

The gym

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ONE stark red neon “GYM” sign reflects on my windshield as I park in the predawn darkness.

My gym is neither an elegant lifestyle spa nor a yuppie sports club or a new age brain gym. Not the high school gym reeking of old vomit and sweaty singlets after wrestling practice. Not the gritty gyms of punching bags inhabited by the down-and-out contenders for the heavyweight championship portrayed in *Cinderella Man*. The bodybuilders and the body sculptors do congregate here at more populous periods of the day; audience adulation is essential. In the morning, only the old and the hardcore inhabit the gym. We struggle for physical rehabilitation and maintenance of function rather than work toward marathons and matches. We choose predawn for reasons of professional schedules and personal pride. We prefer the privacy of invisibility.

Two is the number of knees hobbled by degenerative osteoarthritis, or “bone on bone” as the orthopedists say, which keeps me from running down lobs on the tennis courts and charging up the hospital stairs. Two knees battered from decades of running on asphalt in Virginia and skiing on ice packed snow in Vermont. Two knees with only ratty remnants of shredded cartilage left over for padding. A combination of football knee and housemaid’s knee and jumper’s knee, all euphemisms for chronic abuse and aging knee parts that ache and click and grind and sometimes just lock up tight.

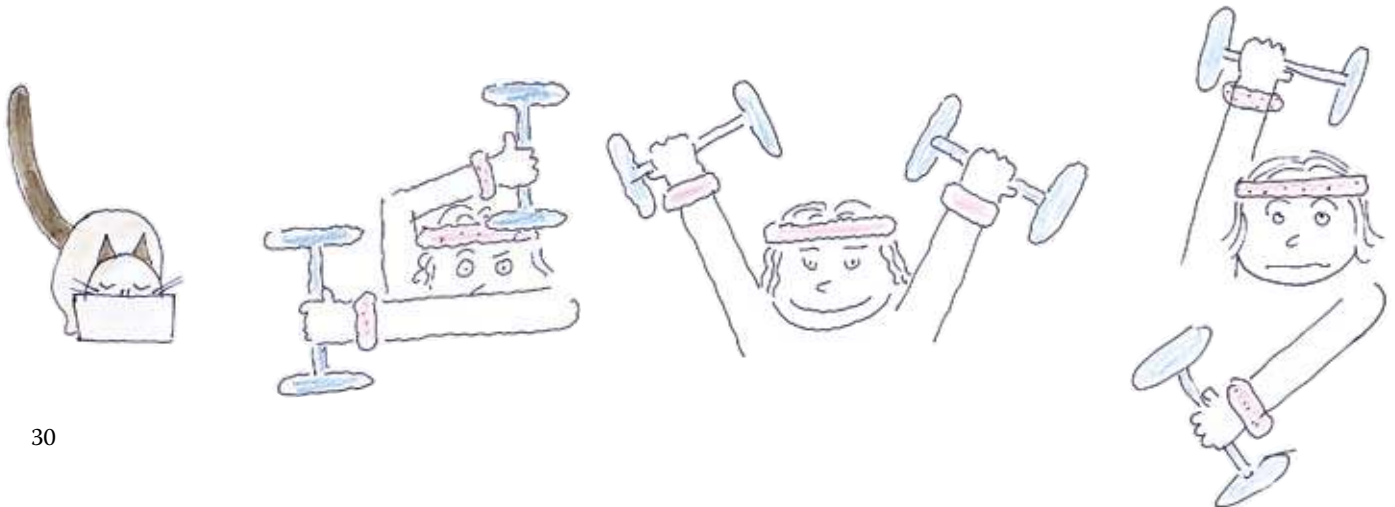
THREE is the number of times each week I arrive at the red neon “GYM” sign in the pitch black with my sweats and my sneakers. The early crowd costumes are grungy gray and black, rarely the faded navy and orange of a Cavalier T-shirt, certainly not the fit couture of racing stripes and spandex featured on the ‘Net. The one early morning fashion sighting to date involved a matching sweater and sweatband in sky blue and pink.

FOUR o’clock is the time I set my alarm clock. Then, I feed the cat, brew my coffee, pack my L. L. Bean canvas bag with work clothes fit for an academic presentation, and perform an abbreviated personal toilet to color lips and brows and, sometimes, a touch of Chanel CoCo just for the sheer insanity of it. Four o’clock rising predicts a 5:15 AM departure, if I resist the temptation to open a novel or fuss with Florrie the cat.

TEN pounds mark the transition from the periwinkle, soft-edged dumbbells piled in a basket next to the big-boy, steel-gray iron weights ordered on racks by weight up to one hundred pounds. The big boys and girls pump iron with them, usually with groaning and straining. I have finally worked my bicep curls up to the iron range, but just barely at twelve pounds. I am strengthening my biceps because the strategic fallback position, the dreaded knee replacements, requires a strong upper body for crutch walking.

TWENTY-ONE different machines are lined up in front of three televisions in one half of the gym: regular old stationary bicycles, lifecycles, recumbent bicycles for oldsters like me, treadmills, Stairmasters, elliptical trainers, and mountain climbing contraptions. Thirty unique, ungainly Nautilus machines, each designed to stress a specific isolated muscle group, are arrayed on the other side of the gym. The posted line drawings identifying the targeted muscles are not sufficient for me to remember where to hook the weights, the direction of the activity, and what to do with my body parts. I use only sixteen of the assorted fifty-one machines and that is enough.

TWENTY-THREE years old is the age of Clarence, who has contracted for \$40 a session to remind me how to get onto the same machines every other day, demonstrate the desired movement, establish the target, sometimes to coach



along with “bring those shoulder blades down into your hip pockets,” and finally, to record the weights and the number of repetitions after each activity. In exchange, I dispense advice on the local housing market (limit search to properties with fenced yard for Bella the Great Dane and a good resale value in two years), desirable honeymoon destinations in the Caribbean (all inclusive couples resort now reserved) for July, a special restaurant (C&O upstairs) for the birthday celebration of Sarah the bride, and what are the rituals of conversion to Judaism anyway? I remember being twenty-three years old, and I avoid being a sixty-six-year-old grouch.

ONE HUNDRED pounds is the resistance on the torture machine, indistinguishable from a medieval rack, named the horizontal leg press. I am not sure which worries me more, the indignity of my contortions entering and exiting the device or the terror of eternal entrapment once ensconced. My attempts to bond with it, even imagining it as a “hug machine” *à la* Temple Grandin, have failed. My quadriceps seem to be growing bigger and stronger as the weight of the resistance increases . . . the better to protect my knees from grinding it seems. And so one hundred pounds seems effective in spite of the indignity of the exercise.

SIXTY is the number of morning sessions at the GYM before one of the other early morning crones offered the gift of

a personal comment: “So, you’re a baby doctor?”

“Yup,” I muttered as I gripped the upright bars to the rotary torso machine (forty pounds resistance).

“Do you ever see old guys in their second childhood?”

“Only at the gym,” I retorted, trying to maintain the rotations.

“Happy New Year, Doc.”

“You too.”

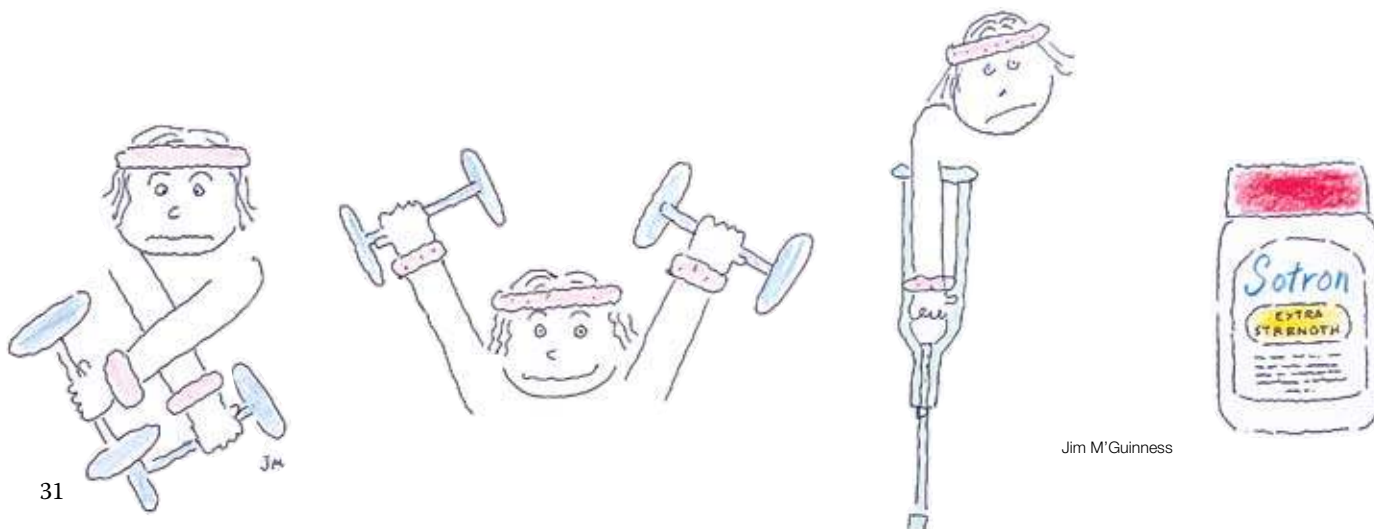
After sixty sessions over five months, I was no longer a transient.

SIX months is how long I have complied with the strengthening routine developed by Phillip the tight-assed, tennis champion-therapist after my health insurance denied his physical therapeutic ministrations. Before then, Phillip had been directing the aides to apply heat, ice, and ultrasound to my knees while he cavalierly spooned Brancusi-shaped blades around my old swollen knee joints. The insurance company apparently had abandoned all therapeutic hope and approved costly surgical operations to replace those worn-out babies. Phillip, a therapist of little chatter and even less body fat, proposed an alternative philosophy: “Join the gym and work the ‘no pain, no gain’ program.” Strengthen the muscles around the knees to reduce the bone-on-bone destruction and . . . maybe the pain will ease . . . and maybe your function will improve. So six months I have been off the tennis court and in the gym on

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays before sunrise. After six months, Phillip swaggered over while I was working on the glute press (now up to fifty pounds) for a brief commentary, “HMMMMM, you seem to be getting into a routine. That’s a beginning.”

ONE is the number of reconstructive orthopedists I will disappoint in July if my newly toned gluteus maximus, medius, and minimus, and the quadriceps and the hamstrings and the gastrocnemius muscles shape up around the knees and slow down the deterioration of the last few shreds of cartilage. Two biceps, two triceps, and two rotator cuffs unnecessarily prepared for crutch walking may put a little extra zing in my overhead, that is if the knees allow shuffling around on the clay court come spring. In the meantime, I sometimes take only one ibuprofen a day. Well, maybe two when I climb the hill to the University of Virginia grounds and then mount the Rotunda steps for conferences. My bladder now wakes me at night but not my knees. **ONE** is the orthopedist who will develop a smaller, jazzier knee joint to implant when eventually I acquiesce to the inevitable surgery, just not this year.

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