

Instagratication

By Anna Kaye-Rogers

WHY WE LIKE IT: *If the media is the message, as one culture critic ‘guru’ claimed when granddad was smoking dope at Yager’s farm, then two of our most cherished infatuations—working out and Instagramming—predictably morph into malevolent bodies of influence and our relation—or rather need for them—becomes destructively fetishistic. ‘Setting goals was meant to be healthy, but it became a prison’. The author explores this fallout with both wisdom and compassion. What is lost, she evinces, is a sense of proportion, both moral and material. ‘How do you go on living when you lose the balance that kept you human.’ (Note this is not a question.) A literate, insightful and provocative CNF written with a light touch in target prose. (Font size is author’s own.)*

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I reach for my toes longingly, fingers towards the floor, back already bent in something like pain, waiting for the sudden crack that tells me it’s time to stop. Working out is *hard*. It’s a pain I inflict on myself, a soreness to the touch I lean into and cultivate like a pulled tooth waiting to heal. I poke at my exposed gums and tired muscles and I wait, luxuriating in the sensation. There is a rawness to the intimacy of pulling ropes and lifting kettlebells. Cold metal on bare skin, taut ropes against thick thighs, the push and pull of weights, the feel of arching into a stretch. I love working out, I just don’t like going to work out.

I want to be friends. I want to make jokes and laugh and feel safe, the same comforting ease that I feel sitting down at a machine. There is a familiarity built on use, a routine that comes with practice and time. It is the sudden stops and starts, days when you can stay up late texting but then go a week without speaking. In a world where the daily consistency of the workout is paramount to improvement, the silences do not bode well. And often, motherly intuition is proven correct.

What if you cannot have everything? What if the business books that talk about home and work-life balance are as full of shit as the men in suits who cheated on wives and left the rest of us behind, betting with money they did not have on houses no one owned. What if you have to choose the ways you can be a good human being, to sacrifice some of your dreams to fulfill your morals?

I can see two brothers related in stubbornness, the way they hold their jaws, carved granite and steel. I wonder which broke first, the one with external damage or the one holding internal trauma. There should be no shame in overworked muscles needing time to heal and rest days, but they push and push until the whole body trembles on the verge of breaking down.

I worry what constantly pushing yourself does, striving for perfection when humans are not built for it. Formerly private things become instagrammed captions, and the screenshots I take seem to be evidence for a murder yet to occur. The 'old' versions become ghosts, but the physical evidence seems to haunt the men they have become. Setting goals was meant to be healthy, but it became a prison. The men you grow into are not always the men you planned to become, and in

the tension, the tightness, the work, you risk injuries that send you sprawling on the cold gym floor.

I want warmth, peace, and happiness for them. Instead I watch the whole thing go up in flames. They are passionate sparks already doused in gasoline, mistakes they hop on treadmills to run from but find themselves back at the starting line. The problem with visions is the humans who see them, who take might-have-beens and could-becomes as prophecies; immovable fate. They eat the same meals and I unwrap candy bars greedily; we won't know who lives life until the end of the workout. The timer will stop and we'll step away, and that'll be it.

I think about how interconnected we are, the way pulling a rope at one end sends the weights up into the air, trusting you to set them back down gently, not crashing to the ground like meaningless objects meant to be used and cast aside. I think about the people who get hurt when the vision you had for yourself cast them as tools, stopped considering what they wanted. My six-pound medicine ball is small and useless but I love it, cradling it between sets. Like a friend who has helped me, a small child I protect between my hands, and you slam your ball into the ground and leave it behind after classes like one of your exes. Knowing you, you'll circle back to put it away after, but you treat your workouts more seriously than the rest of your life. What does that do to a person, to become almost perfect outside and forget to train your insides at the same time? How do you go on living when you lose the balance that kept you human.

You regret it and say you want to stop running, but you can't stop working out to find it, repeating the same routines, set in the same repetitions. I hate going to the gym because I don't

want to leave home, but you've lost sight of your home in the filters of instagram. Your workout buddies go home to their other interests but you remain, long after everyone else leaves. Maybe in the silence and the stillness, when it's just you, no cameras, no expectations, no partners or plans, you can find your center and your peace again, but the moment passes quickly, and whatever you were before you began is gone.

We are constantly at war, tense and expectant, the friction between the loaded bar and the bench press. What I value you set aside, seeking more, and yet when I enter your sacred space I smile more. My little weight is all I needed and all I want. If you keep lifting more than you can handle someday you'll get hurt. And I wanted to be there to help you, but once you no longer needed me to spot, you walked away, back to the exercises you did before, as if you'd learned nothing at all. You point out the mistakes in form your brother makes, missing he's doing a different workout entirely, and your empathy does not stretch far enough into the person you used to be able to be. I am left alone in my workout when all I wanted was a family, but you are far worse off, because all you'll have is yourself.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I have seen the wonders of social media, how it has connected me to people I would have never met otherwise and helped me form lasting friendships. But I have seen those who have used it for other purposes and how it warps them into someone different. It was through this lens that I thought about the fitness obsession and competition that runs through my chosen family, how something that might have been good and brought us together instead kept us apart. But mostly, I made a pun and then wrote an essay to justify having used the phrase.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Anna Kaye-Rogers is a writer in the Illinois Valley who has been published in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She can be found awkwardly sitting on floors avoiding writing wherever there are animals nearby.