

# Peloton

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JACK SLIDES AN ICE CUBE FROM HIS GLASS OF TEQUILA, rubs it over his hot, stubbly face and down his neck where it vanishes.

“Maybe we should get air-conditioning,” he says.

“Can’t take it?” Joanne asks, grinning.

He stares at the dark slit between her incisors that still turns him on. To escape the fearsome heat upstairs, they’ve spent a week of nights lying naked on the living room floor on the futon from Joanne’s daughter’s old room.

Over their heads, the ceiling fan spins a frenzied blur. On the TV screen, cyclists in the final week of the Tour de France push up a winding road in the Pyrenees, which has its own history of border skirmishes.

“I want to quit teaching and live a year in France,” Joanne says, eyes fixed on the racers.

Jack knows what Joanne wants. He keeps a list in his head, anxious to be the one to grant her wishes, but reluctant to satisfy all her longings, in case she stops needing him.

When they bought the house twelve years ago, he said, “It doesn’t have to have everything we want. A house can’t make you happy.”

“Some real estate agent,” Joanne said, pressing a manicured finger against his breastbone. “Shouldn’t you have faith in the dream you’re selling?”

That was after their honeymoon in Europe. They’d followed the Rhine from Amsterdam to Alsace in a rented Saab convertible, her red hair a balmy, tangled flag, his eyes bloodshot behind fake Serengetis. Back home in Toronto, still living in Joanne’s old fifth-floor apartment, the window air-conditioner chugging out noisy breaths of coolish air, they’d scanned the MLS listings, conjuring their future, inventing a list of what they wanted: three bedrooms—one each for his son and her daughter—two bathrooms, a jacuzzi tub, a private yard where they could drink wine on warm evenings as they’d done all through Germany and France, a garage for his aging BMW, gas heating, central air and central vac., hardwood floors. And a shorter list of what they couldn’t do without and what they ended up

getting: three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a yard.

Jack’s boyhood house was a small two-storey brick like the one they lived in now—entrance to the side leading into a galley kitchen where his mother cooked dinner with a gin and tonic in one hand so she’d be able to work up a smile for his father. He was in sales too—Formica back then. Joanne wants to redo the kitchen where the grey Formica is starting to buckle and peel and the fridge stinks of limp celery no matter how feverishly she scrubs it. But she wants more to escape to France, fleeing this sinking ship of a house, the paint blistering on the bathroom ceiling, the swollen window frames, the dank, spider-infested basement.

Jack watches her watch the peloton glide through France, trying to pin down her lust to one particular mountain, lake or town. Her eyes narrow, her skin glows pinker whenever Kaz, the gifted young cyclist who’s challenging the leaders, rides onto the screen, whenever the commentators sound the buzz of his name. There he is in his red jersey near the head of the peloton, squirting water in his face, pedals spinning under legs shaved smooth. When Kaz squeezes his eyes to sharpen the blur of the road ahead, Joanne bites her lower lip, filling the space between her teeth.

Jack starts a new list—the things they’ve denied themselves or each other: air conditioning, a Jacuzzi bathtub, a kitchen reno, anal sex, a really good screaming fight, a dog, TV in the bedroom, children together. The kids from their previous marriages have grown. Two worry lines ride Joanne’s forehead whenever she thinks about Sophie in Montreal, sewing curtains and singing frantic songs.

“At least Aaron is settled,” she says, looking away from an ad for some anti-anxiety drug with troubling side effects, continuing one of their on-going conversations that hang within reach like low wires crisscrossing. “But he’s too young to get married, and that damned bank works him too hard.”

“At least when he marries, he’ll move out of his mother’s house.” Joanne rests a hand over Jack’s heart, aware of the burden she’s accepted for keeping the pieces from flying apart.

When Jack’s mother was drunk, she used to break her grandmother’s Limoges cups and saucers, winging them over his head into the leaded windowpanes. He didn’t know enough to duck. Instead he marvelled at how the windows never cracked or chipped, simply flung back the bits of pink and white china. But later in bed, when he picked them from his hair, the sight of blood smudging his fingertips made his legs tremble.

Jack picks out Kaz and his red teammates from the mosaic of coloured jerseys. From behind, the peloton looks like a herd of goats ambling up a mountain, shoulders forward, flanks swaying, held together by an invisible bond, a glue stronger than the white goop with which Jack's mother, when sober, tried to mend the least damaged cups. Tension forms the peloton glue, tension between the comfort and safety of the pack, and each rider's longing to strike out on his own, casting off the ballast of the others' breath and sweat.

The housing market's been strong lately. But Jack has known years when he depended on Joanne's teacher's pay, when all that kept him going was the time he spent inside her, the memory of their last fuck and the prospect of the next one, when he'd drive by the school just to make sure her red Honda was parked in the lot. One day, it wasn't, but that evening she showed him two bandages on her back where the dermatologist had sliced out precancerous moles.

During the next round of ads, Joanne's head and shoulders slump against the base of the white love seat that's serving as their headboard. "I feel nauseous," she says.

"I thought you liked the heat."

"But this is too much."

She rests a hand over the closed eye of her navel, letting her big toes fall together. Her chin seems to slide into her neck, as if all her disappointments have hollowed her, but when the cyclists return, she raises her head, alert and taut once more.

The peloton splits and reforms like an amoeba. Kaz speeds up, starts to pull ahead, but something causes his bike to sway. It leans into the rider beside him. Jack hears the sharp pull of Joanne's breath, feels her holding it. The other rider wobbles, falls, skids to the side of the road, while Kaz stares ahead, willing his bike upright. Joanne breathes out. The commentators burst into speculation—a stone in the road, sand, bad luck, skittish nerves. The other rider picks himself up. His thigh is bleeding, but he's okay. They spray his cuts, bring him a new bike. All this takes no more than a minute before he's back in the race, chasing the peloton.

"I saw this part earlier," Joanne says. But it hasn't stopped her from watching as if it's her first time.

In the morning, they'll take in tomorrow's race live until Jack has to meet a client. Joanne has the month off and can watch all day. Some days she

never gets dressed, never goes out. Jack likes to imagine her at home, naked, unseen, unknown to anyone but him, like a princess waiting in a castle for her lover to save her, like a nun before she pulls on her habit, or a whore in an Amsterdam window, her fragile toughness contained by the glass.

As a child, Jack used to mix the drinks that killed his mother. He'd slice the lime's green flesh, inhale the juniper fragrance of the gin, free the fizzy tonic from its bottle, then spin the ice around with a plastic stir stick, setting in motion a hypnotic dance of ice and lime. Her favourite drink was just another potion he assembled under her tutelage. She also taught him to make infusions from herbs she grew in the garden. They were meant to cure stomach ache, depression and rashes. He tried them all, but they never had any effect, unlike the snuck sips of gin that made him lightheaded and happy, that cast him into a deep sleep and woke him from heated dreams—his mother flying on a carpet of her own dark hair, brittle as a broom.

Space closes between the leaders and the peloton as they approach the final ten kilometres. The overall leader, the American who won yesterday's yellow jersey, is hanging back, just behind Kaz, who keeps looking over his shoulder as if his gaze could hold the man in check. Joanne has seen the end of the race and knows its outcome, but she's keeping quiet so Jack can enjoy the suspense. The truth is that he doesn't care who wins the day, as long as it isn't Kaz, as long as he doesn't pull some heroic feat in the last minute and suck Joanne into the TV like a slurp of victory champagne.

"Let's think about renovations," he says. "We can afford a nice kitchen now. Granite countertops. Stainless appliances."

Joanne says, "Let's think about selling. We don't need all this space now that the kids never visit."

Her willingness to jettison their house makes Jack's sweaty neck shiver. She could just as easily push him from the convertible to speed more quickly uphill, just as easily pull ahead on the stretch as Kaz is doing now, her heels in their black cycling shoes spinning like a hypnotist's watch, head bent over the handle bars, heart pumping. The dark spread of sweat on Kaz's red jersey makes Jack's patched heart tremble and his trembling thighs ache to keep up for as long as they can.

Some things he's never told Joanne: When he failed to see her red Honda in the school parking lot that day, he took a gulp of vodka from the

flask in his glove box. He keeps a flask in his car for emergencies. When his father was away on sales trips, Jack's mother used to crawl into his bed, her soft breasts under the thin night shirt pressed against his shoulder blades, her long legs wrapped around his shorter ones. She slept at once, but his erection kept him awake, even when he was quite small.

Something Joanne already knows: In Amsterdam, after a few hours in the coffee shops, she encouraged Jack to try one of the window whores, the French-looking one with the rough dark hair, black stilettos, and pink and white scarf. There were tiny raised welts on the backs of her thighs. Jack thought they were bug bites.

Later, when he told Joanne, she said, "Maybe she cuts herself." She said, "Now that you've sinned, I can too."

Now that Kaz has made his move, he rides like a demon, forging a canyon between himself and the herd. The two leaders in blue and green jerseys keep looking over their shoulders as if hoping to ward him off, but their concern only seems to spur him on. Kaz seizes the final stretch through town, his red jersey taking the finish line seconds before the blue and green.

Jack's forehead drops into his hands. Tears burn his throat. He feels Joanne's slick hand cup the back of his neck.

He used to hold the window whore against Joanne, resent her for tricking him by setting a test he'd be sure to fail, but maybe she'd simply been offering a gift, having seen that the girl was not just another pretty object in a window, but a pink and white memory Jack longed to chase time after. Then she'd masked her generosity to make him feel less mean, claiming tit for tat, a debt she has never called in, as far as he knows.

"This house is making me unhappy," Joanne says. "If we sell, we can invest the money and go to France for a year, then buy a condo downtown when the market's cooled."

Jack wants to say no, wants to keep denying her the things on his list of her longings, because that's the only power he's ever been able to wield. With his first wife too. And his son. But denial has always flown back at him—useless, broken.

He raises his head and nods, transfixed by the image of Kaz sailing through the crowd, holding up two triumphant hands.