

Safety Clips

One barbell, two plates, and a couple of safety clips, the required equipment for Romanian deadlifts. I slide the first plate on, then lock it in place with an old school safety clip for support. *This steel coiled clip is a reminder of weakness, no matter how heavy I can lift, the squeeze to open motion will always test my grip strength.* Frustrated, I move on to the other side, the barbell starts to roll, my foot gets caught and in that split second I surrender to gravity. Falling face first, my hands braced for impact. As I lay in shock, two men approach to ask if I was okay, I feel my mouth move, and words fall out, but my mind is elsewhere. In two places at once. I feel the blood rush to my cheeks, flushed with embarrassment.

“Yeah all good!” I quickly begin to gather myself and return to the set-up, as if nothing happened. I sensed one of the men still looking my way, with concern.

It's okay, you're okay, let's begin. I find myself repeating this script.

“Are you sure you're okay?” I hear from a distance.

I am focused on completing my sets, it's just me and the weight.

I arrived with one large suitcase and nothing else. Stepping out of the taxi into the urban, grey streets of New Cross, a distinct and diverse student-focused neighborhood situated in Southeast London. At the center of New Cross is Goldsmith's university, defined by its students, creative and countercultural at its core. My new home was located on a busy main road. Chesterman House: postgraduate dormitories. I lived on the top floor, with 6 other women from across the world. I knew why I came, but in those first moments, I felt displaced. When I opened the door to my room, I was faced with all that I would need for the next year. As the door shut behind me, I felt the distance from my previous life, far behind me. *I could not see it anymore.* Instead, in front of me was a single spring twin mattress, so worn down you could feel the metal coils dig into your back while you sleep. A toilet, and right next to it was a shower. Pinned to the wall was a wraparound shower curtain with stains from a distant past, supposedly there to divide the space. And one floor that combined both facilities. There was no separation between shower or loo, it was one and the same. Shocked. I stood staring. *Why did I leave my known and familiar life behind?*

In the beginning it was difficult, I was truly alone, and with the pandemic creating more questions than answers, socialising with others in the dormitories came with risks. When my mandatory self-isolation was over, England was beginning to re-open, under new rules of social distancing. I joined my local Puregym, situated between New Cross and Greenwich. A 20-minute walk, alongside the cars, the cyclists, honks and bells, and the distinct polluted scent of Southeast London. I did not know it then, but in time the gym would become the life-raft I reach for when I needed a break from swimming.

Puregym is a low-cost fitness center, operating 24/7 and providing an accessible, cost-friendly option to its service users. I've been going to this gym since my first few weeks in England. From branches in Southeast London, to my current branch in Manchester city center. Puregym is constant. I see the same faces at 1PM on any given day – there is a rhythm we follow, our schedules are synced.

8576433, I punch in my code manually, because I have not yet downloaded the app where you can scan and enter, due to constant forgetting. Yet I have remembered my 8-digit entry pin, for the last 6 years. The cylinder opens; I enter and watch the door slide shut. I feel the tension in my body soften, for a moment it feels as if I am entering a new world, and in some ways I am. As the door slides open, there is a distinct change in smell, a mixture between body odour, rubber, and raw human drive: to build.

Overtime, I decide that the gym is a liminal space, one does not stay there for terribly long, yet every time I arrive, it feels like I am returning home. I am returning home to versions of me: the one who moved away, the one who picked her up, and the one who chose to stay. The gym is not where you typically go for social connection, but in many moments the gentle nod from a fellow regular, the friendly hello from a PT, the one that moves aside so that you can walk ahead on the stairs, and the girl that holds the door open for you while leaving the changing rooms. While granular, these moments were sustenance. On days when swimming felt hard, these moments were the air that kept the life-raft afloat. People from all different backgrounds, under the same roof, sharing equipment with one another, while in their own worlds. Working on themselves, next to each other.

Sometimes, when I go to the gym, I linger a while longer. I look at the same equipment, the same mirrors, and I see something different. While the gym sells transformation, in of itself it is a transformative space.

The gym is no longer a life raft, and over the course of 6 years it has turned into a holiday home. A home I get to visit, to sit in the memories of what was and what is not anymore.

After my fall, I didn't manage to get through all my sets, I wanted to continue but my body was saying that's enough. I start to unload the barbell, feeling my shoulder stiffen up, I was really struggling to get the safety clip off. With hesitation I turned towards the man that was staring at me earlier and asked for help. Without a doubt, he comes over, he grips the safety pin sliding it off, lifting the bar for me, I step in to slide the plate off. Within this interaction, I felt deeply seen. This is a regular gym goer, he's a slightly older man, usually wearing a headband and hair slicked back into a ponytail. He minds his own business but exerts a warm energy. And from this moment of connection, we've acknowledged each other ever since. If we pass each other on the streets, or in the gym itself, there is a smile, and sometimes accompanying the smile is a nod. A mode of non-verbal communication that transmits warmth and connects the distance between two individuals.

We are on the same team.

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