Heavy Lifting

After getting bad labs, I hit the gym--and almost get hit myself.

May 1, 2005 By M.C. Mars

I'm standing in the squat rack between sets, brooding over my falling T-cell count and rising viral load. When my labs are good, so are my spirits. When they're bad, a trap door opens at my feet. I somersault through interplanetary darkness without coordinates, without direction. My mind is my enemy. Little things get under my skin. Like the air conditioner in the ceiling 50 feet away blowing cold air on my neck. *Rudolf Nureyev was freaked out about drafts, too, I think. Look what happened to him.*

Opposite me, golden legs spread-eagled on the abductor machine, is one of the most beautiful women I have seen in months. Her arched eyebrows and taut body—thigh muscles straining and flexing—give her a hypnotic power. I smile, trying not to stare. She smiles back, lifts herself out of the machine, takes a swig from her water bottle and glides away. A couple of guys gawk and comment out of the side of their mouths. I know what they're saying. She's wearing flimsy cotton short shorts that say NEW on the left cheek, YORK on the right and CITY in the sweaty gap inbetween. As if summoned by radar, her boyfriend, a big guy in a red T-shirt, materializes, looking protective and slightly menacing. They kiss and make plans.

I start my next set, and my mind returns to my labs. A doctor in a white smock—substituting for my regular MD—blurted them out.

"I told you people I don't wanna know *the numbers*," I said.

"I'm sorry, but nobody told me."

"That should be noted in my file, in bold type. Please write it down!"

My regular doctor and I had a pact. He didn't tell me my numbers unless my health took such a dire turn that I'd have to try new meds. I prefer to remain in the dark and avoid the mood swings, avoid the self-imposed torture bad news can cause, avoid thoughts like *I could never have a woman like that*.

The woman like that now settles into the adductor machine, this time pushing her legs outward, flashing imaginary beaver. *She's selling herself. She should have a barcode, instead of a tattoo, at*

the base of her spine. I finish my set and walk over. “I drove a cab in New York,” I say. “I thought I knew the city pretty well, but apparently there are some places I’ve never been.” She reddens and leaves without a word. I walk back to the squat machine and start my next set.

I’m standing on a platform stretching my Achilles when I see him out of the corner of my eye—the guy in the red T-shirt, about 6 foot 3. I listen calmly to the piped-in music and the clangor of slamming iron. In the gentle drizzle of my endorphins, I accept the inevitability of this confrontation. He wastes no words. “My girlfriend told me what you said. You need to learn how to respect women.”

I look down blankly from the platform. “I thought what I said was pretty witty,” I reply.

We lock eyes. I can feel the rage in me growing, ready to tear loose and send me to jail. I can see the energy that started all this, bituminous and base, born of resentment. And I can read the consequences of further negativity.

“What I did was crude,” I say. “I knew it as soon as the words left my mouth. Tell her I’m sorry. Better yet, I’ll tell her myself.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“OK, then tell her…” I pause. Something wells up in me, feelings that have been just out of reach for days: *AIDS is not a death sentence. You are not a plague carrier. You are not a pariah.*

“Tell her I could have phrased it better, but I think she’s beautiful.”

For information on M.C. Mars’ debut novel, Don’t Take Me the Long Way, *see* “POZ Picks.”

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