murph's big arm above their heads at the back door, Jacob hesitates. Just for a second. Turns and looks up into Murph's long face. Jacob thinks of Teddy, the dog from the duplex next door. On a six-foot chain all the time, never walked, never played with, fed when his drunk old owner feels like it. When Jacob and his dad first moved in, Jacob would look at him from his bedroom window, lying out there in the rain and snow, shivering. His dad said the dog was half mad, that he bit his owner and would bite Jacob too if he went near him. But Jacob could see

those eyes in the rain. Each week he came a few feet closer, talked to him nice when he growled. Then one day he reached out slow, stroked his head. Teddy shook, lifted his tail half-way.

Murph's eyes look just like Teddy's did as he bends and kisses Jacob on the cheek.

His breath. Like chocolate almonds and rum, thinks Jacob, his legs as if empty, unable to move.

"Fuckin' pervert!" screams Aaron, who shoots forward, tries to kick Murph in the shin. And misses. The moment falls over then, flips, like when Jacob was stroking Teddy under the chin, heard his dad bang on the window and yell, then felt something slip, saw the nice peel away from Teddy's eyes, his lips curl back. Jacob withdrew his hand – just as Teddy snapped. Jacob turned and ran, saw his dad through the living-room window, just standing there watching, then heard the chain snap and hold behind him as he fell, feet kicking inches away from the fangs, yellow, like Murph's bared teeth, his eyes just like the crazy dog's.

They turn and run. Like crazy.

Bobby falters, falls. Jacob looks back, sees Murph barely beyond the door, wind lifting his wispy hair as he stares for a few seconds, then goes back in. Jacob runs back, kneels by Bobby, calms him down while digging out his puffer. The other guys halfway up Dead Man's. Fuckin' chickens, Jacob thinks. He tells Bobby that if Chris the big blabbermouth tells their mom what happened, to say it didn't happen, Chris is just making it up and just wants to get me into trouble 'cause my dad will kill me, okay, Bobby, okay? He'll kill me. You got it, buddy? The other guys will back me up and everything will just stay in the group, be our secret because who else has to know, right?

For days, Jacob jumps every time the phone rings. No one finks, but Lyle, Aaron, and Chris avoid Jacob's eyes during *Health Hustle*, and Jacob just goes through the motions. Catches himself wincing at the burnt cocoa smell, Heather's sweat stains too. "Jacob," says Mrs. Stapely, "I notice you're no longer regaling us with song." He just shrugs, sings

“Jesus Loves the Little Children” like a dirge.

They wanna go back, Jacob thinks, I know they do. He decides to lie low for a few Sundays. Schooldays, he plays with the new kid, Scott Parsac, who moved in just up the street with his mom. Sundays, Jacob stays home, reads comics, draws, sometimes visits Scott. He likes the same comics, drawing too. His mom makes them chocolate milkshakes in a Cuisinart.

But at night Jacob stares out his window at the blinking lights and shadowy stacks, thinks about Murph, the guys, the game. One night he gives up on a pencil sketch of Storm, divides the big page into panels and starts drawing Murph as if his hand has no other choice. With a few erasures, the addition of a gown and pointy hat with a long veil, Storm becomes a Fairy Queen kissing a kneeling Murph below the ear. In the next panels Murph’s spots fade, his belly recedes, his teeth straighten and gleam. The wind whirls around him. He emerges from the vortex, green uniform gone, in a long white

tunic over chain mail, big red cross bisecting his torso. Holding a gleaming long sword aloft he reaches into his belt pouch and – Jacob laughs as he changes his mind – sows the ground with chocolate almonds.

He's not a bad guy, Jacob thinks. Just lonely. A little different. Jacob's uncle Angus used to kiss him on the cheek all the time, even pat his bum. Murph didn't touch him, any of them. And he could have. Those big arms. He'd just been into the sauce a bit. Never mind those stupid films they see in school, Big Constable Gracy warning them about candy and strange men. Murph's just lonely. The game'll be better now. Funnier when it's over and they're all up there on Dead Man's. Laughing. And maybe now Murph will let Jacob in the Director's office. To make up for things, maybe.

By late spring Jacob decides it's been long enough. Pedalling up the Lawlor's driveway, he sees Bobby standing behind his mom on the stoop at the side of the house. She's pegging underwear on the line,

has her back to Jacob. Bobby turns, reaches down into the basket, sees Jacob. His eyes bug out, and he wags his head. Draws his finger across his throat. Jacob leans the bike, swerves. The Ready Ranger shifts and suddenly he's clattering down. He yanks up the bike, wincing at his skinned shin as he looks over his shoulder. Bobby's mom, staring. Saying nothing. Just staring as Jacob stands on the pedals and pumps.

That night, when his dad's at work, Jacob calls Lyle. His mom answers. A long wait. Lyle comes on, says he can't, he'll get killed. "Murph's crazy," he says, his mother's voice hissing in the background, "gotta go, bye."

"Screw you," says Jacob to the tone. Just chicken. All of them. He'll go on his own. Maybe.

Over bangers and mash one night, Jacob tries to break the silence. Can't work up the nerve. He clears the plates, puts the kettle on and starts running water in the sink when his dad says, "What's the hurry, kid?"

Jacob looks over his shoulder. “Huh?”

“Look in the fridge.”

A big thick bar in its white and silver wrapping, front and centre on the top shelf. His dad can get them on the cheap from the hospital tuck shop.

“All right! Thanks, dad.”

Jacob fingers the end open and tears, exposing a square. “Almonds too, yum.” His mouth yawns.

“Here now, that’s for you and me both. Get a plate.”

Jacob sets a saucer in the center of the small table, sits back down.

“Go on, then,” says his dad. “You break, I pick.”

Jacob grabs both ends, face taut, *snap*. He hands the biggest piece over. His dad snickers.

“Take it. Go on, take it.”

Jacob’s eyes gleam as he crams the first square between his teeth and bites down. His dad takes the smaller half, puts it back on the

saucer. Always says he likes his “a wee bit saft.” Jacob steals a glance at the brown front tooth. Looks back down. Swallows a chunk and grimaces as it gouges his throat. His dad gets up, pours himself a cuppa. Lips smacking over smeared teeth, Jacob says, jerking his thumb, “You know much about ... whatsisname ... that Murph guy down there?”

“What, weekend watchman down the factory?”

Jacob nods. Bites.

“Chew, son, you’re not a bloody boa for ... why d’yask?”

Jacob shrugs. “Just curious.”

His dad sits back down, mug steaming. He dunks a square of chocolate. Slowly. Holds it dripping over the mug, stares at the empty saucer. “Kooky old Newf, says everyone.” He pauses, stares. “But he had money once. Owned his own business. Heavy machinery or something. Just works weekends down there now. Has enough to live in that tinderbox over Pro Hardware, I guess. Used to have a nice wee

bit of land, though. Up near Hastings.”

“Why’d he move here?”

His dad bites down carefully. Slowly chews, swallows. “Wife died. Damn good chocolate, that.”

“World’s Finest. When was that?”

“When your brother was still – you were young.” He blows on the tea. Takes a sip, swallows. “Me and Jim Blackburn took the call.”

“How’d she, how’d she ... ?”

Dunk. “Suddenly.” *Drip, drip.* “Heart attack.”

Jacob knows what he means. “Some people say he had a kid too.”

His dad nods, chews. “Who you been talking too?”

“Everybody knows everything about everybody in Cookston, dad. What happened to the kid?”

“If you know everything, smartass, then you know he was taken away.”

“By who?”

“Eat your chocolate.” His eyes. Heavy, grey.

Jacob looks down. Takes a big bite. His dad takes his tea and chocolate to the living room, turns on *M*A*S*H*. Jacob finishes his chocolate, starts the dishes. Listens to his dad’s cackle as Frank Burns gets it again. When Jacob’s drying, his dad comes back in the kitchen.

“Have you homework?” he says as he pours a second cup.

Jacob nods.

“Get to it, then. I’ll finish those.”

Jacob dries his hands. On his way out of the kitchen, his dad stops him.

“And see you. Don’t be too curious ’bout that sorry bastard. Leave him be, like everyone else does. Hear me?”

Jacob nods.

“Now go and brush your teeth.”

Jacob turns away, turns back. “Kinda like Dickens a little, that story, isn’t it, dad?”

“Suppose so, son. Go on now.”

Chin in hands, elbows pinning the splayed Math text, Jacob stares out the window at the blinking lights. Just a lonely guy who lost his son, he thinks. A nice house and pretty wife, and now he works in a factory, swears about the Director. Lives in a slummy old apartment. Like Dickens, dad, says Jacob to himself, kind of like us. He imagines his dad and Murph together, before. Friends. Murph’s wife and his mum, too. Laughing at big *pahties*.

Outside, Teddy whimpers and yowls. Jacob holds his stomach. It aches.

Two

LESS THAN A couple of laps to go.
“C’mon McKnight,” yells Mr. Cottam through cupped hands,
“don’t you die on me out there!”

Why, says Jacob to himself.

He’s way ahead. For the first time.

Mr. Cottam’s still pretty new to Cookston.

“Pick it up, kiddo!”

Just knows bits and pieces. Stories. From Mrs. Pomeroy probably.

“Jacob! Open your ears! Dig, son, dig!”

Jacob doesn’t change his pace. Can’t. His legs like attachments,
pumping on their own. Like I don’t have organs, he thinks, wondering

where the burning lungs, the hammering heart have gone.

I'll run, his dad said, the bloody fear right out of you.

Months of black mornings blending in Jacob's mind. The warm bed –*Son? Up* – left behind. Stretching legs stabbed with shin splints. Out on Stirling Road by six. Wind, like lashes. Fartlek after school. Intervals. And hills.

Killer instinct, his dad says. Understand? You come first.

Second, Jacob thinks, bell clanging as he strides by Start/Finish, I came second.

“Bear down, Jacob! Go!”

Like you couldn't wait to get out, said mum, hard on Aidan's heels you were.

He went first.

Can we trade today, Aidan?

Sure, Jakey, you can ride mine.

Jacob's back tire. Like gauze in parts. All the skidding. The hill.

Faster, Aidan, faster!

“Move, Jacob!”

I’m going as fast as I can!

Bang like a backfire, like a gun.

Jacob’s name the last word when Aidan – “Jacob!” – slid through the stop sign. The station wagon, *out of nowhere, John, right out of nowhere*, Mrs. Simpson’s chins and arms jiggling like jello as Jacob’s dad said, *Okay, love, settle down now*, and knelt beside the car, his partner, Jim Blackburn, running up with the fracture board. *Jim, see to th’ other one, make sure he’s . . .*

“Jacob!” Mr. Cottam at the top of his lungs now. “Move it, kid, kick, kick!”

Jacob’s eyes leap left. Lyle O’Brien waving his arms. “Spielman,” he yells, “Spielman’s catching you!”

Less than half a lap. Jacob looks over his left shoulder, almost falls as his knees knock. Dean Spielman, his eyes slits, little teeth bared.

Coming for him.

If you walk, said Jacob's dad, through that front door without

Jacob forgets finishing form drills – *Head up, boy, pump the arms, lift the legs!* – and runs the last fifty metres like he does in his dreams. Away from the body of his brother.

Head tilting, Jacob strains toward the line, everything moving motionless, roaring silent. Like a picture, he thinks.

Dean's breath as if on his back.

Split second, thinks Jacob, diving. His chin hammering the ground.

“He did it!” Mr. Cottam's voice over faraway cheers as Jacob heaves, rolls, head lolling, mouth wide open. He wants air, swallows blood. Fingers rending grass, he imagines digging, scraping. Deep deep down. But he's up in Mr. Cottam's big arms. Hugged, lifted, spun.

“Look at your time!” Steered by Mr. Cottam to the water station, Jacob's eyes – “Look, Jacob!” – fall upon the stopwatch in Mr.

Cottam's palm. He blinks, looks again. His first sub-five mile. "You did it, Jacob." Mr. Cottam slaps Jacob's shoulder.

At the water station, Mrs. Pomeroy hands Jacob cup after cup. He gulps, water spilling down his singlet.

"Easy does it," she says. "Breathe, Jacob."

"More," he gasps, *gulp gulp*, remembering the dribble down mum's chin, her hand wringing the neck of the bottle. *Not a word to your father, Jacob, do you hear me?* Her face the night she threw the ashtray and her hair came unclipped. *You did it.* Her flailing arms, dad dragging her to their bedroom. *You drunk daft bitch, you. You're one to talk to me. Shut your garbage mouth, the boy'll hear. My boy is dead!* Then the thud. *What about the one left behind?* And another one. *Eh?*

"I did it, Mrs. P," says Jacob, leaning into Mr. Cottam's armpit as Dean Spielman walks by. Dean, naturally fast, three Firsts before noon.

"Congratulate your dad for me, eh McKnight?"

Mr. Cottam glares. “Hey, Spielman, be a good loser, too, eh?”

Dean looks down.

“And besides,” Mr. Cottam winks at Jacob, “daddy long legs here walked through most of that mile.” He pulls Jacob close. “Isn’t that right, Jacob? You walked it!”

Jacob smiles, not sure, exactly, why Mr. Cottam likes him – except for running, he’s pretty lousy in Phys-Ed – only that he likes Mr. Cottam. The big grin under the bushy black mustache. How he lets Jacob run the way he wants. Why fool with nature, he says, that’s my motto. Jacob’s dad always corrects his form. Even films him with the second-hand camera he bought for Boston. Jacob watching himself on a white sheet tacked to the living room wall, borrowed reel-to-reel chattering behind them. *Here, here*, thick finger blotting out half of Jacob’s image, *see how you’re leaning? You’ve got to hold that head up, boy, keep the back straight, like a long chain connected to your spine is pulling you up to the sky. Now look here, your shoulders. Hunched.*

Relax, lad, drop your arms, but don't, see, look here, don't wave them about for Chrissake, you're running not batting bloody flies, and don't forget to push off the balls of your feet Dad strictly heel-toe, but Mr. Cottam lets Jacob run on his forefeet. Like he did today. It just feels right. Not like mornings on the Stirling Road. Miles like marathons.

Jacob's smile fades as Mr. Cottam walks him to the Awards table. Mornings only earlier now. More, winning just means more. Regionals. Big Brighton High. Crowds.

Billy Mutton.

Billy, a foot shorter than Jacob, who runs like a gazelle – or a hungry young cheetah chasing one. Just the rabbit, Jacob told himself the first time he raced him. And watched as Billy barreled ten, fifteen paces ahead of the pack. Hungry. Wanting it. While Jacob felt the life drain out of him. His dad trackside, fuming. *Gutless*, he said after the race, and walked away.

Mr. Cottam pins the red ribbon, a big gold 1 on it, to Jacob's singlet.
"Ow."

"Sorry, Jacob, did I get you?"

Jacob looks down at the fluttering ribbon. "It's okay, Mr. C." He thinks of tomorrow morning – *Son? Up* – but hopes as he slides his hand under his singlet that his dad'll be happy. Jacob sees himself bounding through the doors to the ambulance office, *I did it, dad. I had the killer instinct.*

Jacob withdraws his hand, looks, and licks his fingertip.



AT LUNCH HOUR a couple of days later, Jacob sits behind the portable, bent over his sketchbook. He almost chokes on the last of his PB&J when the shadow appears on the page. "Thought I'd find you here."

Sketchbook snapped shut, Jacob cranes his head. Mr. Cottam, smirking, tinted glasses glinting.

“Drawing again, eh Picasso?”

Jacob nods, tucks the pencil behind his ear.

“Mind if I ask what?”

“*Quicksilver*, Mr. C.”

Mr. Cottam shrugs.

“He’s a mutant. His sister’s *The Scarlet Witch*.”

Mr. Cottam shrugs again, his glasses going crooked. “Like *The Flash*, Mr. C. Super-fast.”

“Hey, whatever turns your crank. What about you, flash boy? Do your laps?”

Jacob nods. “Where were you?”

“Sorry, couldn’t make it. Teacher stuff. But I’ve got some good news.”

Jacob’s eyebrows arc. Brighton High, he says to himself, has burned to the ground. Billy Mutton’s been in an accident. “What’s

up, Mr. C?”

“I won’t be putting you in the mile at Regionals.”

Jacob’s eyes bulge. But he furrows his brow, tries to sound mad.
“Why’s that?”

“I’ve just heard there’s a three-thousand this year. Nobody tells me anything. Anyway, distance is your thing, Jacob. It takes you four laps just to get warmed up.”

“So?”

“So I put you in.”

“I’m in the three-thousand?”

“Billy Mutton isn’t.”

The bell rings. Jacob jumps up – “See ya in gym, Mr.C!” – and sprints across the playground, Mr. Cottam’s laugh fading behind him.

During music class, Mrs. Pomeroy watches wide-eyed as Jacob, normally out of key, plays his recorder like a pied piper.

Scare all the snakes away, he thinks.



HIS DAD QUIETER than normal over dinner, blowing on every bite, chewing carefully. Jacob tries not to look at the black-edged space next to the front tooth.

“Son.”

“Yeah?”

“Bit of bad news, I’m afraid.”

Jacob swallows a sausage chunk.

“You know I’ve been studying for my EMCA.”

Jacob nods. He failed the first time.

“Like to stop sloshing windows and get on the ambulance full time and all.”

“Yeah, I know, dad.”

“Well, I’ve to go down Belleville way for a coupla days.”

“Refresher course?”

His dad nods. “Loyalist College. Infant delivery, defib.”

Jacob tries to contain his voice. “Am I staying with Nigel?”

His dad nods. Scoops up a forkful of spuds. Blows. The slow putting in. Chewing.

“What’s wrong, dad?”

He swallows. “Well, last day of the course coincides with your race day, like.”

“So you can’t come?” Jacob’s temples pulsing.

“I’m gonnae try and duck out early. Ol’ Doc Burgess is doing the course. He’ll understand, I think.”

The three-thousand. Lead-off event. Brighton an hour’s drive from Belleville. There’s no way, Jacob thinks, scooping up a heap. “Geez, dad, hope you can make it.”



WHEN HIS DAD'S out of town or on a double, Jacob sometimes gets to stay with Nigel Burke. He handled the divorce. Became buddies with Jacob's dad. Jacob's not sure how, exactly – they always argue about Tories and trade unions – but knows it had a lot to do with the three R's. *Running, Rotary International and Rum*. Nigel helped get his dad into the first two, which helped him get rid, pretty much, of the third. He still comes home with the blue British Navy bottles sometimes, tells Jacob to see to his studies as he heads for the kitchen. After a couple, he sometimes swears about Nigel – *arrogant English prick, that Burke can be* – but tells Jacob *if you're no going to be a doctor law's a pretty close second, son, and either way* – he taps his temple – *that man'll help you develop your mind*.

Nigel's big brick house, pair of weeping willows out front, borders Ferris Provincial Park. His office is downstairs. Jacob always traces his

fingers over the fancy gold writing on the sign – NIGEL R.H. BURKE, BARRISTER, SOLICITOR – inhales the smell of his office. Sits in the burgundy leather chair behind the big wooden desk, cranes his neck at the floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with law books. Plunks the piano in the living room. Takes second and even third helpings of the foreign food Nigel knows how to cook by heart. Changes channels with his flicker. Sits with Nigel over thick heavy art books as he talks about Paris, his favourite painters – Miro and Magritte, Delacroix and Dali. They're my favourites, too, says Jacob, even though the Magritte kind of scares him.

Jacob knows his dad probably told Nigel, *Make sure the boy does his intervals*, but Nigel takes Jacob on long slow runs through the park. Down to the sheep wash and back, Nigel's dog, a beagle named Buddy, loping beside them, his clanking tags the only sound in the still mornings, until even that disappears, replaced by the steady rise and fall of their breath.

“Great run, Jacob,” says Nigel after, hands on hips, huffing.

“You too.”

The night before the race, Nigel barbecues a half-chicken for Jacob, coating it in his homemade sauce. Spraying water – *hiss* – on the flaming grill, Nigel says, “You’ll be basking in the sun and sucking on the bones, medal round your neck, while everyone else struggles and sweats through their events.”

Lying awake that night, Jacob believes Nigel, sees himself winning, sitting back and soaking up that sun. Until he thinks of his dad blasting down Highway 30 in the wagon. Trying to make it. Telling the bitch not to die on him.



JACOB LEAVES BEHIND the smell of cologne and leather in Nigel’s new Prelude, walks across the parking lot of Hillcrest Public, empty except for the school bus. Mr. Cottam stands outside the doors, clip-

board in hand, mustache bristling.

“Let’s go, Bill Rodgers Jr. You’re almost late.”

“Sorry.”

“Nice track suit.”

“New.” His dad bought it before he went to Belleville. Stedman’s.

Waving at Nigel, Jacob jogs the last few feet to the bus, wet Alberto Balsam hair cold against his scalp, foil-wrapped chicken next to his Brooks Villanovas in the brown Adidas gym bag jumping up and down. He can smell the sauce, thinks about the first bite.

Mr. Cottam slaps Jacob’s butt as he jumps up the stairs, says hi to old Mr. Torrens, and ignores Dean Spielman’s stare. Dean’s in long and high jump, the one- and two-hundred. Will probably take firsts in all of them. Jacob looks at the rest of the students, all blabbing, trying not to look scared, he thinks, then sits beside Derek Meikle. Not because he likes him, but because Derek, nearly six feet, a lot of hair on his legs already, hockey team captain and softball chucker, can completely

bomb in track and field. He's never, like Lyle O'Brien, backed out of a race, but he's puked before and during several, and like Jacob he's let others win. He looks at his shoes when Jacob sits down. His dad's made him get another crew cut. Head like a toilet brush.

"Meikle."

"McKnight."

Pause.

"You're in the 800, right?"

"Yeah," says Derek. "You 3000?"

"Yeah."

Pause

"Gonna chicken out?"

"Got chicken for lunch." Jacob points at his bag, laughs, cuts himself off. Can tell they're not supposed to say anything for the rest of the trip. He remembers kindergarten, when they held hands on the way into the Shrine Circus.

Jacob's stomach starts up as soon as the bus pulls onto River Road. He remembers himself and his brother bouncing in the bus's back seat, Mr. Torrens telling everyone to shut up and be quiet. Jacob tries not to look as the bus passes the county line leading to Concession Seven and the Connor subdivision. Mornings, mum always took them in the Parisienne to the end of the gravel road. Dad picked them up after school. In the old Econoline, *OUTLOOK* in big white letters on the side. Almost together, Jacob thinks. He stepped down first, Aidan behind – *Hurry up, Jakey* – when the flatbed blasted by, a blur inches before his face, then slammed into the ditch along the intersection. Dad bolting out of the van, snarling, not seeing them. Only the driver, slumped over his steering wheel. Dad reefing the door open, dragging the man out slam against the front of the bus, screwdriver at his throat. Mr. Torrens hauling him off: *John John they're okay they're right here, look*. The driver, face all bloody, flopping down when dad let him go. *I was gonnae kill the bastard*, he told mum after supper, *I thought he'd gotten both of*

them, love, thought he'd gotten both of them Jacob and his brother in the same bed that night, curled together, quaking. *Maybe, Aidan said, we're not supposed to, Jakey.*

I was supposed to, Aidan, says Jacob to himself. My time. Twice almost.

Jacob slouches, imagines the bus driving all the way across the country. Through the Canadian Shield. Across the prairies. To Alberta. Mum waiting at the end of the road near Aunty Astrid's house in the town called High River. Where the mountains are. *Not a word, Jacob, to your father. Understand?*

Not a word.

"Jacob"

"McKnight." Derek, elbowing him in the ribs. "Mr. Cottam's calling you."

Jacob looks over his shoulder.

"How you doing up there, Jacob?"

Jacob tries to smile, makes a circle with his thumb and middle finger. Mr. Cottam gives him a thumbs up. Jacob looks down at his lap, closes his eyes. Make your belly bellows, he tells himself, his heart jack-hammering. Breathe. He rests his head against the window, watches the blur of telephone poles. New corn in the fields. Grazing cows. Green hills. Jacob thinks of his sketchbook. Of big blank pages. And colour. Viridian green, he says under his breath. Ultramarine. Crimson.

Breathing, his eyes flutter, close. Flare. Flutter again.

Brighton, 7 km, says the sign near the 401 turnoff. Jacob sees the starting line, the gun raised in the air. Feels the fear in his belly, then starts as the school bus lurches, bellows and burps, its nose spouting steam. Mr. Torrens says, “Jesus H” as he grinds it into neutral, and coasts into the Shell Station on the other side of the exit. Jacob looks at his watch. 9:25. As Mr. Torrens, swearing under his breath, gets out to meet the smiling mechanic emerging from the garage, Jacob turns

and looks at Mr. Cottam. He can't see his eyes behind the glasses, but knows they look worried.

At 9:35 Mr. Torrens' head appears around the corner of the bus's raised hood. He shakes it. Mr. Cottam walks up the aisle, all the kids quiet, and puts his hand on Jacob's shoulder. Jacob stands, smacks the roof. He could punch a hole through it he's so happy, but masks his smile with a scowl.

Mr. Cottam pats his back. "Still a chance, Jacob." In the station he calls ahead and gets Brighton High to send down a spare bus. They all pile on. Jacob furrows his brow, huffs and puffs, and hopes.

By the time they pull into Brighton High, he relaxes in his seat, the three-thousand long over. Whole day to myself, says Jacob under his breath. If his dad shows, he can say it wasn't his fault. He steps off the bus, looks up at the puffy clouds in the pale blue sky, and winks. Right now he could run to Alberta, just as long as he could run alone, instead of round and round in a pack, big black number pinned to his singlet.

Mr. Cottam walks over, sighs.

“You coulda won it, Jacob. Shoe-in.”

“It’s okay, Mr. C.” Jacob hangs his head, hiding the smirk, fists in his pockets.

After wandering around the grounds, looking at the colours of team uniforms – Coburg’s Prussian Blue, Uxbridge’s British Racing Green – Jacob finds a spot on the grass away from the track, the crowds, and the noise. He plunks down, takes the half-chicken from his bag. Should wait till I’m really hungry, he tells himself. Then he unwraps the foil. Closes his eyes, inhales the tang. He rips the leg off and tears into it. Within minutes he burps while looking at the bony carcass lying in the foil.

A rustle in the grass. Jacob looks left. Blue Adidas shoes, lime green stripes. Mr. Cottam’s. Jacob proceeds up his burgundy track pants, over the kangaroo pocket of his grey sweat-top, to his face, smirking.

“Your timing’s not so great.”

Jacob squints at the sun which Mr. Cottam's head doesn't quite hide. Quickly wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Chokes down a burp. "What do you mean, Mr. C?"

"You're in the 800."

"No I'm not, Derek –"

Mr. Cottam steps to the side and points like a gameshow host. Derek, under a set of bleachers straight ahead. Doubled over. Pendulum of puke hanging from his lockjawed mouth. Jacob gags. Mr. Cottam smirks. "Wait until after the race."

Jacob swallows burn, shakes his head.

"Now's your chance, Jacob."

"It's not my distance."

"Two laps. It's nothing."

"Get Spielman to do it."

"Dean's high jumping. And I can't sub someone who's in another event. But because you missed yours, they're willing to let you in."

You're the sub, Jacob."

Jacob's jaw quivering. "Can, can I stretch?"

Mr. Cottam snaps out his arm and looks at his watch. "Fifteen minutes to start. I'll meet you at trackside in ten."

A cracked "okay."

"By the way," says Mr. Cottam, walking away backwards, "Billy Mutton's in it." He winks and turns, jogs towards the track.

Great, thinks Jacob, folding his right leg under him, extending his left. Forehead to knee. His leg quaking. Two laps, he tells himself, just two laps. Not my event. Don't have to win. Just finish.

As he walks towards Mr. Cottam at trackside, Jacob sees Billy. Always the first to the starting area. And wired, like a nutty dog.

"Okay, kiddo," says Mr. Cottam, hand on Jacob's shoulder as he slips out of his sweats, "you know who'll set the pace. Just stay on his heels, you've been training hard". Jacob running lightly on the spot, shaking out his arms, nodding.

“You can do it, Jacob. Just lock in right behind him, don’t give up, and use those legs of yours to outkick him in the last stretch. You okay?”

Jacob burps, the smell like barbecue sauce and bones.

“Go get ’em, kiddo.” A whack on the butt.

Jacob jogs up to his assigned lane, eyes avoiding Billy. A dark hand suddenly on Jacob’s ribcage, pushing him aside, and before he looks along the muscular arm he sees Billy’s eyes grow wide as he looks up.

Holy shit, says Jacob to himself.

He’s taller than Darren Meikle. Coal-black hair hangs to shot-put shoulders. Stubble, not peach fuzz. Like the guys back at Hillcrest, bused in from the reservation, who smoke just the other side of school property at lunch hour, flicking butts at Jacob and others as they ride by. This guy looks like them, except for his eyes. Like lacerations, Jacob thinks. Samurai eyes. Other runners, so white and thin beside him, cluster, look down. He goes to the outside lane, cords in his forearms as he

takes off his track suit. Brachioradialis, says Jacob to himself, eyeing the amazing muscles. Like Daredevil or Spiderman. Jacob wonders where he's from. His singlet says P J V I. Port Hope? Peterborough? Parry Sound? Pluto, says Jacob under his breath, smiling as he settles in the lane next to Billy. He can tell Billy's worried. That he no longer knows he's going to win.

Amplified click. Bullhorn voice. "*Rrrunners*, take your marks."

Burp. Never eat chicken again.

"*Rrready ...*."

The emptying of his mind. Wide eyes on the ground six feet ahead, right calf twitching. Jacob feels the pressure of the finger upon the pistol's trigger.

Bang.

Billy takes off, nearly sprinting.

Five feet back in seconds, stomach swirling, Jacob cannot believe the pace.

Then, out his right eye's corner the windswept hair. The slapping sounds. *Pap pap pap*. Barefoot. The big guy is running barefoot, passing Jacob now as he cuts across lanes. He strides alongside Billy – *pap pap pap* – for a few seconds. Looks down at him. Passes. Eight, ten paces ahead of Jacob by the time they reach the two-hundred metre mark.

The emptying, as if he were a spout, a toilet. Jacob gives up. Second, he thinks, eyeing Billy's heels. But Billy puts his head down, pumps his hard hairless legs, moves to within a few feet of the big guy. Jacob growls, spits, picks up his pace. Gains. But the pace. And the chicken in his belly doesn't want to stay there.

As they finish the first lap and the bell rings, Jacob, deaf to the cheers, watches Billy pull ahead a little farther, hopes to hang on for third. Third. Bronze. Not so bad.

His father's voice. Screaming.

"C'mon, Jacob! Dig in! Dig in! You're giving up, lad! Lift those legs, pump your arms, *move move move!*"

Heart as if clawed, Jacob looks left, wrenching his eyes and wrenching them again at the sight of him. “No,” he hears himself say. Impossible. Real. Here. Waving his arms, his face red and furrowed and folded.

Rounding the second last curve. Two-hundred metres to go. Lava in his lungs and guts. Legs filling with sand. Nothing left, he thinks. Dead.

Appearing just over Jacob’s right shoulder, another runner, square jawed and short haired, determined to take third. Spit spraying with each exhalation, his face pale violet, veins at his temples throbbing like long hearts. Jacob looks over at his dad again as he drops to fourth. Mr. Cottam bolting over as his dad steps on the track and screams. “Pump your arms! Kick, kick! Head up! Lift your legs, pump your arms! Come on, boy! Come on!”

Jacob sets his teeth. Lifts his head. Pumps his arms, and digs. Deep. Bastard asshole, he thinks, squealing as his eyes water, won’t die on you.

He passes the guy in third with less than a hundred metres to go.

Empty, not knowing what moves him, but each stride like a leap.

At sixty to go, he draws even with Billy. The shock as he hears him crying.

The hate.

He passes him.

Within ten feet now of the dark guy, guts boiling.

The picture slow silence.

Six feet.

Less.

The guy's back muscles like waves, his hair slowly lashing, like they're under water.

Three feet, two.

The line. Faces. Dean Spielman, wide open mouth making *go*.

Jacob hits the cinder in a heap, gagging.

Cheers through a thick wall, slaps on his back. He rolls over, sees the other guy, hands on his knees, breathing hard, spitting. He looks

over at Jacob, nods. Draw, thinks Jacob, suddenly up, Mr. Cottam bouncing with him in his arms.

“Your time Jacob, your time your time look at your time!”

Jacob looks over at the clock. His eyes bulge. 2:10. As fast as I can, he gasps.

His father suddenly in front of them. Mr. Cottam’s smile fading. He lets Jacob go. His father’s face, the bared brown teeth.

“You lost, lad.”

Mr Cottam steps toward him. “Jesus Christ, John.”

Jacob’s dad sneering, looking over Mr. Cottam’s shoulder. “You were in fourth, Jacob, you were giving up. You were willing to come fourth.”

Mr. Cottam takes another step. Chests bump. Kids backing off, a race judge running over, his hands raised: “Whoa gentlemen, easy does it.” Jacob’s chin wobbling. The judge between his dad and Mr. Cottam.

“The kid ran the race of his life, John, you should be –”

Don’t you tell me what I should –”

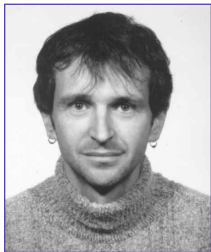
“Gentlemen please, let’s be –”

Jacob walks away.

“Hey.” The big guy, motioning Jacob over.

They take a slow lap. Jacob imagines his brother, here, down at the far end of the track. Cheering his guts out.

About the Author



ADRIAN KELLY was born in Timmins, Ontario, and grew up in Campbellford. He received a B.A. from Trent University, and an M.A. from Queen's. While at Queen's he began to write fiction and co-founded the small magazine, *ASH*. In 1995 he left university to write, travel and teach. He has travelled throughout Europe and Asia, and has lived in South Korea, Switzerland and Italy.