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# After the Baby



## Runner-Up

Three months and twelve days after the baby, I finally took his advice. I was going to join a workout class. I'd always been short and relatively average as far as weight goes, but he insisted. I thought the pregnancy weight suited me just fine, but it was for my own wellbeing, of course. And he was the father of my baby—why shouldn't I trust him?

Anyway, I signed up for a workout class with one of those exciting names. *Move!!* met at a roller skating rink downtown four days a week for a half-hour. Each class cost me seven dollars, which was a bit much, but I figured if I skipped lunch a couple days a week I could afford it. Two birds with one stone, you know. But no one told me I'd have to wait around for 45 minutes in the stuffy, dim room to save a spot each time—the class was in that high of a demand.

The skating rink was a wide, short building that looked like a warehouse from the outside. It sat in the shadow of the Interstate overpass, its small gravel parking lot bumpy with potholes. A wide glass front door opened up onto the skating rink's lobby, which was carpeted in deep purple carpet printed with slivers of fluorescent ribbon in oranges and yellows and greens—the kind that lights up in black light. Booths and benches dotted the room, and the smell

of pizza and nachos hung thick in the air. The walls were lined with skeeball machines and arcade games, all of which flashed garishly. It was a place for children. And yet it attracted people like me and Jenn.

Jenn was a mother like me who joined the class to help her lose that last bit of baby weight. That is, if she had any to begin with. She had straight brown hair pulled into a tight French braid and always wore bright-colored yoga pants and tanks with sayings like “push yourself” and “give it your all” across them in big letters. She had a pair of Nike running shoes that probably cost more than my cell phone, and one of those fitness watches that cost even more than that.

I first met her on a Tuesday, arriving just a few minutes before the class started to find that there was no more room on the rink’s wide polished wooden floor. She had her tote bag, sweat towel, and water bottle spread out in the back row, blocking off an area big enough for her and someone else. I turned to leave—I could always walk Lucy, my black lab, around the block a few times. She’d be bored from sitting at home alone all day, and lord knows she could stand to lose some weight too. Poor thing could barely climb up on the couch. I could just come back tomorrow.

“Hey! Red shirt over there!” came a shout from the back row, apparently directed at me. I barely heard her over the thrum of the electronic music. “Yeah, you. I got a space here.” I jogged over.

“Thanks, I was just about to leave,” I said, tugging the double knots on my shoes tighter. “They really need more room in here. Or more classes.”

“Totally,” she said. “I’m not gonna save my friend a space anymore if she’s not gonna show up. I mean, they even offer babysitting during the class for a couple dollars. No excuse.”

Over the sea of messy buns I saw some women with fluorescent shirts corralling children into a fenced-off area near the restrooms, away from the music and sweat.

She smiled. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Beth. Yours?”

“Jenn. Nice to meet you,” she said, beginning to jog in place. “I’m here to kick this baby weight to the curb!” She stopped and dipped into a low squat, turning her head to look up at me. “How about you? What’s your drive?”

“Baby weight, too.” I lunged and oh god why do my ankles

have to do that shaky thing? “I’m about three months out.”

“Well hey then, congrats,” Jenn said. “Boy or girl?”

“Boy. Cameron Kyle. Yours?”

“I’m about six months out. Her name is Olivia Jane.” Jenn smiled. “Maybe we could arrange a play date sometime.”

“I—uh—”

The instructor, Amber, tapped her microphone a couple times to check the volume and then greeted us with a perky voice, signaling the beginning of class. She wove through the crowd and climbed up on a dance platform against one wall of the wide room. The first thing that struck me about *Move!!* was its relative darkness. Patches of color lit the room here and there under the gaze of the black light, but overall it was pretty dim. No one would be able to see me flapping and flopping around in the back row, thank god. No one wants to see that.

Two light fixtures with spider-like arms stretched across the ceiling, bulbs of different colors flicking on and off in time with the loud electronic music. On the far wall flashed rings of light, spreading and shrinking like recurring fireworks. Projected on the wall there in the center, was the word *Move!!* in an exciting font. One exclamation point just wasn’t enough, I guess? And three must have been too many.

Though I didn’t take the class seriously at first, I quickly learned to. The next half-hour of my life was pain and heat and sweat, and more than once I found myself doubled over, desperately trying to convince my stomach not to vomit. Midway through the first song I had to stop, wheezing, to catch my breath. In front of me, rows and rows of women powered on in sync with the music, kicking and punching and stepping side to side. He was right, I had gotten lazier during my pregnancy.

“Did you survive okay?” Jenn asked me after the class was over, her face covered in a sheen of sweat. She tugged on the front of her shirt a few times, airing herself out.

I was certain I was going to die, and soon. “My calves are gonna hate me tomorrow.” Squeezing just below my knee gave some relief, but I knew I’d be useless for the next few days—well, more so than usual. Climbing the stairs up to my bedroom was going to suck. Maybe I’d sleep on the couch tonight instead.

“Hey, that means you worked hard,” she said. “I barely survived

my first time—it was harsh. But what doesn't kill you, right?" She hefted the tote bag onto her shoulder and dabbed her forehead with the towel. "See you tomorrow then?"

I paused, considering the stretch in my calves and the stitch in my side. I'd gone through worse pain.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

I showed up early the next day, for some reason. The dubstep music thrummed, emanating from speakers suspended from the ceiling at regular intervals around the perimeter of the skate floor. It's not like I had anything else to do, being off work and—well, not busy. God, I'm so lazy. Jenn was sitting in the back row again, texting on a big square phone, the kind that looks silly when you put it up to your face to talk. A white gym towel, neatly folded and glowing in the black light, lay a couple feet away from her, marking off a second spot—for her friend, surely. I set my stuff down the next space over and she glanced up.

"Hey!" she said, shouting over the music, her smile lit by the glow of her cell phone in the dim room. "Beth, right? How're you holding up?"

Jesus, I am so tired of that question.

"About as well as any day, I guess."

"Your calves feeling any better?"

Oh.

"No, they're still burning from yesterday."

"That's Amber for ya. Calf raises are her favorite." Jenn reached over and collected her towel, motioning for me to take its place in the spot next to her. "It's gonna hurt now and probably for a while, but I promise it gets easier—you just have to stay with it."

The song that had been playing came to an end and the room fell silent for a moment as the instructor toyed with the DJ booth's settings. Jenn set her phone down on her bag and pulled her legs into a stretch, which I did my best to mirror.

A clomping sound echoed across the wide room in the sudden silence, followed by a bright peal of laughter. A toddler stomped out onto the floor, his slender mother digging in her tote bag as she pursued him ten or so feet behind. His golden curls bounced as he spun and skipped, admiring the glowing effect the black light had on his shoes. He bent in half and grabbed the toes of his shoes,

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preoccupied, and his mother scooped her unladen arm around his waist. She swung him up and planted a kiss on his cheek, sending him into a fit of giggles.

“What a cutie,” Jenn said. “Your son’s three months old, right?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Does he sleep through the night? My Olivia had me up three times a night every night until about a month ago. Do you have to get up with him a lot?”

“Oh, no,” I said, giving my shoelace a listless tug, “he’s a little angel.”

“Oh, you and his father are so lucky.”

I paused, looking around. More people had arrived, mostly women—mothers, housewives, several men here and there—shifting and swaying as they stretched and chatted.

“His father isn’t in the picture anymore. He—well—it was like a switch flipped when I got pregnant.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jenn said, pausing. “Do we hate him?”

“Do we—what?”

“You know, block him on Facebook, flip him off when you drive past his workplace—” she raised an eyebrow, “—key his car?”

“No. No! Well, no. He doesn’t have a car, and we work at the same place—that’s where we met.” I readjusted the bandanna holding my hair up. “I mean, I’m not supposed to hate my son’s father.”

Right?

“It sucks, honey, I know, but you don’t have to like him. I’ll hate him for you! Not being there for his son—what a bum.” She raised her water bottle in a sort of toast. “Screw him!” she declared, taking a gulp of her water with a chuckle.

The instructor fiddled with her microphone and I knew class was about to start. I was going to do better today, no matter what—no matter what anyone said.

I made it through the first song, the warm-up, without stopping. The next song was tolerable: some squats and some kicks.

Kick, kick, and—a sharp pain stabbed my lower back like a needle and sent me stumbling, catching myself against the back wall.

“You alright?” Jenn shouted to me between breaths.

No.

“Yeah, just—it’s just my back problem. Epidural—the doctor

said it would make my back worse for a couple months. I'll just, uh, sit down for a minute."

Jenn stopped for a minute to help me get situated. "Take it easy, okay?" she said and then got back to work.

I knew the pain would pass after a couple minutes but I just needed to—*Get off your ass, you lazy bitch! Look at all those people in front of you! They're working out. What? You're hurt? You're just lazy! Get up! Get up!*—I stood, steadying myself against the wall, and leaned forward, stretching out my back to make the pain pass faster.

Even though it hurt, I got moving again, picking up at the start of the next song. Every move, every twist pinched in my lower back and sent electric pain down my left leg. *If you ever want to stop being a fat cow, you better keep going. Move!*

I ducked out of class just before the last song was over, desperate for some painkillers and my heating pad, my best friends since the baby.

I don't know why, but I went back the next day. My body couldn't handle the work—it had made that much clear. But I'd been defeated by everything else—I wasn't about to defeat myself.

Jenn had saved me a spot again, and she tapped away on her phone as I approached. She glanced up and smiled, her white, white teeth nearly glowing in the black light.

"Hey, girl. How's your back doing?" she asked.

"Better. A little stiff."

"Glad to hear it. I had back trouble before my pregnancy and it only got worse afterward. You never really recover from having babies," she said, tying a bright bandanna around her head.

The only sound in the room was the throb of the music, like a great heartbeat in the cavity of my chest.

"So I hope this isn't weird," she began, digging around in her bag, "but I have something for you."

From her bag she produced a plastic grocery bag and handed it over. Inside were a few pieces of clothes—onesies for a boy—decorated with turtles and trains and dinosaurs.

"They'll fit your son, right? You think?" She smiled.

The material was soft between my fingers, and I found myself squeezing tighter and tighter.

"Jenn, I can't accept these—"

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“Oh, no, don’t worry! I didn’t buy them just for you. Literally everyone I know has girls, so I was trying to find someone with a boy who could use a few onesies I got early on in my pregnancy.” She tried to decode the look on my face. “I mean, if you don’t want them, I’ll take them back, but you can make better use of them than I can.”

I pushed the onesies back into her hands, my eyes starting to burn with tears.

“I can’t take them. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” she asked, simply.

Oh, god, not that question again. I felt the tears coming.

“I’m sorry.” I stood and grabbed my things. A tear betrayed me, rolling down my face, followed by another. “I’m sorry, I—I can’t accept—I, um, I have to go.”

I turned and walked toward the exit.

Who was I to think that I was ready? That I could handle this? That my life was ever going to be the same as it once was?

I don’t blame Jenn for not knowing.

No one ever knows at first—it’s not like you can look at me and guess. No one can see the scars on your heart. They ask me about his hair, his eyes, how big he is, and lots of other questions I should have answers to but don’t.

One of the instructors at the front desk looked at me as I walked past, her eyes asking why I was leaving when I’d already paid. But she didn’t stop me.

*Why?* It’s a question I ask myself every day. Why him? Why me? Why do I try anymore? At 20 weeks I learned he was sick. His kidneys weren’t forming, there was no amniotic fluid, and the doctors gave me a choice.

So I kept him.

I kept him as long as I could.

His father and I had only known each other for a couple months beforehand. I was unintentionally playing catch-up to the rest of my close friends, two of whom had just gotten engaged. My two sisters-in-law had just had babies as well; a boy and a girl, and I suppose I just wanted a slice out of that same pie. But I picked the wrong guy to have a child with.

He’d start taking his pills again, he said. He’d see a therapist, he claimed. He’d be just like he was before the baby, he promised. He loves me, he lied.

Even in text messages I can hear his voice. *You fat cow. If you were a better mother then he'd still be with us. He's ashamed of you, you stupid bitch. He looks down from heaven and cries because his mom is a whore. It's your fault he died.*

I don't answer his calls anymore.

I should delete his number.

I should block him.

But I don't.

I pushed on the heavy door and it scraped in a track on the ground as it opened. Light poured onto my face and I winced, squeezing my eyes shut.

I hate the bastard.

I hate him because he made me hate myself.