

Hey Dumbbell, Get a Matt

by Liz Lydic



For a long time, I hid it. Growing up in the 90s, to work out as a teen was self-whistleblowing: *I admit that I'm a chubby adolescent and now I must take action.*

Later, I matured, having discovered that working out could be an antidote to my anxiety, and also a way to enjoy progress under no one else's rules. I began stating publicly that an hour of my day might be set aside to exercise.

This confidence apparently opened an invitation for men to give me advice or make inquiries, accompanied by non-so-discreet scans of my body.

"You work out?"

"You're into fitness?"

"You exercise? *Regularly?*"

The gym itself, a culture I certainly knew could be divided between ultimately supportive or ultimately intimidating, was little better.

Michael told me when I asked about his boot camp training that it was only for women who were already in great shape.

Shawn came over to ask me if I was "actually" using the 25-pound weight I had set next to my bench.

Aaron, my gym friend Laurie's trainer, would chin-nod at me as I walked past them and say, "Doubt you could keep up with Laurie! Hope she inspires you!"

But then there was Matt.

Matt worked at the gym, and I couldn't get him to insult me. He just smiled, or gave me fist bumps, his hands tiny compared to his wide, sculpted form. He said nothing to me that had to do with my fitness or my body. I tried intentionally sabotaging my form, to lure him over to correct me. He'd only say - in a totally believable voice -

'Have a great workout.'

The day I had the audacity to crank my treadmill up to 6.5mph to try to pull off a sub ten-minute mile, I planned for Matt's shift. He saw me, huffing and puffing, and didn't say, "Are you ok?" He just gave me a thumbs-up as he walked to the rolled-up towel display case.

I became increasingly unmotivated during my gym visits, especially when Matt was there. Nothing made sense. I told myself it was cool that he accepted me as a peer but that story just didn't check out.

The less he insulted me the more I slacked.

I started using much smaller weights, those cute ones that are padded in colors like turquoise or fuschia. I sat on weight machines, not adding a single gram, and pushed and pulled dramatically. I cycled at low speed on a stationary bike and breathed hard, convincing myself that I was the out of shape, useless person I assumed Matt saw. For six months, I ditched everything I knew and committed to a fitness rookie image.

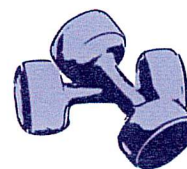
Matt didn't flinch.

I continued this for a year, until my charade became my baseline and I morphed into a flaccid, wheezing, depressed version of myself. I still went to the gym, but it was a lackluster part of my day. A pile of stress grew inside me until it pushed out and created valleys beneath my skin.

Then there was a period in which Matt was absent from the gym. I found out later that he was interested in becoming a firefighter, and had been enrolled in some sort of academy.

Without Matt at the gym to try to provoke, I let my membership expire, and turned to articles and podcasts for a new fitness community, mistaking cries for self-care as demands to counter the overwhelmingness of life by constantly relaxing from it all; to give my body a break.

'*Wellness means you can't do this damage to your body*' was the message, and as I came across it over and over, I began to understand it as '*My body can't do this.*'



continued on next page

That spring, on a rainy day, strolling as slowly as possible in a park, I saw Matt. He was doing pushups on a staircase, and smiling widely.

"Hey!" he said, popping up. "There she is! Haven't seen you!" He put out an elbow and I wasn't sure what to do with it so I just mirrored the move.

"I'm out for a walk," I said, waiting for a suggestion about 10,000 steps or stopping to do some backsprings or maybe lift a porta-potty over my head if I really want to be fit. I paused. "Just walking, you know," I said a little louder.

"Love it!" he said, then lunged forward on his right leg.

"What ... how ... where have you ... Are you a firefighter now?"

Matt tilted his head back to laugh and put his arm behind his neck to stretch his tricep. I felt a longing I was underprepared for. When had I last worked a muscle so hard that stretching it would light up me up with satisfaction?

"Nah. That didn't work out. I mean, for now. I didn't pass the test."

My eyebrows furrowed. I looked him up and down the way other men did to me so many times before. "*You?* Didn't pass?"

"Yep, not ready yet. That's ok, though. I might keep trying. We'll see. It's never impossible to change. I love that about being."

I waited for him to finish his sentence. I almost asked, when he switched arms without continuing, '*Being what?*'

Instead, I nodded, while he touched my arm slightly, with the strength of an athlete, but the weight of a loved one. "I'm so glad to see you. Keep doing life," Matt said. And then he bounded up the staircase.

I looked up to where he was headed, but he was gone. I restarted my walk. After thirty or so seconds, my pace quickened, without much effort, and I began to jog, a little at first, and then quick and quicker, so my feet slapped the wet sidewalk and the pounding in my head and heart grew, and I breathed in the air of the world and of *being*, until I was sprinting forward.



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