

**Waukesha Reads ~ THE BIG READ**  
**2013 Flash Fiction Contest**  
Adult Division Runner-up  
Leah Wanner

Although I was anticipating the gunshot, my body still startled at the noise. I began to run. What I didn't anticipate was seeing *her*. The amount of anger that welled up inside me from simply seeing her face again was surprising, yet justified. How could I react so fiercely to someone I had never actually spoken to? I kept running.

(2 years earlier)

As the handsome, fit young man behind the desk explained the terms and conditions of the membership agreement to me, my cheeks burned. I had no business being here. I snuck sidelong glances at the women dressed in sleek running capris and cute yoga pants. Their faces were glowing as they smiled and chatted like childhood friends. Beneath my large, shapeless t-shirt, my underarms and belly felt damp with perspiration just from the effort of carrying my bag up the steps into the club. I focused my attention on the young man's voice, silently hoping he was almost done. I desperately wanted to just stand up and walk out. What had seemed like a good idea earlier today now just seemed ludicrous.

When the young man finished, he pointed in the direction of the locker room. My heart beat hard as I went in and found an empty locker. I kept my eyes down and quickly stowed my bag. I checked my watch - five minutes until the Tone and Trim class begins. Of course, someone who weighs 317 pounds needs more than just toning and trimming. But the class description on the website claimed it was perfect for beginners. I made my way to the group exercise room.

Several ladies had already gathered, laughing breezily as they stretched and loosened up their legs. This was probably easy for them - just a typical Tuesday afternoon. I snuck to the back of the room and eyed the instructor. Why were her high ponytail and cheerful voice so intimidating? I cringed at my reflection in the mirrors lining the front wall. Luckily, more women and a few men spread onto the floor, distracting me from mentally listing all my body's imperfections. I was relieved to see a few others who probably knew the heartache of stepping on a scale and realizing the numbers didn't go high enough. One more silent pep talk and then the music began.

Miss Ponytail led us in marching and step-touches and some easy stretches as the music pounded a strong, steady beat. I felt myself relax a bit. I made sure not to look in the mirror again as we bent and twisted and jumped. I was aware that my motions didn't exactly match the efforts of the class veterans, but I kept moving. I didn't even look at the clock until twenty three minutes had passed. When I felt like hyperventilation was imminent, I stopped to swig from my water bottle and gasp in air until I felt like I could continue. I lunged. I squatted. My lungs burned and my legs screamed, but I kept moving. Soon the music slowed and the instructor announced it was time for cool down. Feelings of relief and triumph washed over me. I allowed myself to peek in the mirror on my way out, appreciating the redness and sweat as proof that I had worked hard and accomplished something.

Another group of exercisers had gathered outside, waiting for the next class. I glanced up and caught the eye of a Barbie look-alike. My first thought was why someone would wear that much makeup to work out. But then I noticed her long lashes lower as she scanned my oversized body from head to toe. Her pouty lip-glossed lips transformed into a smirk as she elbowed her companion and nodded in my direction. Their heads tilted together and they giggled. I charged towards the locker room as fast as my aching legs would go, blinded by the tears welling in my eyes.

Surprisingly, I never encountered her at the gym again. I can't believe I recognized and remembered her two years later.

She was off to my left, slightly ahead of me in the pack. She wasn't wearing the same race t-shirt everyone else was. Her lime green tank made her stand out - an easy target for my eyes. The starting gunshot rang out and my legs reacted. Somewhere inside of me, the girl I was two years ago reacted also. The rhythm of my feet hitting the pavement calmed me. I easily held pace behind her, watching her blonde braid bobbing with each stride. I wove around other slower runners, mentally encouraging those who appeared to be first-timers. At the two mile mark, I allowed myself a few seconds to reach out for a cup of water. Barbie didn't stop for a drink, but within seconds I was back on her tail. I was close enough to see beads of perspiration forming on the back of her neck. My legs kept pumping.

Soon enough, I heard the thumping bass of the celebratory music being broadcast from the finish line. Spectators were lining the street, cheering for friends and sisters and daughters. I chose my moment: about 200 yards from the finish line, I propelled myself just ahead of her. I glanced over my shoulder, gave her a quick once-over, and smirked. My body, now 168 pounds lighter, nearly floated over the finish line, several seconds ahead of her. Although plenty of other runners had crossed the line ahead of me, clearly I had won.