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Gold's

BY KEVIN McALPHER

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To get back into shape after months of inactivity, I joined Gold's Gym. A Valley branch had opened up in downtown Reseda and the membership fees were reasonable. It was a serious place, Gold's, hardcore all the way, a bodybuilding gym with posters of champion musclemen like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Reg Park covering the walls, and I really had no business being there. It was my intention to build explosive strength, training as I always had in short bursts with heavy weights, which was diametrically opposed to the bodybuilding ethos of slow and numerous reps. "Pumping iron" they called it, but it was all about inflating muscle. The guys who went to Gold's weren't concerned with what their bicep could do so much as what it looked like hanging out their car window as they cruised Van Nuys Boulevard. My bottom-line was lifting the most weight I could. A rippling physique was incidental to simply being strong, and at a certain point I even found a lot of muscles embarrassing: they bespoke a too diligent acquisition.

I went three times a week, didn't hobnob, kept my eyes front, and shuffled the black cast-iron plates. One day I was doing incline dumbbell presses with ninety pounds in each hand, when some madman charged up behind me, spotted my elbows, and started shrieking:

COME ON! YOU CAN DO IT! GET MAD AT THAT WEIGHT! GET IT UP! OH BEAR! BE A BAD BEAR! YEAH! YEAH! YOU GOT IT! YEAH!

I hadn't needed the guy's help until he'd destroyed my concentration by screaming in my ear, which made me want to laugh out loud and kill him at the same time.

Thanks, I grunted, dropping the dumbbells to my thighs. I sized up the fellow in the mirror. He had a perfect tan, a Command Performance haircut, slightly Neanderthal features, and a torso that looked as if he'd swallowed a triangle.

You know, you're using too much weight, he volunteered. You should be using way less and doing twice the reps.

I'm trying to bulk up.

You won't bulk up that way. Slow and steady does the trick. And the downward motion should be as deliberate as the press.

Anything else? I said.

You've got good pecs and delts, he said, running his eyes over my body. But your quads and glutes could use some work.

Glutes?

Your buns.

He canted a muscular cheek my way. Feel mine, he said. They're like steel.

I balked.

Go ahead—squeeze 'em!

I smacked his rump with the back of my hand. They were hard all right. Irish buns. Buns O'Steel.

Pretty good, I said.

Take it from me, buddy, that's the first thing the ladies notice—your ass. They love a hot tush. If you want, we can do a glute workout together. I work glutes Mondays and Thursdays.

I'll think about it.

Just think about the *lay-deez*.

You ran into weirdos like this every day at Gold's. They were usually non-athletes who had taken up bodybuilding out of vanity or insecurity and now thought they were God's gift to sports. And women. The poor deluded souls. Their so-called sport was naked greased popinjays going through choreographed posing routines. Where were the skills? The excellence? You'd see them hanging around the gym all day drinking their protein shakes and shooting up steroids or human growth hormone with a syringe to the thigh. Right in the middle of the place. Had they no pride? And apart from not even being all *that* strong, they didn't even *look* that good—their whole *raison d'être*. Their bodies weren't so much enhanced as encumbered by muscle. They had crab-like arms that stuck out from their sides through lat overdevelopment, and torsos stuffed into T-shirts they'd probably bought in the Little Boys department at J. C. Penny. Most ignoble of all was how they admired their misshapen bodies in the mirrors all day, practicing their poses in an orgy of baseless narcissism and cheering each other on with the facile mantra—No pain, no gain!

I tried to avoid the Glute Guy. I was afraid he might insist on that glute workout or ask me to straddle his back for donkey calf-raises or something equally homoerotic. I tried to avoid him, but one day I couldn't. Crisscrossing from one exercise to another, our eyes met briefly and I endeavored to be pleasant. No point in copping an attitude. This was supposed to be comical.

So how the ol' glutes doin'? I asked.

A dull look.

You know, that hot tush of yours. Been fighting 'em off lately?

Knit brows.

Your buns, man. You wanted me to squeeze them that one day. You wanted us

to do a glute workout together.

Look buddy, he said, I don't even know you.

I made closer inspection. The orangeish tan, the shaved body hair inclusive forearms, the thick neck, small head, eyes crowding the nose...

Do you have a brother? I asked.

Just stay away from me, okay?

Another day at Gold's I was back doing dumbbell inclines. I was working this exercise quite a bit, mainly out of habit, having done a lot of dumbbell inclines in my decathlon training because it isolated those large muscles used for shot and discus as well as approximating the throwing angle. It got not only chest and shoulders but overall arms, which was handy because I didn't have all day to spend at the gym like the body freaks. I was working this exercise one day when I heard a deep, resonant voice at my shoulder, a voice born to sing "Old Man River":

You mind I work in with yeh?

Yeah, I said. I mean no. Sure. Go right ahead.

Much obliged.

It was Lee Haney. He worked as a butcher at Von's down the street. I don't know if Haney was already Mr. Olympia at that point, but if not he would be. Eight times in a row. Haney was a hugely muscled man, like nothing I'd ever seen before, not even on posters. And he had definition. It was as if Haney the Butcher had carved out his muscles with a meat cleaver into cleanly divided slabs. On his stomach you could have grated fresh parmesan. In the middle of his biceps and continuing up through his shoulder was a thick squiggly vein that, probably combined with the guy's voice, reminded me of the switchback course of the Mississippi River where it came down past the eponymous state—even his veins were developed. I won't say that when Haney started his workout everyone else stopped theirs to gawk, but they'd do it on the sly, playing a cushion shot by looking past their own reflections as Haney bombed his traps or crushed out a front double biceps in one of his pose-checks.

Now, lo and behold, I was training with the most muscular man in the world, probably in history.

I kept pacing about while watching Haney out of the corner of my eye. He hoisted the 150-pound dumbbells—they didn't go any higher—and with 150 pounds in each fist he did numerous flat-backed reps, his monstrous pecs distending and bunching and not the slightest quiver in his super-hero arms as the set neared its end. His engorged muscles had a beautiful clarity. You could see where the shoulder tissue separated off from the back and chest, and the biceps from the triceps, and how, despite his massiveness, there wasn't any clutter. All was balanced and harmonious. His entire body was smooth and hard and lustrous as marble, an ebony version of the Farnese Hercules we'd studied in my art history class that semester.

When Haney finished he deposited the dumbbells in the rack.

My turn now. I grabbed the hundred pounders. We'd go for a max here.

I set them on my knees, paused a moment feeling the knurled grips, then kicked them to my shoulders and lay back on the metal-braced incline. One. Two.

Three. Four. Fiiive. Siiiiix. Seeeeeeeeven. One more, one more. As I exhaled big puffs of air in anticipation of the all-out effort, I felt a pair of hands lightly touching my elbows:

Come on now, drive it on up.

I exploded with puffed cheeks and a strangulated grunt and a clank of weights when they reached the top of my press.

Nice, complimented the voice.

Thanks for the spot, I said after dropping the weights to my thighs. I needed it.

No you didn't, purred the soft basso. You had that all y'self.

And that's how I became the regular training partner of Lee Haney, gentle giant and eight-time Mr. Olympia.

Just kidding.

But after that we used to nod hello and I wasn't so disdainful of bodybuilders. And he never insisted I squeeze his glutes, for which I was most thankful, because then, you know, I would have had to.

Kevin McAleer was born and raised in Los Angeles and now lives and works in Berlin, Germany as a translator and writer. He is co-editor with Allan Mitchell and Istvan Deak of the two-volume work, *Everyman in Europe: Essays in Social History* (Prentice-Hall 1990), he is co-author with Adam Blauhut of the humorous short story collection, *Zwei Amerikaner im deutschen Exil* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1998), and he is author of the novel *Surferboy* (German-Publishing 2006) and the historical monograph *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany* (Princeton University Press 1994), which was chosen one of *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* "Books of the Year." He is presently at work on a book about Errol Flynn.

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