

EXERCISE IN FUTILITY

here's an exercise bike in the corner of my bedroom now, occupying the very spot where I'd always planned to put a chaise longue. This vehicle—which is the last thing I ever expected (or wanted) to own—was a Valentine's Day present from the man who claims to love me, and it has proved infinitely harder to lose than the present he bought me *last* Valentine's Day, the pair of running shoes that fit so easily into the bottom of a bag of stuff for the Salvation Army. Unable even to find a way of tampering with the machine's mileage gauge—and so give the impression that it is being used, when in fact it is not—I am forced to the extremity of actually getting up and riding it. Thus am I finally capitulating to a peer pressure greater than any I have felt since the craze for white lipstick swept my junior high school.

I've known for a long time that this day was coming, as surely as I've always known that middle age follows youth. I've known it could only be a matter of time before I'd feel forced to conform, to buckle under, to *exercise!* Nineteen eighty-four is here, and for me Big Brother has turned out to be . . . Jack La Lanne.

But I remember a happier time when the exercise that people did was quietly integrated into their lives. They pulled the levers of stick shifts instead of Nautilus machines; they walked up flights of stairs carrying shopping bags heavy with red meat; they ran to catch bounding toddlers or commuter trains. (And they didn't make a religion out of this putting one foot quickly in front of the other, or bore the rest of us to tears reporting how fast they did it.)

It was a lovely world, the world I grew up in. Oh, there were the token "get out in the fresh air and play" injunctions from my parents, and the perennial enjoiners not to eat too many sweets and spoil my dinner. But on the whole I felt free to go my own lackadaisical way, eating an éclair as I went. I lay around reading books and dipping into the cocktail peanuts; sat on my rear end in front of the TV; walked no farther than my best friend's house around the corner; ran only on rare occasions, mainly to catch up to a group of boys. And with it all I felt as respectable as anybody. I was never lectured on the importance of maintaining my cardiovascular system. Nobody had ever *heard* of the cardiovascular system.

People weren't worried then about the effects of saccharin, which was considered the wonder of the age when I was a mite, just one step behind penicillin. Butter was thought to be a perfectly natural thing to eat; eggs were a breakfast staple; salt was the spice of life; and caffeine and nicotine were the twin portals to adulthood. If people didn't eat steak it was for one reason only: They couldn't afford it.

And then everything changed. I think it began when people started treating their bodies like temples instead of amusement parks. (This seems to have occurred at about the same time the "me generation" replaced "the generation gap.") All of a sudden I'd be ambling along the street, thinking about the possibility of stopping in

somewhere for a container of ice cream rich in butter fat, when suddenly a humanlike figure in a space suit and shoes with lightning streaks on them would whiz by like the Mercury man from Western Union. At first, these apparitions seemed nothing more than cultural aberrations, but as the years went by more and more of them appeared. And now they wore headsets and a faraway look in their eyes.

For a while I could shrug off the phenomenon. After all, it was no crazier than the idea of people paying a lot of money to be humiliated by strangers at an est workshop. But then it turned out that some of those people streaking by me on the street were men and women I actually knew.

Meanwhile, those headsets they were plugged into issued warnings about everything that made life worth living. I watched in horror as, one after another, the people I loved forswore the things I had always believed basic to a tasty, well-balanced diet: Susan gave up coffee and colas, even though her life had previously been buoyed up on a sea of caffeine; Janet banned all food cooked with oil or butter, to the point that eating at her house involved getting the food down your throat by massaging it down your neck; David campaigned against eggs and even handed out anti-cholesterol literature on street corners; Ted turned so pale at the sight of red meat you'd have thought his mother had been frightened by a cow; and Annie labeled white sugar a health menace, second only to walking in dark alleys at midnight. They all ate a lot of bran.

One after another they joined gyms, and signed up for aerobics classes. The man who sleeps next to me every night started throwing off the covers at dawn in order to don an outfit that always reminds me of the ski patrol and jog off into the morning mist. (This strengthens his heart and lungs, so that he has plenty of breath to harangue me on my lack of it.)

Through it all I held out; I stuck to my principles and did nothing. Until the day a couple of months ago when I telephoned a close friend to suggest that we take in a movie and dinner—two activities we had always considered good exercises for the eyes and jaw. This was a woman who I thought agreed with me on most of life's important questions (like who manufactured the slacks with the roomiest seat). And then, in the middle of our conversation, she confessed that she had recently started to run.

I dropped the receiver as if it were a barbell, finally realizing how alone I actually was. Mine was the only closet in town without a pair of leotards or a running suit inside; mine was the only kitchen that still contained all the same food my mother had stocked in hers; mine was the only heart still beating to the sound of its own drummer. I felt the chill of isolation.

So today I'm going to get up on that ugly machine. I'll put my hands on the handlebars, my feet on the pedals, my startled behind on the seat. And I'll start pedaling away to nowhere—or maybe just back into society. ■

THE CHANGE
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AMUSEMENT
PARKS