

Thirty

by Jenny Morse

I turned 30 last weekend. After 17 years of school, eight years in the advertising department of Blue Cross Blue Shield, and about six failed relationships with men I never really liked, I finally made it around the curve. I was officially old. At my birthday party, my nephew Jason, with the in-solence of a seven-year-old, ran through the door of my parents' house, jumped around, and asked me if I knew Moses personally. Did I mention my nephew was a brat? Of course, next in the door was my younger sister. Younger by a year, but if you took one glance you'd think she was still in college. She is happily married with two beautiful children, and 29 hasn't kept her from being skinny, fit, and full of annoying energy. We don't have the best opinions of each other.

She bounced in the door, 6-month-old in tow, perfect husband following, carrying the diaper bag and the bucket of metal cars. I cursed her under my breath in hopes that she too would wake up on her 30th birthday and find her petite, sorority-girl body sagging in all the wrong places. I smiled, gritted my teeth and said, "Lisa! You look great!"

An hour later we sat around the dinner table. I slouched and stared at the few peas left on my plate. I always hated birthdays. This one, though... this one had been the worst. Jason kept reminding me I was as old as dirt. I'm certain now that it was some conspiracy in my family to make me feel like crap. Then, to shut him up, I opened my presents. I thought this would be the best part. Wrong again.

At work I had received three black balloons, a pair of control-top panties, and a basket of black licorice. I hate black licorice. Thankfully my parents avoided the gag gifts and went, instead, for the medium-sized George Foreman grill I had wanted. My 30th birthday had started looking up until Jason read the box. He asked, "Why does auntie Kate need a fat gwillling thing?" Lisa says he's gifted. Did I mention I want to slap him every time I see him?

Then my sister handed me an envelope. "This is from Jim, the kids, and me," she said smiling. Who else would it have been from? I slid my finger under the edge and tore all the way to the end. I must admit, I was a little disappointed when there wasn't any money in there. Instead, I pulled out an official looking piece of blue paper. I smiled and raised my eyebrows, catching Lisa looking at her husband for affirmation of her perfect gift.

Unfolding the paper, I was greeted by four big, black, ominous letters at

the top: YMCA. Below, in smaller print it read:

"Thank you, KATE OWENS, for your ONE-YEAR MEMBERSHIP to NORTHTOWN YMCA. This membership entitles you to ONE FULL YEAR of access to ALL YMCA SERVICES at NORTHTOWN YMCA as well as discounted rates to SOUTHTOWN YMCA AND PRAIRIE VIEW YMCA Membership effective JUNE 8-2002 to JUNE 9, 2003."

"Kate, I originally thought we could go together, but Jim and I are members of the Southtown Racquet Club and I thought the Northtown YMCA would be closer to your apartment." Lisa looked concerned.

I knew she wanted me to ooh and ahh and say how perfect it was. "This will be fine, thanks."

"I was gonna try that YWCA on Monroe, but I thought you could maybe meet a nice guy here." She smiled as though she had just told me I had won a cruise to the Bahamas. My parents chuckled.

"What a wonderful idea, Lisa!" Mom stood up. "Can I take your dishes?"

So that was it. That was my birthday. I got a "fat gwillling thing" and a membership to the YMCA. I honestly felt like moving to Alaska after that night. At least there you get to wear a lot of sweaters so everyone looks a little chunky. Here in Iowa I had that luxury only in the wintertime.

That's what brought me to the point I am at now. A week later, 5:30 in the morning and I am about to reap the benefits of my sister's birthday ingenuity. It is June 9th and Lisa called me yesterday asking how I enjoyed my first day at the Y. Guilty, I told her I didn't make it. All she could do was tell me how wonderful her morning runs are with all of her friends and how being fit makes her feel so much younger. I figure if I go once then I can make up some story of how an old guy at the weight machines grabbed my butt and I will swear never to go back again. Maybe I'll donate the membership to someone at work.

Rummaging through my drawers, I find the least offending thing to wear: sweatpants. While pulling them up over my pooch, I wonder if Lisa realizes that I haven't set foot in a workout center for ten years, unless you count the time I started my new-century resolution and took up stationary biking. My shoestring had gotten caught in the gears somehow and, in an attempt to get it loose, I had fallen off the bike and landed on my knees, butt in the air, legs twisted to the point of hopelessness. The only thing I saw before I started crying were the tan, hairy legs and white Nike shoes of the trainer, chuckling above me in his singlet and running shorts. That was probably the longest I'd ever kept a workout resolution. I never tried again.

But here I am now with a stupid *year-long* membership that my perfect little sister probably spent more on than anything she has ever bought me, and, out of sheer anger and obligation, I am giving in. In all of my 30-year-

old, baggy sweatpants, oversize T-shirt, and worn, off-brand tennis shoe glory, I am going to spend an hour at the YMCA. I need a bumper sticker that says "I'd rather be dead."

I read in a magazine somewhere that you should drink something while you work out, so I check my refrigerator. All I can see, hiding behind Tupperware dishes of moldy leftovers and misshapen lumps of tin foil, are three cans of Coke, a carton of milk, and a bottle of wine. None of these really appeal to me. Not to mention the fact that my body will probably not even make it a lap, let alone several laps, with a glass of wine sloshing in my stomach.

Food? Should I eat before working out? It sounds a little odd, but in high school I remember my sister eating a banana before she ran. I squat uncomfortably and pull out the drawer labeled "fruits and vegetables." Doubting that an onion or a sprouting potato would do anything for my metabolism, I grunt back to my feet and leave the kitchen. Food and drink will have to wait.

Big Yawn. "What the heck am I doing?" I ask my goldfish, Wanda, as I reach for my keys. She swims in a circle. Fish just don't understand, but my apartment manager wouldn't let me have a dog. I lock the door on my way out.

Driving at 5:30 in the morning when you're going to a place where you don't really want to end up is almost like going on a date with that horribly obnoxious guy from work. It's the last place you want to be, but you know if you don't say yes at least once, he will torment you forever, so you're kind of in for the long haul. It's a vicious cycle. Turning at the first stop light, I glance down at the passenger seat: hopeful. If I forgot the membership certificate, then I can't get in. If I can't get in, then I can go home. If I go home, I can go back to bed for a few hours. But, the envelope is there, a little blue piece of paper sticking out the top taunting me. All I can read are the big, black letters: YMCA. Did I mention I hate my sister?

The building is actually new, which is probably the only positive thing about this situation. I read in the paper that it has a five-lane elevated track over two basketball courts, a new weight room, six racquetball courts and an Olympic-sized pool. Maybe it's not the Southtown Racquet Club, but at least it's not dated back to Eisenhower. Rolling into the parking lot, I'm shocked at all of the cars there so early. I thought I could avoid a scene. As I park, though, I notice the one thing I had dreaded the most. All of them are selections from about five different models: a handful of shiny Cutlasses and Lincoln Towncars, about ten station wagons, and a load of the Buick Park Avenue/Oldsmobile 88's. My sister's brilliant idea to wed me has failed. I could've pulled into a nursing home and had better luck finding an attrac-

tive male.

"One time. One time," I keep breathing to myself as I snatch up the envelope and my purse and head for the door. On my way in I notice a Ford Mustang. Maybe it belongs to something attractive? I walk a little faster.

Inside it smells like chlorine mixed with sweat, and I try not to gag. The woman at the front desk smiles as I hand her the envelope. She's wearing a T-shirt that says, "NORTHTOWN YMCA" with a distorted person raising their hands in victory. Her nametag says "Pamela." I want to crack a joke about her not having the boobs to be Pamela Lee, but, before I can say anything, she stands up, hands me back my envelope, and, leaning over the counter, points down the hallway to my left.

"Down there is the pool. You can check towels out right here, and the pool locker rooms are on your right." She points to the set of double doors across from the main entrance. "Through there are the racquetball courts. Once again, you can check out equipment right here." Finally, gesturing around the corner beyond her desk she says, "And the gym, weight room, and track are down that hallway. Can I do anything else for you?" Now that she's standing up I notice she's wearing spandex shorts over her well-toned legs. Ugh.

"No, I think I'm fine." I start to walk away but pause. "Oh, um, are there any vending machines with, like, Gatorade or Power bars?" I try to sound like I know what I'm talking about. Her look is kind of blank, though, and she doesn't speak, so my eyes are forced to follow her pointed finger to the wall directly behind me.

"Right. Thanks." I feel like a moron.

So, I've come to the conclusion that I have no place here. The only people I'm going to find are old bent-over men and women shuffling around a track in polyester shorts and Keds. I will not be graced by the greasy muscles of the men at the Racquet Club or the cute, well-toned basketball players I used to watch in college. I am 30 now, and forced to subject myself to outdated company since I don't seem to fit in anywhere else. Walking down a bright yellow corridor, I glance at the signs on the doors that I pass by. "Men's Locker Room." "Women's Locker Room." "Track." That's me. I think I'll just walk a mile or so. The most walking I ever get is around the mall so I figure this will be a decent way to put my one morning at the YMCA to use. Besides, I don't really know how to do any other kind of workout.

My first challenge is the stairs. I succeed with flying colors: I only have to slow down once. At the top, however, I stagger over to the railing, realizing that my hopes for the morning are dashed. There, coming toward me in the

third lane of the track is the obvious owner of the Ford Mustang. She's tall, skinny, blond, and pumping out laps like she's done it her whole life. I watch her pass. She's got short spandex shorts and a tight tank top. Her long golden ponytail bounces in rhythm with her stride. I'm about to crawl under a rock and die when someone bumps into me from behind.

I turn and look . . . down. There, at about the five foot level is a little old lady in a "Fight for the Cure" T-shirt.

"Oops! Sorry, honey. Guess I wasn't paying much attention to where I was going." Her voice is a little shrill, but her smile beams up at me through permanent laugh lines and spidery crows feet.

"That's alright, ma'am. Excuse me." I step aside.

"Oh, nonsense. Go ahead." she asks gesturing toward the track. "I know you're not leaving, I followed you in!"

"Really, uh . . . I forgot to put my purse . . ."

She interrupts. "No, you're fine. See over there," she points across the track to a small room with benches in the middle and cubby holes lining the walls, "you just walk around and you can put your stuff down over there."

Before I know it, she has nudged me onto the outside lane of the track. Mustang girl is making her second round. Sigh. I feel like a chubby frog in the middle of a busy street, about to get smashed. Before I can sink into my pity party of mid-life depression, though, my little grandma-figure steps confidently onto the track and takes off. I stare, dumbfounded, as she struts away rapidly. She too, is wearing spandex, and, with Mustang girl in the background, I come to the conclusion that this is a new rule. You can only wear spandex if you're: a) young, sleek and beautiful, or b) old and saggy. We in the middle are cursed with sweatpants and big T-shirts.

I hear someone loudly proclaim, "track." My initial thought is, "yes, this is a track" when suddenly six old men with pot bellies and sweatbands are stepping around me. I clutch my purse in horror, too afraid to move.

"Morning."

"Excuse me."

"G'mornin'."

"Ma'am."

One of them banters back, "You better get a move on, girly, there's a stampede a-comin'." The rest of them laugh. The stampede has just come through, I think, but no. I jump and begin walking forward as quickly as I can to avoid the next wave. Behind them is, no doubt, a slew of chatty women with silver hair led by none other than Mustang girl. She whizzes past. At this point I consider walking a lap and calling it good when a shrill voice snatches my attention.

"Still over here, honey?" Grandma lady pats me on the back as she scoots

by. She smiles back, crows feet winking at me from the corner of her face. The back of her shirt points out that whatever event is on the front was sponsored by Southtown Racquet Club. A war has just been declared. If I live through this morning, I'm going to kill my sister.

Finally, I reach the cubby hole room. Half a lap and I'm already panting. I can feel the sweat beading up on my face, so I wipe it with the back of my hand and stuff my purse into a hole. A blue piece of paper is sticking out the top. Still taunting. I decide to stretch before stepping back onto the track. Or at least I hope it looks like stretching. While struggling to touch my shins, I look up to see Mustang girl fly by, followed several yards behind by Grandma lady. I nonchalantly nod and smile at her as she walks by.

"Glad to see you made it over here without gettin' hurt, honey!" She jeered.

My smile turns to a scowl as I step out onto the track. That's it. It's one thing to have my sister, Miss Work-out Princess, and her friend Mustang Girl smashing my self-esteem, but dammit, I will not be patronized by a woman thirty years older than me! I am a raging bull, ready to take on saggy butt spandex woman, and off I go . . . walking as fast as I can to stay up with Grandma lady. My walk isn't exactly what you'd call graceful. An additional twenty-five pounds to my ideal body weight has gone straight to my hips and tummy, leaving me with more of a waddle. Regardless, I manage to remain only a few steps behind her.

I look around and notice the other people on the track. I was right. The only exceptions to the feeling of being in a nursing home are the fact that the elderly here are actually walking, and Mustang girl is weaving in and out of them like a race-car driver. Sigh. I can't help but notice that this little woman in front of me is a bundle of energy, constantly patting people's backs as she passes and exchanging friendly banter with the group of old men. I would be amused if I wasn't struggling so hard to keep up.

After a lap, I can feel the muscles tightening in my legs and, if I could, I would kick myself for buying such cheap shoes. Worst of all, my breathing has become short and labored. I glance around me. I know Grandma Lady can hear me heaving in and out. She's probably afraid of getting sucked in, but I won't give in to the humiliation of the whole situation. So, I fight to maintain my ungraceful shuffle a few paces behind her. For the first time, I notice the writing on the top of her shirt. It reads: *For Jeanie. After your 15 years of fighting, I'm still fighting in your memory.* As I realize what this woman has done, my breath catches in my throat. Not good. Getting choked up over her T-shirt causes me to cough and sputter loudly, and I'm forced to stumble over to the railing of the track and catch my breath, my legs screaming their thanks. Before I can recover, though, I feel what I should've

known was coming. Suddenly my back jolts with a few solid slaps.

"You all right, honey?" Grandma Lady asks.

I turn to see a genuine look of concern on her face.

"I'm . . . (cough, cough) . . . I'm fine." I try to get her to leave.

"C'mon." Much to my dismay, she grabs my arm and begins walking me down the track.

"You don't want to get runned over, do ya?" Part of me is thankful that she didn't make a scene in front of the herd of old men coming our direction. We walk slowly around a turn while I catch my breath.

After a few moments of silence, Grandma Lady is the first to speak, "My name is Jan. Jan Conwell."

"I'm Kate . . . um . . . Kate Owens. Nice to meet you."

"No, no. It's my pleasure Kate. Ready to walk some more?"

"I guess so," I respond; reluctant to be walking with the enemy, but as she speeds up I recognize my chance. We start out at the same spot this time. If I walk faster, then I win!

"You wanna walk together, Kate?" She looks up expectantly, her laugh lines cocked up on one side of her face.

"Really, ma'am, I don't want to bother you . . ."

"NONsense," she insists shrilly. She looks over and pats me on the arm, "I'm here to pick up men and I figure with a young girl like you, the guys'll come a' runnin'!"

I'm too shocked to speak at this point. Why is she talking to me?

She hits me on the arm again. "I'm just teasing you, honey. Haven't you seen those men down there?"

I glance over the edge of the track where a group of eight older men are trying to play basketball in their soaked gray T-shirts and sweatbands.

"They're too slow for a whipper snapper like me, huh?" She smiles.

I can't help but laugh, picturing her scooting circles around them, pinching them on the butt, only to shuffle down the court and make a two-handed layup.

As we walk, I'm too distracted by keeping up to think about any strategy for beating her. Every time I speed up, she doesn't lose a stride. A full lap later, I'm back to my huffing and wheezing, this time, trying desperately to conceal it. I spy the gold band on her finger and disguise my pain with a question.

"So . . . you're married?"

"No. You see, my husband Earl died about two years ago. I could've been like all the other widows and sulked in my home for a year until I died, but I said to myself, I said, 'Jan, you've got a lot more life left to live, so here I am, seventy-two years old and I feel fifty!' Her little gray head turns to me

for my reaction.

"That's . . . that's great . . ." I manage to wheeze out.

"Oh goodness! I'm so sorry. I don't know what's come over me!" Her rapid scoot slows to a saunter.

My body rejoices at the slower pace.

"Sometimes I get going and don't realize anything going on around me. Are you all right?"

I can't let her see my weakness, but I shamefully respond, "It's my first time walking."

"Well," she says eyeing my sweatpants. I cringe. Here comes the mockery. She knew I was a rookie. She knows I can't keep up. "I started when I was two, but you're looking pretty good for your first time walking."

I manage to let out a laugh between my huffing and puffing.

"I'm sorry, Kate, I've been going on and on. You tell me about yourself."

I take a deep breath. Relaxation under strenuous circumstance was never a strong suit of mine. Now, I find myself in a place I hated before I ever walked in, with a woman that represents everything I'm not, I'm wearing naive workout clothing, I can hardly make a lap without feeling like I'm going to keel over, and she wants me to tell her about myself?

"My name is Kate Owens." Breathe. "I work in the advertising department . . ." Breathe. "at Blue Cross Blue Shield . . ."

Praise God, she interrupts. I resume my deep rapid breathing.

"Really! Well, I'll say! I have my health insurance through them!" She beams at the fact that I work for her insurance company? If I could function properly I would hug her. "What exactly do you do in advertising?"

Here I go again. "Well . . . I'm a graphic artist," Breathe, "so I design brochures . . . newspaper ads . . . and different logos."

"That is wonderful, Kate!" She pats me on the back. "Do you have a family?"

Ah, the million-dollar question, "No . . . no, in fact I'm single." I can't help but sound bitter. She reminds me of my sister, so I brace myself for her sermon.

"Well, that's all right. You've got your whole life ahead of you to find a man." I'm shocked. There is no joke, no gasp of disbelief, no sermon on marrying before your eggs dry up. She sure has a lot of confidence in the world for a woman who has been in it so long.

"I never really thought of it that way."

"What, are you 25?"

"No. Actually . . . I just turned 30 last weekend," my response is less than enthusiastic.

"Honey, you don't look a day over 25. Besides, when I was 30 I already

had four children and a lazy husband. I wanted to be in your shoes.”

Right. I can tell our pace is picking up, but surprisingly my breathing is beginning to even out. I get brave. “So, Jan . . . how often do you come here?”

“My daughter actually bought me a membership two Christmases ago when it opened.” She laughs. “I was so mad at her. I thought, ‘What? Am I fat? Is she trying to tell me something?’ My daughter is almost forty but looks your age. She ran in a marathon last year. Got three-thousandth out of five-thousand runners. I don’t know how she does it. I think she was really trying to get me to meet people after my husband died, so finally I came, and when I got here I met this nice woman. We became friends and I’ve been coming three times a week for almost a year.”

“Where is she?” I’m beginning to wonder why she picked me to talk to when there were so many others she could swap war stories with.

“Well, she passed away a few months ago after fighting breast cancer for 15 years. It was really sad, but I knew her well and she always said she was ready when the good Lord was ready.” Her laughter lightens the solemn mood I had quickly taken as I remembered the back of her T-shirt. “I guess when He’s ready, there’s not a lot we can do about it, huh?” She pats my shoulder.

“My sister gave me my membership for my birthday.” The words come out before I really think them through. I become rigid. Jan seems excited that I’m sharing though, so despite my hesitation I continue. “She’s only a year younger than me . . . but she’s married . . . has two children, and is as skinny and fit as a teenager . . . I wasn’t as excited about her gift as she was.”

“This isn’t so bad, though, is it?” Jan gestures to the track. “I mean, all that’s here is us old folks and we don’t judge anybody. It’s better than going to those darn racquet clubs and fitness centers where everyone you see is built like Kirk Douglas.”

I feel bad about my personal war. She’s not as patronizing as I had originally thought.

“Only ten percent of the world is shaped like those people, the rest of us get to really appreciate our bodies the way we are, right?”

I smile back.

“I guess you’re right.” My voice has a hint of doubt, but despite the throbbing soreness creeping up my legs, I’m in awe of the rhythm of my body. Legs: left, right, left, right, alongside Jan’s. My arms: swing, swing, swing, powerfully moving my body forward. My breathing: In, out, in, out, the huffing has reached a minimum. I can practically feel the calories and fat burning off. I’m leaving a trail of myself behind me in neat little puddles on

the floor. I hope Mustang girl doesn’t slip.

“Pride, honey. Take pride in who you are. You only get that pretty body for a few years, then suddenly you wake up one morning and your face is drippin’ off, your arms wave back at you, and your boobs are on the floor. Then you really have to dig deep to find som’n to appreciate.”

We both laugh and take another turn on the track. Mustang girl walks by briskly, obviously on her cooldown. Sigh.

“You see her?” Jan asks, leaning close to my slyly. “She started coming two weeks ago, little speed demon . . . I been trying to catch her ever since.”

Before I know it, my watch reads 6:30. I have been here for an hour and I walked two whole miles without even realizing it. Grabbing my purse, Jan and I walk out to the parking lot. She waves at a few older men on the way out the door. I shake my head, chuckling.

“I’ll see you on Wednesday, won’t I?” She asks, unlocking her white Buick Park Avenue.

“I think so, Jan. That’d be nice. Same time?”

“Five-thirty. Have a good day at work, sweetie.” She gets in her car while I fumble with my keys. Pulling out, I notice her license plate reads SXYGR-MA. I laugh out loud.

As I pull out of the parking lot I take a few deep breaths. The sun is climbing the sky and the city is beginning to wake up. I decide to stop by the market on the way home. I think I’ll need some bananas. Then after work I might go shopping and get some better shoes. Maybe some span-dex?

No, probably not. I think I’ll tell my sister to get me some for Christmas.