

Heart-Break

"We're all in here because of the opposite sex and anyone who says otherwise is a liar, –" says the muscleman completely out of the blue.

"I just don't want to be fat anymore. I think I look like a Walrus." I say nervously, hoping to elicit some kind of agreeable response or at the very least a placation like "Oh, you're not that fat" or "You're not the worst I've seen." But the muscleman nods along all too vehemently.

"Listen, you gotta keep your heart wound tight," the muscleman says trying to make himself clear. "I date three to four women a week, and all I do is follow a strict regimen of diet, know what I mean?"

I didn't know what he meant.

"These are the rowing machines and they are the second most popular machine in the whole gym. You see-" he says as he sits into the saddle of the rowing machine, his massive frame flowing over the sides like a river of muscle -and frankly I am surprised the saddle doesn't buckle under his weight. "What do you think the most popular machine in the gym is?" he says before answering his own question: "The running machine. -But we'll get to that." And with that he shows me how to strap my feet into the pedals, and powers the machine for a moment. "Look, there's ways of getting rid of fat which is what you're after. But there's the quick way," he pauses, "and there's the slow way, see?" he says with finality, judging me, reading my attitude I assume, with each gawking look and bizarre and attentive pause. One might even think he was paranoid about something if one didn't know any better.

"All right. This is the most popular machine in the gym," he says unstrapping and moving me over to the running machine.

"Ah. I was hoping more to maybe get to use the weights and work on my strength," I say naively, but receive a verbal spanking immediately after from the muscleman.

"Look I'm going to level with you okay, you need to focus on 'cardio' which is your running machine and your rowing machine because those are your fat burners and you're a big guy, okay, and you seem like a nice guy. What brought you back to the gym?"

Why was I here? I thought about what the muscle-man first said when he was told to show me around the gym: "We're all in here because of the opposite sex" and I mean surely it can't be that simple? I had been in a relationship for years and we'd both become overweight, and I hadn't had a job in a few years and shit I probably even had depression. I mean I had to move back in to my parent's house and at my age that's just pathetic. I had just signed up to an online dating app, and it wasn't going well. It just can't all be that simple, can it? I don't want to believe I am the kind of guy who upon meeting a girl will judge her by her looks but the undeniable fact was here I was in a gym

so that a woman can judge me based on mine.

"Every great thing man has ever accomplished has been an attempt to impress the opposite sex. Do you know who said that?" the muscle man asked and I hazarded a guess:

"I don't know, Oscar Wilde?" and the muscle-man just grunted.

"Look, what's your diet like, do you eat fruit? Veg? You're going to have to have some kind of diet, maybe even... some kind of supplement, yeah?" he said and like an idiot I just replied:

"Yeah, I mean I've started eating salad and I don't eat biscuits and crisps anymore." And I felt his eyes boring into mine so I looked down at my feet and was certain he knew I was lying. It was just so strange how he was looking at me and his nervousness just didn't fit – not with him being such a confident and large man.

"What do you know about Clenbuterol?"

"Clenbuterol?" I said and as I said the pharmaceutical word it all made sense. He was angling to see what I thought about the taking of steroids.

"Look, you seem nice. And I know you're not police because nobody's *that* good of an actor. I'm no artist or musician or whatever, but there was a girl in my life who cheated on me, got that?" he said with aggression, which doubly made sense given his allusion to taking steroids. "Cheated on *me*. See? You gotta keep your heart wound tight, treat them like dirt and they love you for it. You can't let them into your heart. The best thing you can do is bang 'em then tell 'em they don't mean nothing to you -- keep them wanting more," he said and dabbed at his forehead.

The windows were open in the gym and a handful of both skinny and large women were running and rowing. It was hot that day and everyone was feeling that summer pressure of love on the heart. It occurred to me that I didn't like the muscle man's machismo. All I wanted to do was leave the gym and maybe go home and watch TV or play a videogame. God how I just wanted to leave this place and go home. Still, I had to accept that I wanted to look like the muscle-man even if I didn't want to *become* him; I had to accept that I hated the way that I looked and how I repelled women; I had to accept that this man had a quick way for me to take care of my physical appearance but that I would not let it change my heart. All of the women in my life had adored my heart starting with my mother always telling me it was 'pure gold' and even my ex conceding that she loved that I wrote poetry, jokes, and cared about children and animals.

"Don't let 'em in your heart, sir, and I'll have you banging girl after girl in no time," he said, and he was starting to get to me now, and I was ready to start talking price when he said, finally: "This is the..." As we made our way to the next gym contraption the muscleman screeched to a halt like someone running on a treadmill with its tread breaking apart halfway through.

He doubled over and he clutched at his chest with his clawing hand while he made several mighty breathy noises. At first, I thought he swallowed some gum or something but it was soon apparent that it was much worse. As the other gym trainer rushed over

to help, and a crowd gathered around him, he lay down exhibiting 'agonal gasps' and the gym trainer began to perform CPR and he flailed like a flopped dying fish.

While bathed in red and blue ambulance light reflecting off the tall aluminum gym mirrors it occurred to me that here the muscle-man had suffered heartbreak – for the second and perhaps final time in his life.