

*New England Interscholastic Rowing Championships, Lake Quinsigamond, Worcester*

I am lying low in the white Vespoli, wired for sound, stomach tight with anticipation. Coach Gilmore's last minute advice echoes, "Make your boys laugh; it will unnerve the competition." We vow to one another that we will win today for him. Above the line, we are consumed by our laughter and then fight for composure. A false start jangles our nerves, awakens the need to pee---the oarsmen relieve themselves. We focus. Our heartbeats are thudding in our ears. I fade into a calm, going over every inch of the course in my mind.

"Sit ready," calls the starter; I feel the four bodies behind me tense. "Attention." Their legs, necks, backs lengthen, ready for the first short stroke. "ROW." We jump off the line, shooting ahead of the competition. We are dumbfounded by the power in our start. I call a power ten and we open our lead to a half-length that discourages other rowers, unable to see my boat. A taut excitement grips my stomach; this is more perfect than any of us had dared imagine.

At the halfway mark, I call the "gold medal ten" and suddenly the shell, the oars, the oarsmen and I, the coxswain, are one. There is no weight in my body, none in theirs, none in the narrow fiberglass. We seem to rise above the water and fly. Behind me, I hear other voices, desperate, screaming at their crews to pull harder. We are walking away from them.

From the beach, the screams grow louder. I see the finish line. Groton is powering forward. I am afraid. I want this too badly to lose now. "Want this," I scream, "Want this more than they do." We do.

We cross the line with half a length on Groton. The air rushes out of me as I scream. We are five people again, the synchrony shattered. We are overjoyed. Our joy mixes with the despair in the boats around us, with the tumult on the shore. We are the New England Champions. We have proven what we have known all along, that we are the fastest, the best.