

Treadmill Tim

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I stepped onto the treadmill.

Four miles in 28 minutes, I told myself. I ate an entire pizza that afternoon and was disgusted. I'd made the pizza for the entire apartment but my roommates all had classes that. The run was supposed to make me feel healthier.

I pressed the "QuickStart" button. I hate using the pre-set programs on treadmills. I was soon running at 10.6 mph, a full-on sprint. *First mile in six minutes, then I'll take eight minutes on the second*. The woman running next to me was obviously impressed with my speed. She kept looking at my machine, envying the speed. I looked at her speed and smiled.

The first mile always sucks. It's like my body doesn't want to admit that it's running. The only thing that brought me through was the music. I listened to The Mad Caddies play fast, loud ska music. The horns blaring in my headphones, I remembered seeing the band live with Sara. I really had wanted her to love ska music and a live concert seemed like the answer. "It's too loud," was her only comment after the concert. The memory made me smile. As if on cue, when the "Distance" light of the treadmill read 1.08 miles, I broke a sweat. The runner's high set in.

I slowed the speed to 8.5 mph and glided. I looked at the woman's treadmill next to mine to compare speeds but got distracted by something else—her water bottle. Of course! I had forgotten mine. *Where is the drinking fountain?* I'd been coming to this gym for months now but still didn't know where the fountain was.

In high school I would classify myself as a punk, which is quite different from an emo. Punk kids don't take themselves so seriously and are known to be fun loving, even

if authority pisses them off a little. Emo kids, on the other hand, always seem pissed off at themselves and anyone else trying to be like them. Depression leads them to emo music. Though, I must admit that I have several emo bands on my iPod but I don't listen to them regularly.

Yes, the emo kids annoyed me in high school but that was four years ago. My college years as an anthropology student had made me much more understanding of various lifestyles. But still, I had a hard time taking such people seriously. They all seemed to be going along with the trend, if even unknowingly.

Anyways, where was I? Oh, right. I was thirsty. As I looked around the gym for the drinking fountain, I saw a young woman in the stretching area wearing bright orange shorts, something off an 80s aerobics tape, revealing her evenly tanned legs. She wore a tank-top that certainly wasn't designed to hide the fact that she had breasts. Several men stood around her, pretending to stretch just to be near her. She got down on hands and knees and raised one leg back to stretch it. All the men stared at her vulva.

I rolled my eyes. *Give me a break*, I thought. I knew the kind—the girls who came to the gym just to give their number to guys. And these guys, so pathetically gathered around her, don't they realize that they can't *all* get her attention? Doesn't she realize that she'll only get the guys who want to sleep with her and that's it? Maybe that's all she wants—go to the gym scantily clad just to find a sex partner.

My sister was this way. Well, not entirely. But at 21 she had called many guys “boyfriend,” guys who only called her “hot.” Our parents had spent hours talking with me about her, seeking ways to address her promiscuity. “It's just a phase,” I would tell them, though I wasn't sure if I believed it. She'd been checked into rehab three times, twice for

an eating disorder and once for substance abuse. Now, at the gym, I saw my sister stretching with men. At least, I saw the form of my sister.

Anyways, where was I? Oh, right. I was thirsty. My eyes left the stretcher and continued searching for the fountain. But before I found it I noticed a woman on an exercise bike, the back of her T-shirt read, “Praise Him! Christian Youth Camp-Summer 2009.” A crucifix sat amidst the words. Christian Youth Camp. What does that even mean? What does one do at such a camp? I imagined young, impressionable teenagers listening to some middle-aged man warning them of hell and Satan. “One party, kids. You go to one bad party and it’s an eternal lake of fire for you.”

My parents were religious, though not extreme. They didn’t send me to Christ Youth Camp, after all. But they certainly believed in Jesus and heaven and wanted their children to go there. I haven’t told them that I don’t believe in God. I saw the way they worried about my sister and didn’t want to add to their anxiety. They would take my religious doubts more seriously than her behavior. “At least she believes in God,” they would tell me. Mom would cry and Dad would say something about religion being the only source of guidance. I felt plenty of guidance without God in my life. But my parents wouldn’t see it that way. Their son would be lost. Why does God have to be the only source for guidance? Why do people have to fear hell in order to treat others with decency? I thought about those kids at the Christian Youth Camp.

The ska music on my iPod was now long gone, thanks to the Shuffle feature. A new song played—an emo song. I didn’t change it.

I stared at the cycling woman’s back for a moment more then returned to the quest for the fountain. Two guys at the bench press. Big guys. One guy, the spotter,

clapped his hands, yelling. I took one headphone out. “Ah, yeah, dawg! All you! All you!” The lifter touched the bar to his chest and as he pushed it back up, both guys began screaming. Nearly every head in the gym turned to look at the meatheads. The lifter stood and chest-bumped the spotter. They continued yelling, apparently so overcome with testosterone they just couldn’t keep it in. They felt it necessary to inform the entire gym that they had strong muscles.

They reminded me of Sara’s current boyfriend. He was a door-to-door salesman making \$80,000 a year at age 24. He drove a Hummer, an actual Hummer, and had a life-long membership at the tanning salon. She had met him at a party just a few weeks before she dumped me. I was at the party and had chastised Sara afterwards for allowing the salesman to flirt with her in front of me and even accused her of flirting back. Sara had gotten defensive and said that there was no way she’d ever like a guy like that. “He’s just so obsessed with himself. I could never date him. Trust me, Tim. You don’t have to feel threatened.” Unfortunately, I trusted her.

The spotter had now become the lifter. Why do the jerks of the world always end up ahead? Why doesn’t it pay to be compassionate or honest? Why are the relationships based on loyalty always replaced by those based on image? I missed Sara’s bold statements. I missed her kindness. I had had girlfriends before her but they seemed forced to me, my heart not in them. But Sara was different. Sara was real. I stared at the lifters and imagined her in the Hummer, the salesman lying to her about where he was the night before.

I looked around the gym. All around me were the people who had ruined my life, the people who should have been everything to me but had instead taken me for granted.

I turned the speed on the treadmill up to 12 mph, as fast as the machine could handle. But that didn't change anything. I still felt the dissonance. How did this happen? When I started running I had felt fine, perfectly pleasant. Now, thanks to all these jerks, I was in a bad mood.

I hit the "Stop" button. 4.05 miles in 27 minutes and 8 seconds.

Not bad, I thought, and left the gym.