



MUSCLE

CONFESSIONS OF AN
UNLIKELY BODYBUILDER

SAMUEL WILSON FUSSELL





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Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder

Samuel Wilson Fussell



To Peter Conrad

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ALTHOUGH THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT IS TRUE, THE NAMES OF CERTAIN PERSONS AND PLACES HAVE BEEN
CHANGED IN THE INTEREST OF PRESERVING THEIR ANONYMITY AND PROTECTING MY OWN LIFE.

S.W.F.

WHEN YOU OPERATE IN AN OVERBUILT METROPOLIS,
YOU HAVE TO HACK YOUR WAY WITH A MEAT AX.
—ROBERT MOSES

THE FIRST DUTY IN LIFE IS TO ASSUME A POSE.
WHAT THE SECOND IS, NO ONE HAS YET DISCOVERED.
—OSCAR WILDE

THE INTRODUCTION

You spot them on the streets of the city and, increasingly, in the malls and parks of the suburbs. Sometimes they band together. Mostly, they walk alone. Bodybuilders. You know the kind. They strut like no others, holding their elbows wider than their shoulders, legs far apart. I know, I was one of them.

For four long years, I trained four hours a day, six days a week with them. I broke whole wheat bread with them. I filled my body with steroids alongside them. I lived with them. And, finally, I competed on stage against them.

The following is an account of my journey—what I did, what I saw, what I felt. Those in search of a steroid primer or an exercise manual are advised to look elsewhere; my purpose is different. Part ditty, part dirge, I sing of arms and the man, of weight rooms and muscle pits, of biceps and triceps, bench presses and low pulley rows, of young and old, woman and man, straining and hoisting iron to the boom box sound of Top 40 record stations in bodybuilding gyms across the land.

I sing of dreamers and addicts, rogues and visionaries. And I sing of my own solitary pilgrimage into this strange world. A world filled with wrist straps and ammonia, BIG Chewables and “the juice.” A world governed by a savage force that swallowed me whole from a bookstore in New York City, and did not relent until it had chewed me up and spit me out 80 pounds heavier and 3,000 miles later on posing dais in Burbank, California. I was swabbed in posing oil and competition color, flexing with all my might, when I came to, a sadder and wiser man.

1. THE GENESIS

ALL THE UNHAPPINESS OF MAN STEMS FROM ONE THING ONLY:
THAT HE IS INCAPABLE OF STAYING QUIETLY IN HIS ROOM.
—PASCAL

Bodybuilders call it “the disease.” Its symptoms include a complete commitment to all matters pertaining to iron. Not the kind of iron you use to press your clothes, but the kind they use to create bulges and muscular mounds in their bodies. You find “the diseased” in bookstores hovering by the rack containing the muscle magazines (invariably adjacent to the pornography). You overhear them in vitamin stores, discussing the merits of branch-chain amino acids and protein powders. You scan them on the subway, their hypertrophied bodies a silent, raging scream of dissent. And, walking to work in the morning, you can see them through the windows of their gyms, hoisting and heaving weights in a lifting frenzy.

Most of them catch the disease during the years of adolescence. On the back pages of comic books, scrawny teens find advertisements for chest expanders and chin-up bars. For many that’s where the affair ends: in an unmailed letter or as cobwebbed, unused equipment piled in the basement. But for a few—the truly afflicted—the arrival of the equipment is just the beginning. Within a matter of months, they graduate from chest expanders to bench presses, from pull-ups to squats. Eventually, as their bodies fill out and the dream takes hold, they gravitate from distant neighborhoods to their own kind in the gyms of the city.

This was not my story. I passed into my mid-twenties knowing nothing of the disease. Until the age of twenty-six, in fact, my life was filled with books. I began my course of reading at a prep school called Lawrenceville and continued it through my graduation from Oxford University. Until then, everything was set. The son of two university professors of English, I was next in line to assume the academic mantle. My parents’ only cause for concern was the fact that I preferred American literature to English.

The trouble began when I moved back to New York City for a year off after Oxford before I was to enter graduate school. Within a month I found a sublet on the Upper East Side and a job in publishing. But suddenly and spectacularly my health began to deteriorate. First it was my lungs (the doctor diagnosed pleurisy), then it was a fever (this time, pneumonia). Despite medications, my condition did not improve. Colds, hot flashes, chills—one malady replaced another.

My arrival at work every morning set off a communal buzz of concern. At six feet four and 170 pounds sopping wet, I had always been gaunt. But now, with rasping lungs and cadaverous complexion, I looked like an outpatient from Bellevue (which, in fact, I was). I publicly tried to pass off my predicament as nothing serious—I was just feeling a little under the weather, I said. Things would take a turn for the better come spring, I was sure of it.

And my friends averred that this must be the case. They took me out to lunch and tried to take my mind off my health. But all along, I knew the cause of my own particular disorder, I was just loath to admit it. The problem, you see, was New York. It terrified me. To divulge my fears seemed cowardly, somehow unworthy of the city. But finally, among the lunch gathering, bracketed by a coughing fit,

let it all out. Was I the only one, I asked haltingly, living in a constant state of terror in the city? Did others also find themselves under siege?

As soon as I admitted it, the facts and figures came tumbling out of my mouth. The rapes, the muggings, the assaults, the murders. Those were the majors, but the minors were just as bad. I felt trapped by the teeming populace, dwarfed by skyscrapers, suffocated by the fumes from factories and expressways. And then there was Jerry, and men like him.

“Jerry?” they asked.

I was surprised they didn’t know him. He seemed to be on a first name basis with much of the city.

“Hi, Jews for Jesus! Jerry here—that’s with a *J*!” he would shout, as soon as he spotted my head on the subway escalator each morning at Grand Central. Sandwich board and all, he waited for me at the top of the platform, plucking *me* out from the hundreds of other commuters fore and aft.

“How ya doin, Stretch?” he’d begin, all smiles and concern, draping an arm around my shoulder. And then, in an abrupt change of tone, he’d pounce: “What I mean to say is ... how do you feel about ... *tomorrow*?”

I explained to growing laughter around the table that Jerry was just one of many “friends” drawn to me through the course of the day like slivers of steel to a magnet. Something about me seemed to appeal to every deadbeat, con artist, and self-proclaimed philosopher of the city. No matter where I turned, confidence tricksters hounded my path.

At the conclusion of my painful monologue, I sat back exhausted, shamed that I was so vulnerable. And then, suddenly, merry voices chimed in from all sides at the table. Apparently, I’d struck a chord after all. There was Niels, who exulted in the fact that his wet, limp clothes had been scattered across the laundromat floor by a street tough when he hadn’t removed them from the washer on time. There was Matthew, rocking in his chair in delight, as he told us of the gray-suited man who followed him home one day, lowered his trousers on Matthew’s doorstep in mid-afternoon, and defecated on his welcome mat. Troopers together, everyone seemed to have their stories to tell.

What had happened in the recent past to the newscaster Dan Rather had, in one form or another, happened to us all. Two men had accosted Rather on the street, and took turns beating him, all the while asking him the question: “What is the frequency, Kenneth?” Self-consciously, I joined their laughter at the table in the retelling of the story. It was agreed that the fact that it made no sense made perfect sense.

“Urban dissonance,” my friends called it, the inevitable result of the great flux of cultures and tribes, languages and races that make up the city. Too many people, too little space. The result: noise, stencil art, subway riders pushed in front of trains—all unavoidable byproducts of “modernism.”

Urban dissonance was one thing—diarrhea another. The city literally scared the shit out of me. It wasn’t just Jerry or the crowds, the heckling or the hassles. It wasn’t just bag ladies lamenting their persecution by the CIA. It wasn’t even the nightly serenade of gunshots and sirens outside my bedroom window. These things I might someday learn to cope with. Try as I might, there were things I simply couldn’t ignore.

Like what I’d witnessed on a downtown subway platform my first month back in the city. All I could hear at first were the screams, but as I neared I saw the crowd. They were milling around two men, one a huge, bearded skell (a man who lives in the tunnels and trains beneath the city) and in his grasp, a hapless businessman. The skell was shaking him like a rag doll while the victim shrieked in fear. No one made a move to help him. We all watched, paralyzed, as the skell punched his victim repeatedly in the face. Every blow he struck sounded like a baseball bat hitting a side of ham. It was beyond brutal, and when the skell grew bored at last and skipped away, leaving his prey comatose in a pool of

blood, we heard him far down the subway corridor singing a nursery rhyme in victory.

I realized the god-awful truth when I helped the poor man to his feet. It could just as easily have been me, just as I could have been the one strolling down First Avenue at the precise moment an air conditioner dropped from a fourth story window. As it was, according to the papers, it was on Elizabeth Beaugrand who was brained. Just a matter of time before it would be my turn, and if it wasn't an air conditioner, then it might well be a construction crane, a snapping bridge cable, a cement block, or, of course, a knife, fist, gun, or rug cutter.

My New York days I spent running wide-eyed in fear down city streets, my nights passed in closeted toilet-bound terror in my sublet. My door triple-locked, windows nailed shut, the curtains, needless to say, drawn. The place was going to explode at any moment—I could feel it—and unless I gained something fast, some uniform, some velcro, I would catapult into oblivion along with the rest of the shards. Caught in this nightmare, I needed something, anything, to secure my safety.

My friends advised me to try the usual anodynes: Something like The Harvard Club or The New York Society Library might do the trick. A lit candle in a dark room. And if not that, well then, why not some exercise, like Tae Kwon Do even, or, if need be, Plato's Retreat? In any case, don't worry, they said. Just stop taking things so seriously.

But how could I stop taking things so seriously when conditions were so serious? A recent MIT study indicated that a combat soldier had had a better chance surviving World War II than a New Yorker surviving New York.

My family was out. I couldn't retreat to our house in Princeton because it had been sold while I was away at Oxford. After thirty years of marriage, my parents had bitterly and publicly divorced. To choose one parent's home would have meant taking sides. I did try a girlfriend, and we spent a number of blissful afternoons together. But the partings were always hell. She had to rush off each evening to the downtown apartment she shared with her fiancé.

The more I learned about the city, the more I noticed the alternatives. Suicide, for one.

BOY GULPS GAS, EXPLODES!

So the *New York Post* reported. On an average of once a week, a citizen leaps to the tracks in a subway station to kiss the third rail or jumps to his death in front of an oncoming train. The George Washington Bridge is another favored spot, along with the few skyscrapers still lacking the deterrent of fences and barbed wire on their peaks.

Finding an activity was another alternative. In Washington Square Park on weekends I found scores of men, heads burrowed in their hands, playing chess, all in quest of regulation and safety in the square grid of the chessboard. I saw white men dressed in black on the subway, swaying in their seats reciting Talmudic texts aloud. I saw black men dressed in white, periodically unfurling prayer rugs and chanting toward Islam.

Relocation was another possible solution: heading off in a silver camper with an untainted water supply to the mountain peaks of the West, proclaiming myself a "survivalist." (I'd noticed that survivalists of a different stripe relocated to places like Taos, New Mexico, and called themselves "artists.") But I didn't want to relocate. I just wanted to be less assailable, less vulnerable. Good God, it was enough to make a grown man cry, or—hold your hats—turn to bodybuilding.

I was ducking for cover, as usual, when it happened. This time it was a man with a crowbar and a taxi medallion, worth \$50,000 at the going rate, which he had just ripped off the hood of a New York taxi cab. Spotting me as a likely customer, he'd advanced upon me, brandishing the crowbar for

emphasis. I quickly sought shelter in the nearest building, which turned out to be the New York landmark, The Strand bookstore. It was an appropriate refuge—I'd used books all my life for protection. I caught my breath and, as was my custom, made way to the autobiography section (I frequently found myself there wondering how *they* coped with life).

It was in this aisle, in this store, in September of 1984, that I finally caught "the disease." Here was I came across *Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder* by Arnold Schwarzenegger. A glimpse of the cover told me all I needed to know. There he stood on a mountain top in Southern California, every muscle bulging to the world as he flexed and smiled and posed. Just the expression on his face indicated that nothing could disturb this man. A victim? Not bloody likely.

As for his body, why, here was protection, and loads of it. What were these great chunks of tanned, taut muscle but modern-day armor? Here were breastplates, greaves, and pauldrons aplenty, and all made from human flesh. He had taken stock of his own situation and used the weight room as his smithy. A human fortress—a perfect defense to keep the enemy host at bay. What fool would dare storm those foundations?

And that's where it hit me, right there in The Strand. I knew it in an instant, my prayers were answered. What if I made myself a walking billboard of invulnerability like Arnold? Why couldn't I use muscles as insurance, as certain indemnity amidst the uncertainty of urban strife? Arnold had used iron to his obvious advantage, why couldn't I? And if the price was high, as a quick glance at the tortured faces in the training photos suggested, well, wouldn't four hours a day of private pain be worth a lifetime of public safety?

Nothing else had worked for me. The Harvard Club tie and The New York Society Library card had done nothing to ward off attack. As for Tae Kwon Do, one had to actually engage in street combat to use it. But muscles—big, loud muscles—well, they were something else altogether. Surely a quick appraisal of my new gargantuan body would guarantee me immunity, even from the criminally insane. And the beauty of it all lay in the probable fact that I would never be called upon actually to use the muscles. I could remain a coward and no one would ever know!

It was that simple at first—at least, so I thought. By making myself larger than life, I might make myself a little less frail, a little less assailable when it came down to it, a little less human. In the beginning I planned to use bodybuilding purely as a system of self-defense. It wasn't until later, 800 muscle-crammed pounds later, that I learned to use it as my principal method of assault.

2. THE Y

WE ARE ALL STILL PIONEERS, REQUIRED TO COLONIZE THE PIECE OF GROUND WHICH CHANCE ASSIGNS US, TO MAKE IT OUR OWN BY SHAPING IT INTO A SMALL, AUTONOMOUS, INTELLIGIBLE WORLD.

—PETER CONRAD

I spent the next day at work educating myself about the lifting world. I wanted to make sure that I entered the gym that night with the appropriate attitude. The preparation, I felt, was essential—the sooner I built myself up, the sooner I'd find safety. So it was that I spent that morning ignoring my typing chores and underlining passages from *Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder*. By noon, I had practically memorized the whole text.

I was too nervous to eat at lunch, and found myself instead in a magazine store, shelling out money for muscle periodicals. *Flex*, *Power*, *Ironman*, *Muscular Development*, *Muscle & Fitness*—I got them all, and passed the afternoon in my cubicle going through the glossy pages.

I skimmed over the photos showing the models with their gaunt cheeks and wasted, scrawny frames. From the beginning, I never had the slightest interest in what the magazines called “toning” or “spot reduction.” These models reminded me of myself as I was, not as I wanted to be. How would a low percentage of body fat help me in the event of a street fracas?

I wanted to get as big as possible as fast as possible. The bigger, the better—that boded best for personal protection. So it was the most massive bodybuilders who caught my eye. Builders whose flexed arms were actually larger than their heads. Builders who could balance a glass of milk on top of their inflated chests. Builders like the Cuban expatriate Sergio Oliva (now a cop in Chicago), Bert “Beef It” Fox, Geoff (“Neck”) King.

These men never sucked in their cheeks. Just the opposite, they puffed and preened through the pages, displaying their frightening wares of tanned tissue and bulging veins in the most Herculean poses: the crab, the javelin throw, the back double-biceps. And always, every few pages, there was Arnold.

The Education had been clear on Arnold's history. Born in 1948 to middle-class parents in Graz, Austria, he began his communion with iron at the age of fifteen. He approached the weights with what Gaines and Butler in their book *Pumping Iron* labeled such “joy and fierceness” that just five years later, barely out of his teens, he won his first Mr. Universe title. By the time he retired, “The Austrian Oak” had won Mr. Universe four more times and the most prestigious title in bodybuilding, Mr. Olympia, an unprecedented seven times. Arnold ruled bodybuilding in the way Muhammad Ali ruled boxing, with enough skill and charisma to dumbfound critics and competitors alike.

But it didn't end there. Upon his retirement from bodybuilding, Arnold simply changed fields, making himself part of the Zeitgeist with his ascension to the silver screen and his marriage to Maria Shriver.

Through iron, he had got what he wanted: big-balled muscles and a permanent pass to the Kennedy compound. Surely, I thought at my desk, if he could do that, then I could fulfill my own more limited ambition and gain 20 to 30 pounds.

But I had a feeling it wouldn't be easy. Gone were the days of Indian clubs and Charles Atlas. I had

seen a photo of him once, smiling and flexing on the beach, supporting a pair of bathing beauties on his broad shoulders. He made lifting seem as easy and pleasant as a Sunday afternoon stroll in the park.

In the pages of the magazines spread out before me, however, there was not a smile to be found on the faces of these modern-day builders. Just a look of grim determination, as lifter after lifter grunted, strained, and heaved, and pulled black iron in California gyms. They seemed close to bursting from the stress. How far they'd come from the days of Charles Atlas. It was not at all clear that these modern men were even of the same species.

I sat in my cubicle and inhaled anxiously. I hadn't counted on the pain angle—not to this degree anyway. I wavered just for a moment, but then made my decision. If this “no pain, no gain” adage were true, then, I would learn not just to accept pain, but to embrace it.

With that resolve, I found myself after work grimly purchasing the necessities for my mission. I bought a stiff leather weight-lifting belt, a pair of canvas sneakers, jocks, and gray sweats. What else would I need? Bandages? A stretcher? Clutching my new gym bag to my bony chest, I made it to the Vanderbilt Y on East Forty-seventh Street, just a few blocks from my job. With my corporate membership discount, the price was negligible.

There I sat in my black, size 38-L suit, as Mr. Quigley, the head membership coordinator, spoke to me of the advantages of the gym.

“We've got jogging,” he said, “though, of course, you have to run in packs. ...”

“Packs?” I asked, confused.

“Yes,” he sighed. “For safety's sake. To lessen the probability factor of attack by EDPs on the street.”

“EDPs?” I asked.

“Yes, you know, Emotionally Disturbed People.”

I knew. The subway skell and his ilk—the reason I was there. I barely heard Mr. Quigley as he ran through the Y's other sports programs: basketball, swimming, karate. I didn't hear him at all when he spoke of ceramics, modern dance, and acting. I couldn't, the din upstairs was deafening. Mr. Quigley lifted his head and frowned as the ceiling quaked and white specks of plaster rained down on our heads.

“The weight room?” I asked, unable to contain my excitement.

“It makes me physically ill,” Mr. Quigley grimaced. He shook his head sadly. The sagging heavy-lift jowels, the eyes ringed with fatigue made him look like a rheumy basset hound. “Perverts. Animals. We don't like these people any more than you do,” he said. “We don't encourage them, you understand, but we can't just stop them from coming in. We are, after all, a *Christian* organization.”

This struck me as odd. After all, just that afternoon *The Education* had cleared up my own misconceptions. Arnold had stated categorically that the weight room was *not* a breeding ground for cripples and addicts, sexual deviants and dangerously unbalanced men. No, that was a false and absurd surmise from a prejudiced public, he'd said.

The muscle magazines concurred, taking great pains to explain that gyms are actually a haven for safety in a world rife with disease, poverty, and prejudice. They are the stronghold of democracy, they said, where every lifter, regardless of color or creed, is free to pursue personal physique gains. Just bring a “positive mental attitude,” and you'll be among like-minded friends in the gym, the magazines promised, happy, healthy, and feeling terrific.

So, in some confusion, I pocketed the new membership card Mr. Quigley gave me, and headed up the steps to the Y's locker room that night. I pulled my new sweatshirt over my head, and collected

myself on the wooden bench by my locker before venturing to the weight room.

“Remember,” I prodded myself, hitting my fist into my cupped hand, “joy and fierceness,” “joy and fierceness.” I leaped up and strode to the door. It wasn’t until I actually set a foot inside that I panicked.

First, it was the heat. It felt like a Saigon summer. My legs buckled from it. Then the crowd—I was amazed the room could hold them all. Everywhere around me, there were men. Hundreds of them. I say men, mind you, because, despite what the magazines suggested (“Lifting is *family fun!*”), there were no women or children present.

I recognized the fierceness immediately. The air was filled with violence. On the far side of the room, among the scattered dumbbells and barbells—the “free-weights” I recognized from the magazines—gathered a muscular band of men about ten strong. Many of them wore camouflage pants and black combat boots. They punctuated their exercises with savage screams and directed murderous glances toward the fifty or so thinner men who were working out near me.

The men on my side of the room were engaged in pulling cables or lifting bars connected to two skeletal, chrome structures immediately before me. All I could hear, aside from the background rock music, were wrenching groans of despair and the monotonous clinking of iron. All I could see beneath the sickly glow of the few working fluorescent bulbs were the sagging shoulders and bent brows of the defeated. So much for joy.

The floor was a dumbbell graveyard. A few were chrome, but most were flat, ugly, black iron, and they covered the interconnecting rubber black mats that passed for a rug. The walls, coated in dimpled black rubber, supported steel racks of all sizes, some apparently to accommodate certain exercises and others to house the iron equipment. The windows were covered with corroded iron bars. The whole hopeless thing looked like a nightmare out of Piranesi.

I hadn’t the faintest idea how to proceed. Should I simply select one of the weights at my feet and start swinging it, as if I were an iron veteran? I bent forward to pick one of the smaller ones up from the floor, when a fist hit my kidney, and a scream pierced my ear.

“Move your ass, stork!”

I sagged to my knees from the blow and looked directly into the eyes of a double amputee. On his chest he wore a shirt that said Bert, on his head a baseball cap that said “Do the Hustle.” He covered what was left of his legs with a Hefty garbage bag, drawn tight around his waist by his weight-lifting belt. There was no wheelchair in sight. The size of his massive arms made me wonder if he’d ever used one.

“I beg your pardon,” I muttered, feeling my aching kidney with one hand, shamed that I had inconvenienced him. “Can I help you get a weight?” I asked, in an attempt to remedy the situation.

“Fuck off, new meat!” he roared, scuttling off to join his huge friends at the free-weight sector.

By the time I regained my feet, this raucous band turned on me. At first, the chant was barely audible above the thunderous pulse of rock music, but it soon grew deafening.

“New meat! New meat!” the group sang, led by Bert, the snarling gargoye. “NEW MEAT! NEW MEAT!”

My heart started racing. I began to hyperventilate. This was something I hadn’t encountered in *The Education* or the magazines. What’s next? I wondered. Rape? Public hanging? I was preparing to flee and abandon the whole endeavor for one of the Y’s safer offerings—ceramics perhaps—when a figure sprang up from behind the neighboring machine and grabbed my hand.

“Hi, I’m Austin and a Capricorn!” he shouted above the clamor with a smile. Though he was a ball of bones himself, his T-shirt read, “If you’re going to be a bear, be a grizzly!”

I was too frightened to say a word. It might be a trap, I remember thinking. Warily, I accepted his hand.

“Oh, don’t worry about *those* sillies.” He waved at the beefy troop on the far side of the room. No longer chanting, they now bickered among themselves and directed their fury at the Olympic barbells and dumbbells in their hands.

“They don’t mean any harm—not really,” Austin assured me. “I couldn’t help but notice you before back in the banana republic,” he tittered, motioning to the locker room.

I explained to Austin as politely as possible that I had come to the Y with one intention only, and that was physical development. He understood immediately.

“Jesus, what wouldn’t we all give for a few more inches,” he sighed.

“Should I start with free-weights?” I asked.

“Sorry, babe,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulder, “but you’ve got to learn to walk before you can run.”

He steered me away from the free-weight side, toward his friends.

With Austin’s help, I made the acquaintance of the two machines that dominated this part of the room. These were called “the Universals,” named after their manufacturer, The Universal Machine Corporation based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. They looked like the kind of stripped-down equipment U.S. astronauts had left on the moon. According to Austin, they would be my principal means of physical transformation.

“What we’re all doing here is called ‘circuit training,’” Austin said, grandly waving his arms at the men before us.

I looked at the men by the machines. Heads bowed, they trudged from one exercise station to wait in line by another. They looked about as happy as war-torn collaborators awaiting execution. The only sound I heard from them was a mechanical recitation as they counted their repetitions during each set.

“It’s called a ‘circuit,’” said Austin. “As you can see, we all do a little tour around the machines, stopping at certain stations along the way. Doesn’t matter which of the two machines you choose, they’re duplicates to ease the congestion. Now, see, all you have to do is lie on a bench, sit on a stool or stand, depending on the exercise, and push or pull a bar or cable connected to a weight stack in the machine. One complete tour of all the stations, about ten in all, is a circuit. That should take you about 30 minutes. Three complete circuits is a workout.”

I peered into the machine’s metal innards. There were numerous weight stacks within the rectangular frame of the contraption. Each stack was attached to a pulley or a bar projected outward from a stool or station.

“Is it safe?” I asked, prodding the cold steel of a weight stack with my finger.

Austin laughed at my anxiety. “Look, you’re a Virgo, am I right or am I right? I *knew* it! You Virgos are so fussy. These machines are much safer than those free-weights over there, believe me.”

I looked over at the free-weight section. Just then, a short black man with absurdly huge legs wrapped his fingers tightly around another man’s neck.

“Sweepea, Goddamnit! Call me by my fuckin’ name. I ain’t Mousie! I’m The Portuguese Rambo, you fuck!” he screamed.

Sweepea’s face was rapidly turning purple. I looked around the room. No one was even watching, let alone glanced back at Austin.

“Oh, it doesn’t mean a thing. Mousie, oh, I mean ‘The Portuguese Rambo’—he likes to be called that, you know—well, he’s very excitable. This sort of thing happens every night. It’s part of the process,” Austin explained.

He brought my attention back to the machines. With the Universal, he said, the weight is always connected to the machine. You never have to balance it, just push or pull. With free-weights, there is no intermediary between you and the weights. If you lose your grip with them, you might well crush your face.

“Machines are less efficient than free-weights if you really want size, since they do some of the work for you, but they’re a great place to start,” Austin told me. I understood. I needed a few months on training wheels before tackling the real stuff.

“Look, I’ll take you through your first circuit, if you like,” Austin said.

He ushered me off to a Naugahyde bench dripping with sweat. I lay flat down on it and watched as he inserted a metal pin in the weight stack by my head. The stack in the machine was connected to a bar that jutted out over my chest. Twelve times, I pushed the bar from my chest to arm’s length. My face started turning beetroot-red after the eighth rep. This was my introduction to the bench press.

“Breathe!” Austin shouted, hovering over me. “Like you’re having a baby!”

At the shoulder, or deltoid, press, I perfected my breathing. I sat on a stool facing the Universal, grabbed the bar by my shoulders with both hands, and pushed it over my head. I exhaled when I pushed the bar up, and inhaled when I eased it down. At the seated rowing station, I sat on the floor with my feet braced against the machine, and made like a collegiate rower, substituting a handgrip, cable, and weight stack for an oar. This was for my back or “lats,” as Austin called them (the abbreviated form of latissimus dorsi).

I learned that my arms were really divided into two muscles: triceps, or the back of the arm, and biceps, the bulge at the top. Austin adjusted the stack as I worked my triceps by pushing down on a bar cabled to the top of one of the machine’s stations. For my biceps, I fell in line with the others, waited my turn, then grabbed a handlebar at thigh height and curled it up to my chest.

That was it for my upper body. Push or pull and recover; fall in line for the next exercise; push or pull and recover. It was a continuing theme. Already, I could feel a nasty degree of pain.

Austin laughed. “Believe me, it’s perfectly normal. You see, you tear the muscle each time you workout. That’s why you wait 48 hours before working the same muscle again. If you don’t, you just flood the thing to death, and it’s of no use to anyone.”

Legs were next, broken down into my “quads” or quadriceps, the front of the thighs; “hams” or hamstrings, the back of the thighs; and calves. The Universal had special steel pedals for exercising the quads. I settled myself into the Naugahyde chair, braced my arms on the metal grips by my hips, and pushed, 12 times.

Austin went next, then led me to the line for the leg curl station, where I lay flat on my stomach on a bench, fit my legs under a padded bar, and, bending at the knee, brought the bar up with my heels until they touch my hamstrings for 12 repetitions.

My first circuit was complete at the calf station, where I stood on a narrow plank of wood, and raised myself on tiptoe and back down again using only my calves. The exercise seemed absurdly simple until Austin added a padded yoke to my shoulders connecting me to a weight stack in the machine.

That was it, upper and lower body. I’d just completed my first circuit. I sat down, too confused to be exhausted. I had two more circuits to go for my first workout.

“What about that?” I asked, pointing at a man who held a bar in both hands and was busy shrugging his shoulders toward the sky.

“Oh that. That’s for the trapezius muscles. I think ‘traps’ look unsightly on a man,” Austin sniffed.

I noticed that none of the men by the machines had them. On the far side of the room, though

everyone did. These “traps” bunched up like single grapefruits on either side of the neck. They were thoroughly intimidating. I couldn’t wait to get them.

“Anyway, I’ve just taught you the basics. For every exercise, there are tons of variations. You’ll see as you go along.”

Just then, a man dressed in a singlet and what appeared to be a tutu broke from the line for the deltoid press to introduce himself to me.

Quickly, Austin pushed him away, hissing, “Back off, Mary. He’s mine!” The man skulked back to his station.

I couldn’t let this go on any longer. “Is this a gay gym?” I asked.

“Look, honey,” he replied. “All gyms are gay.”

I examined the men by the machines. There Austin seemed right. “But what about them?” I asked, pointing to the free-weight lifters.

Austin laughed out loud. “*Especially* them,” he said. “They just don’t know it yet!”

I thanked Austin for the circuit and the information, and, as gently as possible, told him that I didn’t think I’d be needing a training partner for the rest of the workout.

As he walked disconsolately back to his friends, I set about mastering the machine. “Joy and fierceness,” I reminded myself, “joy and fierceness.” I adjusted the weight so that I could accomplish the mandatory 12 repetitions. Invariably, I began pumping them out with ease, imagining the day I would walk unmolested through the streets. But before long, I was whimpering and hideously contorting my aching body as I pushed the last few up.

The men by the machine eyed me warily. I could sense it. I was doing something wrong. No one else at the machines seemed even to be trying.

Austin came over. “Take it easy,” he whispered, “don’t get into such a flap. Remember, Rome wasn’t built in a day.” But his words meant nothing to me. After jerking and bouncing my way through two more circuits, I silently congratulated myself—I was already one of the stronger men on that side of the room. I left the weight room flushed with victory.

My euphoria lasted all of 15 seconds, the time it took for Austin to find me back at my locker. He invited me to accompany him back to his place for a shower and a liver-and-whey shake. He had some slides he wanted me to see: some of the world’s most famous bodybuilders in a variety of interesting poses. It was all part of “the lifter life-style,” he assured me.

As politely as I could, I declined. Nothing more could happen, I thought, not on my first visit to the gym. After all, within the last two hours I’d suffered public humiliation, physical attack from a double amputee, and sexual harassment.

I breathed a sigh of relief and headed for the shower. That’s when I heard him. He was no ordinary shower warbler.

“ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX, SEVEN!” the shout rang out, acoustically amplified by the shower tiles.

Bewildered, I looked at a man shaving at a nearby sink.

“Your first time, right?” he asked.

I nodded.

The man gestured with his head toward the shower. “They call him ‘The Counter.’ Some say it was ’Nam, others he lost heavy on Black Monday in Wall Street. Any case, the light’s on upstairs, but nobody’s home.”

I peeked in and saw him, alone, under the showerhead. He wore a showercap, but the water wasn’t on. It must have been on at some point, though, because he was lathered with soap, and rubbing with

was left of the bar into his skin. Again, the voice boomed forth: “ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX, SEVEN!”

Hearing my steps, he turned to face me. I looked down. No, he wasn't visibly excited. That wasn't then. I gazed at his face. Underneath the comedy of the shower cap, he looked utterly haunted.

He bit his lip for a second, examining me. I waited, uncertain yet for what. Tears, perhaps, or bitter accusing words. Instead, his eyes turned inward and he took up his recitation again, this time louder than ever.

“ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX, SEVEN!”

It had been a long day, but as I showered all I could think about was my next workout. Despite everything—the humiliation, the harassment, the methodical man beside me—I was hooked. Standing insensate under that showerhead, none of it seemed to matter very much. In the end, to my joy, I felt numb.

3. THE WALK

I INVENTED, MORE OR LESS, MYSELF.
—ION TIRIAC

From that first night of September 1984 to March of 1985 I labored three times per week in the weight room. Every bar I pushed, every cable I pulled, moved me that much closer to a body weight of 200 pounds, to safety out on the street, to isolation. My fellow gym members watched, astonished by the obvious and frightening fact that this lifting was of crucial importance to me. None of the men by the machines understood the depth of my desperation.

There was a beautiful simplicity about it. I pushed the iron, and my body grew. The harder I worked, the better I felt. My routine brought order amid chaos. I knew just where to shuffle and when: Deltoids followed pecs, hamstrings followed quads. Always 12 reps, always three circuits. I barely paused between exercises, moving from station to station, cable to bar. And if I wasn't that strong, I could make up for it by continuing to exercise long after others had padded off to the showers. Set after set after set. Ninety minutes straight. Week after week. The training sessions passed in a blur. I put on 100 pounds in the first six months (bringing my weight up to 185) and regained my health. By March, my arms measured 15 inches, my neck 15½, my calves 15, my thighs 24, my chest 40, and my waist 34 inches. It was on my way.

Still, one thing was bothering me. Despite my gains, things did not let up out on the street. Three card monte sharps still took one look my way and rushed to set up shop beside me. My friend Jerry still lit up as I approached the subway escalator. And the general panic still followed me wherever I went. As much new armor as I had, I realized I would need a hell of a lot more.

Across the room lay the answer. Free-weights. The hugest men I'd seen, the men in the magazine were always pictured with free-weights. They never seemed to trifle with the Universal. I couldn't imagine them encountering the slightest difficulty out on the streets. I had to break the plane.

At the edge of the crowd on the far side of the weight room, I saw him again. His upper body wasn't as impressive, nor was his height. He stood as tall as my elbow. But his legs were enormous, the knees and ankles fairly drowning amidst the overhanging muscle. Noticing my stare, he put his dumbbell down and, rigid as a robot, walked over to me.

"I vomit the most. That's why my legs are the best," he said, in a high-pitched, girlish voice.

"The Portuguese Rambo," he proclaimed, extending his shaved forearm in my direction. He was completely bald, black, and about forty years old. He wore a sweatband on his head tilted at a rakish angle. His weight-lifting belt said BAD in black block letters.

"Hell, man, you can't build a house on a weak foundation," he said, pointing to his legs with a pointed index finger. The words were familiar. I struggled to place them.

He shook loose the muscles of his massive legs, and we both watched the flesh flap like a loose sail in the wind.

"This here's the greatest sport; see, you work hard, you get rewarded." Familiar words again—where had I heard them before?

I nodded. I had witnessed his temper that first night; I didn't so much as utter a peep.

“See, we been watchin’ you at the machines. And you know, man, we don’t get it. Wha’choo want to work so hard for and waste it on them machines?” he asked, adjusting his groin with a public flourish. “Look, you want a chest bigger than Dolly Parton, right? Then follow me to the bench press.”

It was what I’d been waiting for. At last, the breach to the free-weight group. I kept my head down and tried to drift in as inconspicuously as possible. Unsettling snatches of conversation from strange new voices floated around me.

“It was so dry, man, I had to crowbar it in. Once I got going, like sandpaper. Man, it was music to my ears. She loved it too,” one man whispered, lasciviously, to his friend.

Another thundered beside me: “... so I nailed him, twice, with an uppercut. Should have seen his teeth there on the sidewalk. Like bloody Chiclets. You don’t mess with a *lifter*, man. ...”

I hurried to the bench press where Mousie, The Portuguese Rambo, was loading up a solid steel bar with 45-pound black iron plates. Olympic Barbell Company, the weights said. The bar rested on a trestle attached to the bench. By the time Mousie slid three plates on each side of the bar, it sagged at either end.

“Three hundred fifteen pounds, man,” Mousie said, lying with his back flat on the bench. He did two repetitions, hoisting the bar off the rack to arm’s length, then bringing it down to touch his chest before pushing it back up.

Mousie removed a plate from either side and let me try. This wasn’t a machine, and I knew instantly. It was twice as hard as what I had grown used to. I had no problem repping the 225-pound weight; I had a grave problem balancing it. The bar listed like a doomed ship in my hands.

“No problem, man, I’m here to spot you,” Mousie said from above my head.

With his fingers occasionally guiding the bar, I managed 10 repetitions. When I rose, unsteadily, to my feet I saw Bert eyeballing me. Mousie recognized my fear.

“Relax, man,” he said. “Bert’s seen how hard you work out. He really likes you. If he didn’t, you would have found a Kotex in yo’ locker long time back, believe me.” He prepared the bar again for his next set.

“Besides, homeboy,” Mousie added, rising from the bench when he finished, “you don’t come to the weight room to make friends, you come to make gains.” That too seemed familiar. Was it the magazines? The Schwarzenegger canon?

After seven sets of bench presses, Mousie puffed out his chest and walked with his shoulders high to the incline bench. It was slanted at 45 degrees and, he said, would work our upper pectoral muscles.

Mousie grabbed a pair of dumbbells weighing 80 pounds each. He rested them first on his thighs, then took a deep breath, sat back on the incline, hiked the weights up to his chest, and pushed them to the sky 12 times.

I didn’t understand it. My normal route back at the machines was to follow the line to the shoulder machine. Why more chest?

Mousie laughed between reps. “‘Cause we’re workin’ chest, man,” he answered. “I already done back this mornin’.”

“I thought you had to give your body a rest?” I asked, confused.

“You do, and the way you do it is to work a different body part every time, never repeatin’ the same part the next day. See, it’s called a ‘split routine,’ that is, workin’ different muscles on different days splittin’ up yo’ body parts.”

As Mousie explained it to me, he was actually engaged in a “double-split” program, meaning twice a-day workouts. He’d done back that morning, and would do chest that night. The next day, quads.

the morning, hamstrings and calves that night. The day after that, shoulders in the morning, arms at night. The fourth day, or “off day,” was reserved for rest. The entire program was called “three on, one off, double-splits,” and, as I discovered, everyone in the free-weight section adhered to it.

“Why you think we don’t look like them sorry-ass motherfuckers?” he asked, pointing to the men leaning on the machines.

Again, I used half Mousie’s weight. As I did my repetitions, I spied Sweepea lumbering through the door. He was the man I’d seen Mousie strangle six months earlier. They were the best of friends, I discovered, though Mousie frequently called him “The Missing Link” behind his back.

At five foot ten, Sweepea weighed 250 pounds. Of that bulk, an equal proportion was fat and muscle. He sported a Prince Valiant haircut, so shellacked with hair spray it looked like a helmet. Perched on top of the helmet was a black pirate’s cap with a Jolly Roger emblem. All this, plus a missing front tooth. Smiling, he looked cherubic. Scowling, like a very bad dream.

Catching sight of Mousie, he hustled over to join us. When he spotted me, though, he slowed down, walking with exaggerated muscle-bound difficulty, as if he were fighting a torrential gale.

“What day is it, Mousie?” he asked.

“Monday,” I interjected, trying to get at least something right.

Sweepea eyed me with disdain.

“No,” Mousie said, laughing. “Sam don’t understand yet. It’s chest and back today, Pea. Wha’s it for you?”

“Legs,” he groaned. This, I found, was the universal builder’s reaction to “leg day,” since the leg muscles were by far the most taxing to train.

“Look, you want to join us for chest?” Mousie asked, rolling his eyes at me. I gathered Sweepea would do anything to avoid a leg workout.

“Where are you?”

“Fourth set, second exercise,” Mousie said.

Without a warm-up, Sweepea snatched up the 80-pound dumbbells and erupted in a burst of violence. I watched him in alarm as he screamed “Fuck Arnold!” at the top of his lungs, snorting and cackling at every repetition. I looked around me. None of the other free-weight men, too busy bragging among themselves or brooding individually on benches, paid him the slightest attention.

Without missing a beat, Sweepea finished, handed me my dumbbells, and said, now calm as a country pond, “Your set, man.”

With my tongue between my teeth, I did the exercise, but timorously, spending as much energy balancing the weights as pushing them. At the eighth rep, I heard myself groaning and tried to stifle the sound.

Sweepea looked at me sadly and turned to Mousie. “He needs an attitude adjustment, man.”

Mousie, taking his turn with the dumbbells, agreed. “Bro, you need to *attack* the weights, conquer the motherfuckers.”

“That’s right,” Sweepea added. “You ain’t with the sheep no more,” he said, motioning to the men leaning on the machines, “so stop bleating like one.”

Sweepea emphasized his point by walking with his dumbbells to a sign on the wall that said:

PLEASE REPLACE WEIGHTS

TO RACK AFTER USE.

Directly beneath this sign, looking back at me, he dropped them dramatically from his shoulders to the

floor.

~~“Quigs will come, man,” Mousie said in warning. I gathered he meant Mr. Quigley.~~

Sweepea sucked in his gut and puffed out his chest. “Let him come, you see me quiverin’, bro’?” I turned his face slightly to the side and adjusted his pirate’s cap.

That’s when it hit me. Bad theater. Every word they uttered, every move they made seemed rehearsed—as rehearsed, in fact, as any performance I’d ever seen on stage. That explained the pregnant pauses before delivering the lines I knew so well from the magazines. Lines like “You got stay hungry,” or “You work hard, good things will happen.” Much of being a bodybuilder, I gathered, meant playing at being a bodybuilder.

Was this the essence of the sport? My reading seemed to confirm it. Since the first AAU Mr. America contest in 1939, bodybuilding involved premeditated reinvention. You chose who you wanted to be, and acted accordingly. So Angelo Siciliano picked up a dumbbell and became Charles Atlas. So Arnold Schwarzenegger became, for a time, Arnold Strong. If it was all a matter of role-playing, that explained Mousie’s vision of himself as The Portuguese Rambo and Sweepea’s pirate’s hat.

It also explained my presence in the gym. The threat wasn’t just from without, it also came from within. The fright I’d felt on the streets of New York I also felt deep within myself. Who was this man who cried not just at graduations and weddings but during beer and credit-card commercials? Who was this man terrified of his own rage, his own anger, his own greed, his own bitterness? Who was the man who never heard a compliment without hearing a subtextual insult, who never said “I love you” without resenting that other fact: “I need you.” I couldn’t deny it was me, or could I? There wasn’t enough pomade, mouthwash, deodorant and talc in this world to eradicate my sins, but what if I created a shell to suppress them? What if my armor not only kept the world out, but kept me in?

I was more than willing to play the role of a builder if it could save me from myself. Sweepea and Mousie had found a disciple in their midst.

“No more Jell-O, ma!” I brayed, attacking the weight, as my new training partners broke into grins. During my reps, I resorted to what Schwarzenegger likes to call “The Arnold Mental Visualization Principle,” more commonly known as the imagination, and saw my chest growing to such gargantuan proportions that no shirt on earth could contain it.

We went from incline presses to the decline bench, dumbbell presses to dumbbell flies, attacking our chests from every angle. Only two moves work for the chest, Mousie explained: a standard push-up movement from your nipples forward, and a standard fly movement, from arms outstretched at your sides to a position straight before you. Every chest movement is a variation of these two themes, and each theme involves the same principle: stretch (and by stretching, tear the muscle) and squeeze (flex it, contract it, during the whole movement).

At the end of the 90-minute workout, I had done so much stretching and squeezing, I could barely move. The free-weights had made all the difference. My chest spasmed and cramped back at my locker. It was caught in a state of shock. In circuit training, I was used to thirty sets per workout, broken down into three sets per body part and ten different body parts. But tonight, we’d done thirty sets for just chest alone. The welcome onset of numbness was the only relief from the pain.

“God ain’t exactly helped you with genetics, bro’,” Mousie said, when I peeled off my tank top.

Sweepea pinched and prodded my aching body. He delivered his verdict with a sad shake of his head. “He’s an ecto, man. That’s tough.”

I felt thoroughly defeated. I recognized the term from the magazines. They were filled with geneticspeak, classifying every human being into three basic body types: endomorphs, the naturally obese; mesomorphs, those born stocky and muscular; and ectomorphs, the lanky and bony. According

to bodybuilding lore, you can change the way you look through weights, and racial stock might be taken into consideration (with advantages to Italians, Germans and Blacks), but of the three basic body types, ectomorphs have the most problems gaining muscle mass. For sheer size, they have the most to overcome. It wasn't what I wanted to hear.

"Arnold was an ectomorph," I proffered hopefully.

"Hey, Arnold was a *German*," Sweepea countered.

Again, my shoulders sagged. Mousie detected my misery. He asked if Sweepea and I would join him for a drink.

"Bodybuilders drink beer?" I asked.

"Milk is for babies. Arnold drinks beer!" they both shouted in what I took to be Austrian accents. Laughing uproariously, they revealed that they had seen the movie *Pumping Iron* again recently and were just quoting Arnold.

As we made our way to the bar on Fifty-second Street and Second Avenue, we ran into a man who looked as if he had sprung live right off the pages of my magazines.

He certainly didn't resemble anyone from the Y, free-weight section or not. He had achieved the look gained only by the most advanced builders. While my body was a mess of straight edges and right angles, his, so preposterously muscled, was a mass of curves, fleshy ellipses and ovals. They made his joints look tiny, and, in contrast to the great gobs of muscle, almost dainty.

He swept by us without a glance, not even acknowledging Mousie and Pea as iron brethren.

"That dude's got some *serious* muscle..." Sweepea said beneath his breath. "Bet he can bench for 400 and squat five."

That much gym slang I knew. Sweepea estimated that a body like that could bench press for 400 and squat five hundred pounds. No one in our gym could do it.

"He's paid his dues, sure enough," Mousie added. As I was to learn, that was the greatest compliment one bodybuilder could pay another.

"He ain't no barbody, tha's for damn sure," Sweepea murmured.

"What's a barbody?" I asked, craning my neck for another look at the huge man. From a distance, now, all I could see were the trademark signs of a builder: the simian, sloping shoulders, the V-shaped torso, the tiny waist.

"You know, all chest and arms, to impress the women up and down the bar. I seen loads of 'em do that work. They just build those muscles you see in a Polo shirt. They don't got legs, or calves or nuthin' else," Sweepea explained.

"Bet he's on the juice," Mousie whispered.

"Yeah? Well, I ain't asking him," Sweepea said fearfully.

"The juice?" I asked.

Sweepea smiled. "Yeah, man. You know, 'roids, shit, steroids."

"That doesn't seem very natural," I said. I'd noticed that the magazines were decidedly silent on this subject.

Sweepea looked at me with a wry grin. "What's natural?" he asked. "Looking at you, you think it's natural to go someplace and read for hours at a time. See, the way people think, that's OK 'cause you're developing your mind. Well, I say, what's wrong with developing your body? I mean, shit, what would *you* rather look like, Carl Sagan or Lou Ferrigno?"

I didn't reply. I was too angry and ashamed. After all, I wasn't the one walking up Second Avenue wearing a pirate's cap atop a Prince Valiant haircut. As for the shame, I knew that Sweepea was right. Even strapped in my weight-lifting belt, I looked much more like Professor Sagan than like a builder.

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