

Treadmill

The steady sound of her feet striking the treadmill is all she can hear.

Pound, pound. Pound, pound. Pound, pound. It is not unlike the sound of her heart and she wonders for a moment if she can change the tempo of her heartbeat at will, liken it to the pounding of her feet, so that they are in perfect rhythm with each other, one primal beat. *Pound, pound. Boom, boom. Pound, pound. Boom, boom.*

She pushes her bangs back and wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. Remembers that she has forgotten to bring a towel again. She watches a drop of sweat fall from her hand to the black rubber beneath her feet, a tiny splotch that flattens, then evaporates away. She wonders how many other people have relinquished the sweat of their bodies here, whether the mixture of all this sweat could create something in and of itself.

Pound, pound. Boom, boom. She hears her feet and her heart as if they were one beat now. The gym is so silent at this hour and she loves the feeling of being here, almost alone, save the body-builders, the steroid boys, in the corner with their greased skin, with their fake tans and stilted gaits. They grunt and groan as they push and pull against the cables and weights, and there is, in her mind, the inevitable comparison to sex, and more specifically, to sex with Tim – always

strangely silent, as if they were afraid of saying the wrong thing, the very thing that would ruin it all.

She closes her eyes, relying on her other senses to guide her through the quickening pace of the treadmill. She feels the rubber slide beneath her feet, brings one hand to rest on the support bar, the other arm pumping furiously beside her body. She keeps track only of the time, not of the miles she has run. She'd rather not count them, because then she'd be forced to lie to the orthopedic she has been seeing. If she doesn't know, she reasons, she can't tell him.

"How many miles did you do on the treadmill this week?" he will ask her, as he examines her knees, rotates her ankles in his cold hands, presses gently, then more firmly into her hip flexors. "I really don't know," she'll reply, and then he will shake his head and frown at her, deep creases forming between his eyebrows.

She opens her eyes and glances at the clock on the wall. 1:38 am. She says a silent prayer for 24-Hour Fitness. She has tried 5 am, but there are hoards of people hoping to fit in their walk or run before work. She has tried 10 am, but all of the housewives are there, walking at a snail's pace, barely breaking a sweat, eyes glued to the ubiquitous TVs, to Regis and Kelly. She wants to scream at them: You'll never get any results that way! But she doesn't.

She has been going for one hour, 38 minutes now. The body builders are silent and she glances to the corner where they sit on a bench, bottles of Gatorade in their hands. One of the men unwraps an energy bar, the crinkling of the foil

package interrupting her rhythm. She stumbles a bit as the track races beneath her feet. She silently curses, then regains her composure. She is aware that they are watching her and she looks down at the black rubber beneath her feet, not wanting to seem as if she is interested in talking. She is only here to walk. *Pound, pound. Boom, boom.*

“Hey. Treadmill girl.”

She pretends she hasn’t heard him, the bodybuilder with the energy bar.

“Yo,” he tries again.

“Me?” She turns her head quickly in his direction, then focuses back on the wall in front of her.

The two men laugh. She glances sideways at them. From this distance, they are just gaping mouths and teeth, brilliant white, set against their impossibly dark skin. Again, she turns to the wall in front of her, to the gray screen of the TV that is perched on its stand slightly higher than eye level.

“Yeah, you. There’s no one else in here this time of night. You getting ready for a marathon or something?”

She shakes her head. She looks at the clock again, edging toward 2 am, the time when she usually reaches that state of purity, her body high on the endorphins, the sweat cleansing her of everything – not just the food she has consumed, but all the foul thoughts that won’t disappear any other way. In this state of unadulterated bliss, she can forget the stack of neat, typewritten papers

waiting to be signed on her dining room table, the three messages her mother has left on her answering machine pleading with her to call back, the newspapers scattered across her empty, unmade bed, black circles rimmed around the ads, numbers highlighted in yellow that she cannot bring herself to call.

“You been on that thing forever, baby. You’ll wear your joints out that way.” She regards him from the corner of her eye as he looks her up and down and bites down on the energy bar.

She stares straight ahead. *Pound, pound. Boom, boom.* She sets her jaw in a determined fashion and presses a series of buttons on the treadmill. What she needs is a more difficult climb. She adjusts to the slight hill, the new speed. She pushes herself to go faster. She runs until the sound of their voices is just humming in the background.

The bodybuilder with the energy bar approaches. She can hear his heavy footsteps competing with the rhythm that she has established in her head, a foreign, unwelcome beat.

“What? You’re too good to talk to us?”

She turns her head slightly to look at him, but all she can see is the beige, gooey matter in his mouth as he chews.

“Aww man, leave her alone,” his buddy says from the bench. “She’s a fuckin’ freak.”

You're one to talk, she thinks, but says nothing. She will not let them keep her from the top of the hill, from her state of ecstasy. She blinks her eyes, as if the men will disappear this way.

"Hey, shut up, man. Sorry about him." She tries to picture his face without looking at him. The bulging forehead, the disjointed nose, his eyes the color of creamy coffee. He couldn't be more than 25, but he has the face of an older man, despite the spattering of acne on his forehead and chin, the telltale signs of being on the juice.

She is surprised that when she finally glances at him, he's not that bad at all. He smiles at her with the brilliant white teeth, a dimple at one corner. His hair is black and closely cropped, his jaw broad and square. She blinks as a drop of sweat falls into the corner of her eye.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Lanie."

"Lanie. That's different."

"Short for Elaine."

"I like it."

Tim's face flashes in front of her. Tim's face as she last saw it, sitting across from her in the marriage counselor's office. What was that look on his face? Not anger or hatred or anything of that sort at all. Pity, maybe. That was it. He thought she was pathetic for believing that things could be worked out

between them. The counselor, a woman with sagging jowls and white hairs on her chin, asked him the question directly. “Tim, are you here to try and work things out with Lanie?” She remembers holding her breath, feeling the absence of air in her lungs, the absence of sensation in her toes, the absence of blood to her head. Later, when she came to, lying on the plush green rug, Tim stood above her. “I can’t do this anymore,” he said. He kneeled down and kissed her cheek. She closed her eyes again and breathed in the last remnants of him, the stale, musky odor that somehow she’d grown accustomed to.

The odor of the man beside her, the unmistakable smell of sweat mixed with some sort of spicy cologne, brings her back to present. The smell of the man who is preventing her from purging her body, her mind of everything right now. She will not let him stop her from reaching her goal. Tim tried to stop her and now look what has become of them.

“I’m Bo,” he says, shifting from one foot to another. “The asshole over there’s Pete.”

She nods and turns back to the wall, quickens her pace.

“Look, I’m not trying to be rude,” he says. “I was just thinking maybe you’d like to take a break. We could – uh – aw shit. I don’t know. Grab a couple of beers. Go back to our place and just hang out.”

“Jesus,” Pete says from the bench. “Give it up, Bo.”

Bo ignores his buddy and edges closer to the treadmill. Lanie keeps trudging uphill faster. *Pound, pound. Boom, boom.* She is conscious of the sweat that runs in tiny rivulets down her neck, into the space between her breasts. She tries not to think about the man standing next to the treadmill, waiting for her to respond in some way to his gesture. She tries not to think about the man who will meet her back home at 8am to – in his own words – “tie up all the loose ends”. To purge himself of her, the way that she purges herself of everything on this treadmill.

It takes her a moment to realize that she is crying and she can almost feel the look of surprise and pity on Bo’s face, doesn’t have to turn to see that it is there.

He takes a step back. “Whoa, you ok?”

She nods her head as tears and sweat fly from her face, making puddles on the treadmill beneath her feet. She needs to keep going, doesn’t she?

“Hey, did I say something wrong?”

She cannot answer. She wipes her face with the palm of one hand and her eyes sting with the salty mixture of sweat and tears and mascara remnants. Make-up she hasn’t removed. She can’t remember the events of today at all, but then she reasons, it was really yesterday. Yes, she has been here on this treadmill, watching today turn into yesterday, the clock bringing her over the threshold of one day, into another, but both of them essentially the same.

“Dude,” Pete says. “Let’s go.”

“Hang on, man.”

Bo isn’t a bad guy, she thinks. Maybe Bo is someone who would understand her. She turns to look at him through her glazed eyes. Bo would understand the feeling of accomplishment you get at the top of the hill, when you press the weight above your head, when you cleanse your body of all the things you cannot abide by. Tim could never understand this. He kept saying, “Lanie, you don’t love yourself enough,” but now she knows the truth. He is the one who couldn’t love her enough.

“You gonna be alright?” Bo asks.

She nods her head and attempts a smile. She feels like an impostor, the smile a foreign object plastered across her face.

He smiles back, the dimpled right corner deepening, and turns toward the door. Pete throws him a towel and he catches it in his hands, buries his face in it.

“See ya, Lanie,” he calls over his shoulder. She can hear Pete saying something as they exit, something about how you shouldn’t waste your time with certain women, how they are nothing but trouble. He’s wrong, she thinks, and then she looks at the clock and realizes she has crossed the finish line. 2 am. And yet, she feels no sense of relief this time, no exultation. She pushes the red button and halts the treadmill, grabs her towel and water and runs out the door.

Bo and Pete are talking to the guy at the front desk, towels wrapped casually around their thick necks. Bo raises his eyebrows in acknowledgement.

“Hey. You done?”

“Yeah. Finished.” She is breathing hard, her chest rising and falling, steadily, the sound of the treadmill still ringing in her ears. *Pound, pound. Boom, boom.*

“Need a walk to your car?”

“Ok.”

Bo walks beside her through the parking lot. He is taller than she had thought at first. Maybe it is the broadness of his shoulders, the strange bulkiness of his bowed legs, that made her think otherwise. Pete walks ahead, whistling a tune. She wonders if Bo would defend her against Pete, who called her a freak. Tim never said it in so many words, but she knows he, too, came to think of her this way.

They stop in front of her beat-up Honda, the one she has driven since college. Tim said he would buy her a new car as a reward for getting healthy. “My resting pulse is much lower than yours,” she’d said. “This is not about me,” Tim had replied. She told him she liked her Honda, that it felt comfortable, like an old pair of slippers. She remembers his face when she told him this, remembers thinking that he looked like a man who had given up.

She fits her key into the lock and opens the car door.

“Hey, I didn’t know they still made ‘em like that,” Bo says.

She laughs, actually laughs, and it stuns her. When did she last laugh?

She turns and looks Bo straight in the eyes. “You’re funny,” she says.

She drinks one beer with Pete and Bo in their Studio City apartment and it is enough to make her feel drunk. She doesn’t remember the last time she had anything but water or diet soda to drink. Yes, she does. Tim begged her to drink champagne with him on their two-year anniversary. He said it would do her good to loosen up. She remembers feeling dizzy and wondrous, until things started to go hazy, and Tim’s voice started to sound strange, and then the room started to spin. She remembers sleeping in the bathroom, her head hanging over the toilet bowl, Tim holding her hair back, apologizing, telling her that if she’d only indulge once in awhile, it wouldn’t have this effect on her.

She laughs with Bo on a faded green IKEA couch and Pete takes charge of the remote, flipping through channels on the TV. She sees flashing images of Larry King interviewing a British reporter about the royal family, a woman talking about a cubic zirconium ring on the QVC, little Rudy being reprimanded by her Dad on a Cosby Show rerun. She knows she is drunk and she relishes the feeling, lets the beer settle inside her, slightly amazed that she has no desire to stop drinking, to tell Bo she has made a mistake, to go home yet.

Pete takes a giant swig of his beer and sets the bottle on the table. He looks at her with small, twitching eyes, then looks quickly away again. She knows her presence is annoying to him, that he thinks Bo is crazy for having brought her here at all.

“Why do you do it?” he says, turning back to her.

“Do what?”

“You know. The treadmill. Two hours in the middle of the night.”

“Why do you do it?” she asks, thinking that even in her current, inebriated state, she is too clever to let this go.

“Huh,” is all that emerges from his mouth. He shakes his head and turns back to the TV. He has found a Baywatch rerun and Lanie watches as Pamela Anderson bounces down the beach in her red swimsuit.

“I told you, just ignore him.” Bo places a hand on Lanie’s arm. It is warm, but calloused from gripping weights in the gym. She thinks how ordinarily, she would remove his hand or scoot down the length of the couch or even pick her car keys up off the table and leave, go back to the gym and hit the treadmill. She thinks of going home, of arriving at her front door, turning the key in the lock. Of being greeted by the interminable silence, the answering machine blinking red, the papers where she left them. She leaves Bo’s hand where it is.

Pete clicks the remote again and the TV fades to black. He stands and stretches his bulky arms over his head.

“I’m beat,” he says. “Enjoy your evening. What’s left of it.”

He disappears into a hallway and Lanie hears the sound of a door slam. She realizes the beer has interfered with her judgment. She should go. But Bo’s hand is rubbing her arm now and it feels so warm. She is usually a bundle of raw nerve endings, shocked into the moment by every noise, every sound, every sensation, but now she is dulled at the edges and it is such a welcome feeling.

“Thought he’d never leave,” Bo says with a laugh.

“Yeah.” She can’t think of anything else to say.

Bo slides his hand up the length of her arm and wraps it around her shoulder awkwardly so that she is forced to lean into his chest. Neither of them has showered and she knows this would normally repulse her, but she hasn’t the energy to say anything about it.

She can feel his breath, tainted with Miller Lite, on her face and she closes her eyes, not wanting to think about why she shouldn’t be here or why she’ll be back on the treadmill tomorrow at midnight or maybe even before then if she can’t stand to wait that long. She thinks about Tim who will ring the doorbell in the morning and ask her the following questions, not necessarily in this order: Have you found a place yet? Why haven’t you packed anything? Did you sign the papers?

Bo’s breath is in her ear now and she knows he is waiting for her to turn toward him so he can kiss her. She will let him kiss her, she thinks, because he

understands her and he can help rid her mind of all those questions that she doesn't want to answer. Tomorrow she will be back on the treadmill and he will be back in the weight room and they will both go back to their respective routines.

Bo's body is heavier than she'd imagined and she wonders how they can defy the laws of gravity like this, with him on top of her, pounding away, grinding against her hipbones that jut out like spikes on either side of him. She is grateful that Bo is not creative, that he is interested only in standard fare, that he doesn't ask her to get on all fours or give him a blow job. She is grateful, too, that he is not silent, that he moans and grunts, as he did in the weight room. She keeps her eyes open, nervous that Pete will re-enter the room, but she sees only the dim light from the empty hallway, feels the worn canvas of the couch beneath her bare skin, feels herself emptied of all the things she'd hoped to do away with on the treadmill. She feels sweat forming on her skin all over again as she reaches toward that purified state where her mind goes blank, her body is light, free of all the things that weigh it down.

She drives home as the sun is coming up, a faded pink glow in the sky that she can just make out through the defrosted circle on the driver's side of the windshield. Her t-shirt stinks of dried and re-dried sweat – some of it hers, some of it Bo's. She slides back against the rough leather of the car, her inner thighs glued to her sweatpants with the sticky remains of their encounter. Normally, she would hate this, would not be able to wait this long to wash him off of her. She

wonders how long this contented feeling will last, as she coasts down the near empty stretch of freeway, beginning to feel the ache in her head, remnants of the beer, of her lack of sleep. She knows that in three hours, Tim will walk through the door and want the answers that she doesn't have. She has never had the answers, it seems, and if she did, Tim would not be leaving. She rubs at her hipbone and knows it is bruised. The orthopedic will ask her how many miles she did on the treadmill this week. "I don't know," she will tell him.

Truthfully, she doesn't know.