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No Sweat

Julie Poole

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JULIE POOLE

NO SWEAT

Get ready for your cha chas

—Richard Simmons

SWEATING: ATTEMPT 1

“TRY IT, JULIE-GIRL,” said the nurse with waist-length dreads. Maintaining a steady clap, she gestured her chin towards the common room where *Sweatin’ to the Oldies* was playing on a flat screen at a volume a bit too brash for 9:00 in the morning. I walked up to the TV and stood a few inches away, entranced like a toddler. Richard Simmons danced to the front of the circular stage, high-stepping and clapping in time with the rhythm of the bass guitar and drums. Dancers of all ages, races, and body types mimicked his movements behind him. “Party time! It’s party time! C’mon, Kim. C’mon, Erin,” he said. The live band had revved up fully and the soul singer launched into a rendition of “Gimme Some Lovin’.” “Warm up that body. Gimme a clap,” he said. “Shake it out.”

As if possessed, I started to march my feet and incorporate some funky chicken arms. Just as I was starting feel warm, I heard the nurse in the background laugh a little. “That’s it,” she said. Worried that her feel-better

activity was a plot to humiliate me, I sunk into a nearby chair and continued to do what I excelled at: sobbing.

Another staff member had nicknamed me “Julia Roberts.” Perhaps he thought that I was fishing for an Academy Award in waterworks, but the truth is, I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t stop the liquid from pouring out of my eyes and nose; it seemed like I’d been crying for days; it was worse than having the hiccups. My ribs hurt. My eyes looked like they’d been swallowed by my eye sockets. I was just as annoyed as the patient who moved seats after listening to me honk snot into a sad-looking tissue. With all the tear purging, I was desperately thirsty, but since I was convinced that the available pitchers had been laced with iodine, I refused to drink the water. Tears dripping onto my collarbone, I watched as Richard lead his troupe in another move for the upper arms, “guitar.” Everyone stomped one foot and strummed an invisible electric like a rock star, only a far less dexterous one. “Gimme Some Lovin’,” Richard sang off tune. A smile spread across my face. I loved his hair, his mesquite-colored tan, his outfit: a low-cut basketball jersey, white tennis shoes with matching scrunched-up tube socks, and his shorts, especially his shorts. They were striped like a piece of hard candy. Candy shorts. “I’m so glad you made it,” he said into the camera. I thought maybe he was referring to the mental hospital I was currently in. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but like millions of other Americans over the past three-plus decades, I latched onto Richards Simmons as my savior, my guardian angel, right then and there.

NIGHT SWEATS

MY ROOMMATE GLORIA sat on the end of her bed, resting her forearms on her knees, like a women's basketball coach. She slid her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose, pointing two fingers eye-ward, indicating that she wanted my full focus. "Watch out for the night staff," she said, nodding in the direction of the hallway, where a man with a clipboard had just breezed past, his keys jingling hip-side.

"Rapists and criminals," she warned.

She knew this because she worked for the CIA and was running an undercover investigation.

"You speak Spanish?"

"Sí," I lied.

"Good. We'll take turns sleeping. *Buenas noche, mi amor.*"

Still wearing her sunglasses, she disappeared completely under her blankets and rolled onto her side, facing away from me. Gloria never roused from her slumber to relieve me from my shift. Instead, I stayed vigilant, alert, listening to my heart pound its red angry fists on my eardrums like it wanted to burst out of my chest and limp across the floor.

Soon, I understood why Gloria slept cocooned. Every few hours, a night staff would walk in and shine a flashlight on me, then pass over Gloria's sleeping lump. "Bed checks," they were called, meant to verify that you weren't dead. Although I imagined something much more sinister, that they wanted to confirm you *were* so that an all-night necrophilia fest could ensue.

Rather quickly, I learned to distinguish between the various light-shiners. One guy was built like a husky unfit bouncer at an underage club. He was a dick. He wore a swishy-sounding tracksuit and seemed to relish playing cop. This was evident by the way he raised the light over his right shoulder to aim the beam into my eyes like a blinding stream of piss. All I could do was blink, let the brightness punish me until the shadowy face behind the light's wide lasso had had enough. I sat up in bed listening to Gloria snore and to the other insomniacs shuffle down the hall in their hospital-issued flip-flops. A different light-shiner entered our room past midnight, a short skinny guy. He was more thoughtful, keeping a good distance while he pointed the flashlight at the foot of my bed and traveled it up slowly till the beam reached my body, sitting atop my neatly tucked bedcovers in lotus pose. I grinned and waved, looking as if my head might do a 180-degree turn, while a disembodied voice said, "Still not sleepy, motherfucker."

I'm not sure how many days I was sleepless, but it was long enough to watch the night staff's teeth grow into fangs and my own face in the mirror morph into a lemur. The cycle was clear: Each night that I went without sleep, the more paranoid I became; and the more paranoid I became, the more impossible it was to sleep. I could picture cortisol, pulsing red, light up in my brainstem like inflammation in a muscle rub commercial.

Sometimes, I came close to caving. I made a visit to the night nurse's station, bent down to the mouse hole cut out of the bottom of the Plexiglas window, and spoke into it like a microphone.

"Hi!... I can't sleep!"

I sounded oddly enthusiastic, as if this was less of a problem and more of a revelation.

She asked me if I'd like to try something that would help me rest.

I bent back down again to deliver a louder-than-needed "Yes."

She put a pill in a little paper cup and placed it in the divot. "Ambien," she said. I looked at it, convinced that this sweet, five-foot-tall, ninety-pound nurse had just given me an assisted suicide pill. I left the paper cup and walked away, only to be back the next night with the same complaint.

"Hi!... I can't sleep!"

She smiled, told me that she could give me something to help me, and asked if I would like to take it this time. Again, I said "Yes," only to look at the pill, think about it, and walk away. To sleep, I decided, was to consent to death. I was certain that something bad would happen if I went under. I might be gang-raped by the flashlight guys. Gloria, who'd turned on me after I picked up her *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book and a picture of a baby fell out, might smother me with a pillow. My heart, unable to handle all the drugs coursing through my system, might forget its rhythm and slow down to one flat, final note.

SWEATIN' A BIT MORE

MORNING CRACKED OPEN like an egg, spreading its yolk across the common room's linoleum floor. The nightmare of night was gone and the day staff arrived. Breakfast was served, followed by a community meeting, then a

slew of groups and activities to establish a routine and prevent boredom. In between breakfast and the morning meeting, the nurse with waist-long dreads put on *Sweatin' to the Oldies* as a transition period to give cleaning staff time to wipe down the tables and on occasion disinfect a chair.

The nurse clapped and urged two spaced-out patients with nothing to do to get up and dance. At this point, I didn't need to be recruited. I wanted to sweat. I liked the "Gimme Some Lovin'" song, especially when the sax player came out on stage, wearing cool shades and a Hawaiian shirt, and raised his saxophone like an elephant trunk during the high note of his solo. My crying spree had ended and now I had a delirious case of the giggles. I made a new friend, Sami, who was game for some *STTO*. She wore two little buns on top of her head positioned like bear's ears and had managed to dress up her hospital scrubs by stepping into the neck-hole of a striped boat-neck tee and pulling it up over her hips, tying the arms in front like a belt. A shirtskirt-and-pants combo. Sometimes she added a pair of hot pink leggings around her neck that doubled as a loud but elegant scarf. She was fun. We laughed our asses off whenever Richard cued a raunchy move, like "bump and grind," which involved grabbing fistfuls of air and pumping our hips back and forth. "Cha-chas" were a riot, too, fun to say and do. And "knee-squeezes," which for some reason, I misheard as "bee-squeezes." My personal favorite was "cow bell," which, like "guitar" and "bongo," simply involved miming the action of playing said instrument. *Sweatin' to the Oldies* proved to be versatile entertainment. There was a scratch on the DVD, and when Richard froze, we froze, too. Sami seemed convinced that

she knew me. “Are you Jessica? Are you Kim? Judy?” I had no idea who or what she was talking about, but I agreed to each name, and this made her laugh. Later, I caught on that she had been asking me which dancer I was. Probably Judy.

SWEATIN’ IT BIG TIME

MY DOCTOR, I decided, was against me. One look at his belted khakis, and I had him pegged for a thirty-something new-doc-on-the-block so tethered to his DSM-5 that there was no point in convincing him to see past my ping-pongy eyes and heavy use of expletives.

“Why do you think you’re here?” He asked.

“On this planet? Or in this room?”

He wrote something down.

“I got a bad batch of meds and my brains shit out of my asshole.” This statement felt true.

He asked for the name of the medication and it slurred out of my mouth, as though purely mentioning the brand summoned one of its many side effects—cotton mouth.

“Can you tell me more about that?” he asked.

“Big Pharma mixed my shit in a bathtub—sold me their rat poison varietal. Generics, that shit will fuck your shit up till you wicked shit yourself!”

This was a theory that I felt held some weight; it had all the features of

a good whistle-blowing documentary. Corruption, greed, little people as fall guys. Although, to be accurate, my symptoms were more of the reverse: days on end of constipation and stabbing stomach pains.

“Listen,” he said. “You had what’s called a bipolar episode.”

“No,” I said. “I had what’s called a post-recession face punch. I’m not nuts, I’m broke.”

I wholeheartedly believed this theory, too. Put anyone in a pressure cooker of prolonged stress brought on by joblessness, living on food stamps and unemployment, and just sit back and wait for the moment when they start muttering to themselves. My unemployment checks had whizzed to a stop and each day that passed was one day closer to an eviction notice. My endocrine system had been on red alert for months.

“You have bipolar I,” he said.

“I’m in my mid-thirties. That’s a bit late for a bipolar diagnosis, dontcha think? It’s probably just really bad PMS.” I laughed. “PM double D; it’ll make a bitch crazy.”

He shook his head, not terribly amused, and sighed.

In the first week, it felt pretty good to have complete disregard for my psychiatrist’s medical degree. He was an idiot and I saw no point in putting any trust in him. It was only when I began to see a look of genuine concern on his face that I started to pity him a little. He was another well-intentioned burnout-in-the-making, and there was more at stake for the both of us. His job was to get me stable in three weeks, or I’d be moved to a state facility. State mental hospitals are no high school football game. Even in my hypo-

manic cloud, I knew that a minimum three-month stay at a state hospital, especially one with a reputation for being violent (patients *and* staff), would take months, years even, to recover from. And here's where maybe our goals aligned: Neither of us wanted to see me committed to state; in a way, it would have marked a failure on both ends. So I decided maybe it wouldn't hurt to play along a little and accept my diagnosis. All I wanted was to feel normal again. All he wanted was for me to keep taking my meds.

WORKIN' IT OUT

AT SOME POINT, it dawned on me. *Sweatin' to the Oldies* wasn't just a workout video: it was a religious experience, preparation for crossing over into the great unknown. Richard wasn't just teaching us to sweat off the pounds, but to sweat off sin. This theory was proven at the end of the video when—during my favorite part—each dancer busted a move unique to them, as their name and the pounds they'd shed flashed up on the screen inside of a gold star. The number represented how much their souls had been unburdened. Judy had lost 51 pounds off her soul. Jessica lost 72 pounds. A man named Elijah lost a whopping 300. They were all so smiley because they felt lighter physically and spiritually. No more baggage. Richard had freed them from their self-hatred and taught them to love their earthly bodies, which were, as the Bible said, created in God's image. Conveniently for me, I was filled with self-loathing, so when I started to break a sweat, I was shedding my body shame, my discomfort with my sexuality and with

intimacy, my loneliness, my depression, my mania.

Richard Simmons was an angel in disguise. He was the chosen one, whom God had put in charge of welcoming people into the afterlife. I pictured a gaudy golden arch, a disco ball rotating above; smoke-machine clouds, the sound of a marching band, cymbals crashing, timpani, noisemakers, steamers shooting overhead, crepe paper tails flying. Richard would be right there at the entrance, blowing fistfuls of glitter, clapping, jumping, shouting, “You can do it!” while people in short shorts streamed through the pearly gates into paradise. If heaven looked anything like the set of *Sweatin’ to the Oldies*, if it had a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, if Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild” played, and everyone got to pretend-rev their motorcycle engines while wearing hammer pants and side ponytails, then I would convert from agnostic to believer.

It’s WORKING!

BY WEEK THREE, I still couldn’t sleep at night, but I’d taken up catnapping during the day. Sleep made all the difference, and despite residual paranoia, I was getting better. I was also getting better at *STTO*. My rendition of “Rockin’ Robin” was energetic and alive, and my footwork was partially accurate. When Richard said, “You’re doing great,” I believed he was referring both to my moves and my treatment plan. Less self-conscious about the “sexiness” of the dances, I took the execution of my “bump and grinds” and “birds” (a showgirl move) seriously. Moving my hips in slow

semicircles, as if grinding on an invisible patron's lap at a strip club, was healing for me. Stretching my arm overhead with the grace of a ballerina made me feel like I had something to live for. I didn't care which hospital bystanders I might be giving boners to; it felt good to not hate myself.

Then, the day before I was to be released, something rather magical happened. Sami and I inadvertently started a full-fledged dance party. It started just the two of us. The cleaning crew was in the background mopping up a serious Cheerios spill. The common room chairs were in disarray, but we still had plenty of room to dance in front of the TV. We were particularly on point that morning. I looked down at Sami's feet and realized that, while I was the more flexible one, she knew the steps better than I did. Overall, our choreography was the best it'd had ever been. We were energized, committed. It's as if our bodies were sending out signals that said, *Get up out of that chair and live a little*. Katherine, a woman who flopped on the floor whenever she didn't want to do something, was the first to join. Then Bill, an older vet with tobacco stained fingers and white hair that stood on end. And Gloria, who whooped and ran her hands down the sides of her body with sexy abandon. James, the new guy, who knew his Bible verses by heart. Paul, the raver kid, who disregarded Richard's cues and rolled an invisible ball of energy back and forth through the current of his long, bendy arms. Even Alec, an elderly man in a wheelchair, joined, conveniently rolling up behind our jiggling asses. The nurse with waist-length dreads grabbed passing day staff by the arms to point out our performance. They smiled, and I wondered if I was somehow responsible

for this. It had been just me, sweating solo, for the first week. Then Sami joined regularly after my crying phase ended and I became fun. In my own weird way, maybe I was a leader of sorts, using my cha-chas to help other people get healthy, gain their freedom and independence again. I was exercise fish bait. No, it was Richard! Candy Shorts started it all, a small, but not insignificant, miracle.

STILL SWEATY

HAVING A MENTAL illness means that I have to closely monitor “my weird.” Any signs of insomnia, impulsive deadbolt checking, creative use of adjectives, or radical horniness, and I might just be headed for a rollercoaster high followed by a car crash. The easiest ways for me to regulate my moods are through meds and what Richard has been emphasizing for years: diet and exercise. Whenever I’m feeling the pushmi-pullyu forces of anxiety and depression trying to take host of my body, I remember my steps, both literal and figurative. I lock my bedroom door and draw the blinds. And instead of crawling under the covers, I strap on some ankle weights, unroll my yoga mat for some cushion, and dance to my own eclectic mix of Rihanna, Robyn, and ACDC in front of my floor-length mirror until sweat trickles down my back. It would be an exaggeration to say that Richard Simmons cured me of my mania; lithium, time and support from family and friends probably helped more. But what I learned from Richard remains deeply ingrained. Even if you’re just marching in place, you’re still getting somewhere. Every

step, every cha cha is a step towards healing, happiness, a deeper connection with self and others. I can't see what's happening in my brain—the synapses firing, the neurons, all those other doodads that I really know very little about, but I can listen to my inner Richard who says *Never give up, never stop reaching* and I can look down at my calves, say *damn, these puppies look good.*