

On the Politics of Gym

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In early October 2021, I was reading a book on Wattpad titled, *All Good Things*, written by a Canadian author named Renee Racine. It was a lighthearted read—because laughter is something I desperately needed—and I found something rather unexpected in it; I found myself. To give you a wee bit of summary, the story is about a Toronto-based woman in her forties whose name is Alice. Alice is in desperate need of some passion in her life, and so she quit her job to find what's next for her, only to go into depression and realise she didn't know her thirteen-year-old daughter as well as she thought she did.

What Alice discovers inside her daughter's closet will cause her to rethink what success means in both her career and her marriage. But that's not all, Alice also needs to make some changes in her habits, such as physical activities, to stay healthy, albeit it wouldn't be the first time she tried. This main character dreads sweating and doesn't like the gym. The only time she recalls having been to the gym is a year before when she talks about it in the book. And this I could relate to the most. I also dread sweating and have a hard time getting to the gym. This similarity between Alice and me, is what inspired me to write this personal essay about my fitness experience.

In so far as my motivation is concerned, this essay was born out of the desire to write about how I was superior to Alice in taking care of my body, since she only visited the gym one time, and that was because she was jealous of her husband's fitness. Afterwards, Alice did not return to the gym even though she paid for a full year upfront. I thought it was hilarious, thinking about all the money she paid for nothing. I know it sounds like I was comparing myself too much to a fictional character, but according to Freeman, *fiction, no matter how surreal or otherworldly, is a response to reality.*

Thankfully, I realized I wasn't so different from her, and this is why this essay is relevant in that it's a part of my life that I am ready to discuss. Should my story be of any value to someone, it would mean my attempt to tell a chaotic story of my life (I've got many) that wasn't too depressing was a success. I believe we can all use a lighthearted read from time to time even if it's not fiction, because life doesn't have to be a tragedy; it can also be a comedy. I find it funny that I didn't last long in the gym like Alice, albeit my story is much more tragic. You're probably thinking that I'm exaggerating, hence I'm going to tell you step by step how I came to the conclusion that fitness and I weren't a match made in heaven.

South Africa, 2019:

The year started with me having a lot on my plate and I was ready to be my best self again. In 2018, I started a treatment for acne at a beauty clinic somewhere in Brooklyn, Pretoria, and from there I had a new perspective on how my diet could positively or negatively affect my skin's appearance. One time I was diagnosed by my doctor with iron deficiency (anaemia) and I was prescribed iron tablets among other pills. That was a wake-up call. I was looking forward to finding the holy grail that would stop my 22-year-old self from looking ten years older and unhealthy. I had questionable health. And before you roll your eyes, it was a time when everything that could go wrong did.

I was underweight (down to 45 kg for 172 cm), so naturally, my first goal was to gain weight. I made an executive decision to eat better for clear skin and a healthy weight. That would knock two birds with one stone. I was an okay cook but I needed a healthy diet. Around January, I had been using Herbalife products for about a month because it felt like the place to start for anyone who wanted to live a healthy lifestyle (disclaimer: I am not currently affiliated with Herbalife). I didn't have a huge budget, so I fastened my belt to make ends meet.

Out of my desire to be physically fit came a passion for cooking healthy food. Concretely, I upgraded my diet, since food was easy to start with. Becoming proactive had helped me improve my cooking skills and I discovered I had the cooking gene all along. I could always make whatever dish I set out to make, and the food tasted divine. However, although healthy eating was beneficial, it wasn't sufficient because I was trying to fix all my health problems with food. I needed exercise.

In February, I went to the mall and bought myself new activewear and a gym mat to start exercising at home. This, my friends, was the beginning of a love story. I downloaded an app with different exercises I could do every day, from fifteen minutes to more if I wanted to. However, my home fitness endeavor turned out to be dangerous when I ended up in the emergency room in March for extreme chest pain, which occurred during my morning workout. I thought I was having a heart attack, which was later ruled out by the doctor who took care of me that day.

During the following three months, I went through serious depression because school wasn't working for me anymore. I couldn't tell if I was traumatized by my visit to the ER and that's why I packed my gym mat and put it in my wardrobe. In July, the cycle began once more with me having the same weight concerns I had in the beginning of the year, and I wanted to be healthy and fit even though my mental health had taken a toll and my body felt too far gone to revert to its former glory. At that point, I didn't want to exercise at home anymore because it wasn't safe or efficient.

On the 9th of July, 2019, I went to Virgin Active in Loftus, Hatfield, which was close to home, to get a membership. Virgin Active had a promotion. I felt lucky to stumble upon that opportunity because I would get about one month and a half for free. And I'm talking about my second gym membership because my first time was already a distant memory of a decision I took on a whim a few years before, in Sunny Park, Sunnyside, simply because the Virgin Active staff was very convincing.

Unfortunately, it was a false start because I remember never stepping foot once in that gym for training (looking at you, Alice!) until I eventually canceled a few months in, after many phone calls from the gym asking me when I was going to start training. I also remember crying whenever the money was deducted from my bank account every month because it was too expensive for me as a student trying to afford a decent lifestyle. But for my second membership, I thought things would be different because, this time, it was part of the plan. And here, thanks to the discount, I had just enough money to purchase a three-session personal training pack with my membership.

A kind lady helped me choose a personal trainer because I wasn't sure what criteria to consider. The lady whose name I don't remember told me that based on my goal, which was to gain muscle, it was best to go with a male trainer for faster results. It's like she knew how important that was to me. But what she didn't know was that I wasn't comfortable being trained by a male because I was ashamed of my body. After I chose who I wanted as a personal trainer (a tall, dark, and kind-looking bodybuilder), all I had to do was wait for our first meeting scheduled for about a week later.

So, the following week, I showed up at the gym to meet my future trainer for the first time. He had been waiting for ten minutes at the restaurant inside the gym when I arrived. The man didn't look happy to see me. I felt bad because I tried to make it on time, so I sat at the table, my hands tucked in my orange-red hoodie's pockets after greeting him apprehensively. The personal trainer and I spoke, and from our conversation, I could feel that he dreaded the idea of training me. Thankfully, after touching base, the man said he had someone else in mind who could replace him saying he couldn't train me.

I agreed to meet whoever was going to be my new trainer without hesitation. So, my first personal trainer went to fetch his colleague while I waited in the hall. The man returned after a few minutes with someone who I thought was a handsome rugby player because he looked like one (based on looks, the Springboks would be happy to have him), but my level of discomfort skyrocketed because he was white. I expected that he too would find a reason not to train me like my first trainer, a black brotha.

To my pleasant surprise, the new personal trainer who I will call Gabe was a true gentleman. You could say courtesy was his middle name. Gabe was soft-spoken, looked me in the eye and smiled genuinely all the time with a smile that wasn't forced (you know what I'm talking about), and he seemed pleased to be my new PT. It's safe to say I had been missing some kindness in my life for a while, and a stranger showing me kindness was a breath of fresh air. I was looking forward to becoming a real gym goer, but I only went to the gym five times for the entire duration of my membership (don't laugh).

The question is why couldn't I commit to it even when I had the opportunity, twice? The answer is, I was afraid. I remember my real first time in the gym was a class called Heat. I arrived at the gym that evening in time and while I was waiting for everyone else to arrive, I looked around me and saw heavy lifters on my left, and other people using those intimidating machines—most of which I couldn't name—distantly on my right. The size of the gym sort of gave me the right to stare; it was a room large enough for people to not catch me staring at them.

To be honest, I expected myself to feel a lot more out of place than I did. Part of me was excited to be there, even though I was feeling insecure about my physical appearance. I had zero body positivity when I joined the gym. The only part of my body I liked was my head and from my neck down, I wanted to change everything. It wasn't just my size that bothered me—I was tall, skinny with long limbs, and a tiny caboose—but also I was usually feeling weak or mildly sick, and sometimes so sick I would think death was around the corner.

Contrary to what most people believe, the lack of body positivity isn't just a fat person problem. I think fat people are more confident going to the gym because there's a proverbial acceptance that the gym is for losing extra weight than the other way around. When you see a skinny friend, the first thing you'd tell them isn't "go to the gym," but the opposite is true if you had a fat friend. I was the skinny girl who wanted to gain weight and hit the gym instead of eating junk food, which wasn't the proverbial norm either.

So, on the day of my first class, the instructor arrived and introduced himself to me and other members who waited by the door. I may have forgotten his name, but I remember how vibrant and friendly he was from the get-go. Fast forward to the end of that class; I realized it was way too hard for me. It was such a sobering experience, considering I went in thinking I could handle a little heat, only to discover I couldn't do all the exercises until the end like the others.

I was one of those who stopped before the thirty-second laps of a given exercise were depleted to catch my breath and stayed catching my breath even after the others moved on to the following drill. My chest was burning. I could picture those memes of people who fell off the treadmill sliding down on their stomach when I was losing my footing during my time on the treadmill. I left the gym that night as a changed woman.

I went to the gym four more times, including one Express Abs class, the first two training sessions with my PT Gabe, whom I quitted before the third session due to life events, and my final trip, when I fell in the middle of an intensive exercise utilizing the two ropes. I remember how excited I was on that last day to have a gym buddy who was none other than my younger brother. My brother had been going to the gym for a long time and was supportive when I told him I was going to get a membership too.

It happened a couple of months after I'd signed up. I overworked myself with the ropes and it felt like I was going to faint. My chest was burning and the dizziness brought me to my knees. I was lightheaded and unable to stand on my feet. My brother—or one time gym partner—was next to me and saw the entire scene. He ran to get the emergency staff. When the emergency staff arrived, they helped me back to their station. According to my brother, the nurses asked whether I had experienced such issues before and whether I had cardiac problems. He didn't know the answers, so they sent me home to rest, and I never returned.

After that day, I dusted my old gym mat and only exercised at home, but I kept it intermittent. I wasn't going back to the gym even though I wanted to. And until now, I still contemplate the idea of getting back into fitness and having my dream body. My experience at the gym taught me that it's crucial to know your physical limits. I also learned that to be healthy starts in the mind. If your mind is toxic, it can and will intoxicate your body.

I've not been exercising lately because being a writer means sitting in front of your computer ninety per cent of the time, even if you're not writing. I only need to get up for bathroom breaks, meals, occasional chores and rare errands. I'm not sure if my current lifestyle is the reason why I'm about to reach my ideal weight of 72 Kg, but I know I have to incorporate fitness in my daily routine, even if for just fifteen minutes, to maintain a good balance.

I wrote this essay to reflect on my fitness journey as a suspiciously unfit girl with a burning desire to be a gym-goer. Although my dreams were crashed because there were too many lows and not enough highs, it is not in my intention to tell you that the gym isn't good. I think meaningful changes do not come easily; my experience testifies to how true that is. Much like Alice in *All Good Things*, I want so many things to be different, and it's a daunting task to always be on the lookout for something exciting to do with my life. I hope by the time you're reading this, I will be in the best

shape of my life, gym-goer or not.

Priscille is a writer born and raised in Kinshasa, who lived in South Africa for six years before returning to her home country from where she writes fiction and non-fiction. She's currently working on her first adult fiction novel. When she's not writing, Priscille likes to read and try her hand at everything she is passionate about. She is available on Twitter @PriscyFat.

