

Mick and the Fit

by Greg Stolze

January 12, 2018

Ruby Smolenski is doing lunges. “Reach waaaay back, people!” she calls, her voice loud and commanding. The song ‘All About That Bass’ blares from speakers at the back of the room. It’s a fitness class and Ruby is the instructor.

The room is kept cool, but the students still turn on the fans. It’s a large space in a community fitness center. It has hardwood floors, mirrors on two walls, fluorescent lighting shining down on kettlebells, yoga mats, aerobics steps and other gear designed to help obscure exercises target neglected muscles.

Ruby is wearing a strappy-backed fitness tank in an explosively bright floral pattern. It coordinates with her skintight fuchsia yoga pants and turquoise shoes. Ruby is fatless, all lean muscles and smooth, controlled movements as she shifts into deep knee bends.

“Keep those booties low, ladies and gents!”

The students are a mixed lot—ten women, two men, and most of them aren’t dropping nearly as low, or as easily, as Ruby. One of the women has a slight potbelly and greying hair. Her red face shows genuine distress and her leg muscles tremble at the lowest point her drop. One of the men, sweat pouring down his face, only bends his knees to a 45-degree angle.

“OK! Grab a drink! Next we’re going to do some planks!”

One or two outliers can compare to her—the easily perfect posture, the even and controlled movements with the weights, the steady rhythm while running or jumping rope or doing push-ups. They, like her, show up to class in workout togs that cost enough to look fun and casual. Others are in sweat pants, t-shirts from vacations, bandanas rolled into headbands.

Ruby never asks them to do anything she isn’t doing herself, and she frequently presents lower-impact options while shouting “You do what’s right for you! Everyone’s on their own journey! Listen to your body!” But she always does the hardest exercises, easily, while bellowing encouragement.

The class is listed on posters and in brochures as “Change It Up!” and described as a mix of aerobics, strength training and stretches. Every week, it’s completely different. Ruby subtly brags about never repeating a routine.

“OK! For all of you who just started out as a New Year’s resolution, you’re doing great! Just keep those backs straight in plank! You don’t want anything sticking up!” She seems perfectly comfortable as others groan, or feel their arms shake.

“Four... three... two... one! OK, stand up, we’re going to do some cardio!”

“Ugh,” says a woman in her twenties, but this small rebellion is inaudible over the blaring dance mix of Neil Diamond’s ‘Coming To America.’ Two Fridays ago, when the class went to brunch afterwards, she said her goal was “Fit into this goddamn bridesmaid’s dress in February.”

“You can do these in single steps if you have knee issues!” Ruby’s statement somehow combines elements of both a shout and a chirp. “If you want to push yourself, add a squat in the middle to make it a power jack!”

March 5, 2018

Ruby is on the sofa. She’s wearing battered bunny slippers, plaid pajama pants and a sweatshirt from her college volleyball team. The sweatshirt is XL and so loose on her that it could accurately be described as “amorphous.”

An aging laptop is open beside her. She’s supposed to be working on her résumé but it’s going slow. She has a granola bar in her hand. She’s picking at it more than eating it.

Ruby usually got her night-black pixie cut trimmed every five weeks, like clockwork, but she’s two weeks overdue and it looks unwashed and awkward. When the phone vibrates, she twitches. She picks it up with eyes slightly widened, a small frown. But the text makes her relax, and she replies with dextrous thumbs. After a few exchanges, it rings and she answers.

“I’m OK,” is the first thing she says. Then she listens for a moment.

“No, it’s fine. I mean, the job’s gone. Just... yeah. I never thought I was one of those people who let their job define them, but it turns out... mm hm, totally. Mom’s letting me stay with her a while. But really, I don’t want to talk about me so much. How’s *Japan*?”

That question lets her sit silent on the sofa for a while, adding only an occasional “Uh huh” or “Whoa” to the conversation before it steers back to her.

“I’m hanging in there,” she says. “Really, I am. I feel terrible, of course. It was just... yeah. Exactly like that.” She says nothing for a moment, one finger picking at the granola bar. Her eyes are starting to redden.

“Yeah, I’ve gotten a few calls from lawyers,” she says. “It’s all very vague and threatening and I just get off the phone after saying as little as possible.” She closes up her posture as she speaks, going from a weary sprawl to a nervous curl.

“Of course I feel guilty,” she says. “I know it’s not like I did anything on purpose, but... yeah, maybe ‘responsible’ is a better word, but even that... I’ve been over it in my mind a thousand times, wondering if there was something else I could have done, or, or did I do something I shouldn’t have? But it’s... yeah. The doctor said... uh huh. Yeah. So, I mean, everyone who *matters* knows...”

She sighs, her mouth starting to turn down again.

“I mean, I feel guilty for being *mad* about it. Which is something I’m not allowed to say. I should be on the fringe of this! And I am, really, it’s the family who... yeah, two kids. I know. I can’t imagine. But that stupid video made the whole thing this big *story*, this whole referendum on... well... yeah, that, obviously, but also on *me*. And it went viral because... people aren’t supposed to be like this, this isn’t anything we...” She sighed. “Because of that damn footage, I’m for sure in the center of the *viral story*. And like every fucking virus, it’s spreading and it’s making everyone sick.”

With that, she bursts into tears. They sound tired, like she’s been crying a lot.

June 28, 2018

Ruby’s getting off work. Her hair is now red, but the black roots show. Her face, which seemed sculpted and elegant when she was happily leading classes, now looks thin and pinched.

“Excuse me, miss?”

She keeps walking to her car, as if she didn’t hear, or as if she’s deniably pretending she didn’t hear.

“Miss! Pardon me!” The voice instantly becomes louder, booming, and she stops, looking resentfully back.

“Ruby Smolenski?” Hearing her name turns her expression from that of a drudge being asked to work extra into the alarmed alertness of a potential victim.

“I mean you no harm,” he says. “I think what happened to you is terrible.”

He’s huge. Not tall—just average height, but broad and swole. His skin is the dark tan of a turkey from a Thanksgiving ad, or a bodybuilder on a canister of creatine supplements. He’s wearing a distinctive light-blue shirt and, as he comes closer, smiling, she can see the logo of a national brand of gyms. His teeth are glaring white, and the hand he reaches out for a shake is the size of a bunch of bananas.

“I’m Gerard,” he says. His bicep is cantaloupe-big, its veins kinked and scribbly with overdevelopment.

“I’m afraid I have nothing to say to you,” Ruby says, fumbling to get her keys out and click her way into her car.

“Hey, it’s cool! It’s cool,” he repeats, stepping back, raising his hands. His head is shaved close, its dome the same even tone as the curves of his muscles. “You’ve really been through the meat-grinder huh? It’s awful, what they’ve been saying about you. What they did to you.”

“I don’t want to...” The car finally opens and even with her hands trembling, her balance is perfect and she flows into the car with easy poise.

“Hey. Hey.” Gerard has come closer. His eyes are the exact same color as the trademarked hue of his gym shirt. “Calm down. Lower your heart rate. Relax your muscles. Become tranquil.”

His eyes are so blue, his tone so confident, that she does. The door is closed, locked, the window up.

“I can help you,” Gerard says. “Please let me.”

Instead, Ruby twists the ignition. The engine coughs to life.

“It happened to me too!” he shouts as she drives away. She can hear him. He has the loud, commanding voice of a gym instructor.

September 11, 2018

Gerard is arguing with Steven, and Ruby is uneasily watching. They are in Steven’s martial arts gym, which he has told her more than once is a “dojo.” They’re all wearing matching black workout T-shirts and leggings, slightly shiny, possibly because the yarn has silver infused into it to fight bacterial stink. Glowing under their ankles, pure white sneakers.

There’s a symbol on their chests. It’s a combination of their initials, and it somehow mixes the modern proportions of the Helvetica font with an entwined complexity reminiscent of the demonic seals in the *Ars Goetia*. It’s matte black against the fabric’s shine.

“On today, of all days,” Steven says, “I don’t want to hear a lot of talk about how it’s OK to harm a few in order to help many more. I can’t believe I’m arguing about it with *you*. Is your leg...?”

Steven’s older than Gerard and Ruby, and not as fit. His black shirt pouches over a dadlike belly. For a while, Gerard would kid him about it. Lately, the kidding has sounded like less of a joke. Steven still has a full head of hair, silvering like an executive. The hair on his arms is thick, dark black.

“The leg is *fine*,” Gerard insists, and indeed he’s been doing squats and stretches as if it was perfectly limber. Ruby saw him favoring it when he came in though. He was walking through the door as she got out of her car, and he wasn’t looking her way.

Gerard continues. “Perhaps, on today of all days, we should accept the necessity of sacrifice. I know you had students in the military—either those who fought or those who were preparing to. I did too. But... current events should not shape our *philosophy*, except by how they show timeless principles and endless truths.”

“Man, *whatever*,” Steven says, exasperated.

“Maybe,” Ruby says, “We could let Steven lead class this time.”

“It’s not his turn,” Gerard replies.

“OK, sure, then maybe I should. If you’re not a hundred percent...”

Gerard folds his impressive arms. “Look, we agreed. We made a commitment, we put an intention out into the world, and we’ve gotten results. Or at least, I have. You remember me telling you about Onyeka, huh? *I made her walk*.” His skin reddens as he speaks, as passion

colors his voice. “The doctors, they gave up on her, but I didn’t. She walked for the first time in *two years*.”

“And who paid?” Steven asks, glaring.

Gerard waves away the question. “No one who couldn’t afford it, and it wasn’t anything bad. Nothing ice, stretching and Gatorade won’t cure. Don’t you understand? We were always in the business of building strength out of pain, but we’ve made a... a quantum leap, we’re on another *plateau* now! You’re supposed to be some kind of motherfuckin’ warrior poet and you’re scared of this? You want to back out now because you might get *tired and hurt*?” He says these last words in a mocking babyish voice.

“It’s fine,” Ruby says, looking between the hulking Gerard and the glowering Steven. “We’re here to work. Next time Steven leads.”

“It’s my dojo,” Steven says quietly.

“And we’re doing, like, dojo work here!” Gerard won’t let it go. “It’s a place for self-improvement, right? The anvil on which you hammer yourself into a more perfect weapon? Think what you can do with the efforts of a dozen, or a *hundred* students moving through you!”

“Not all of us have been able to rebuild a following,” Ruby says, turning to give Gerard a look.

“And that’s terrible, terrible,” he says. “I mean, I don’t love how macho-crazy testosteroneed my current clientele are. But, give ‘em their due, they are motivated. That’s what it’s about, right? The moto.”

“The moto,” Ruby repeats.

“The moto,” Steven sighs.

“Cool, cool,” Gerard says. “Now grab some mass, we’re doing *leg day*!”

May 16, 2018

“You need a little help here?” Ruby asks the customer, who is elderly and squinting at the screen of the grocery store self-checkout. “OK, bakery rolls don’t have a bar code, you can just type in... it’s right there... here, why don’t you let me do it?”

“You need a little help here?” Ruby’s hair is pulled out over the strap of her uniform ballcap and looks like the tuft of an old-fashioned shaving brush. Like everyone else who works at the store, she wears black polyester pants and a red polyester polo shirt. It fits her better than most of them. “OK, it’s not scanning your rewards card, try running the back over the barcode laser... yeah, that should do it.”

“You need a little help here?” Her voice retains the well-trained upbeat positive chirp of her gym leading days, but it’s artificial now. No one notices. “Yeah, the stickers on the kiwis have little barcodes, you can just scan them!” Her smile is nearly a grimace.

By the end of her shift, all she wants to do is go home, soak in a tub, and get the smell of produce and customers off her skin. She hasn't worked there long, so she gets the least desirable heavy shifts, and she is expected to move a *lot* of people through self-checkout. In terms of groceries scanned, her six self-pay kiosks are supposed to do the work of two and a half full-service lanes, with her as the single staffer. Now and again the teens working the cash registers have to call her over to OK liquor sales, but usually it's a store manager who does that.

Ruby tries to view it as an endurance exercise—improving herself by staying on her feet as long as she can. She tries to step to her last customer of the day with the same alacrity as her first. She works harder than the others, though perhaps with less efficiency.

She goes home with a bag of fresh vegetables for her dinner. If anyone asked her (and no one has), she'd say this was the best part of working at the grocery store, doing her shopping with an employee discount and never having food spoiling in her crisper. She eats and goes to bed as the sun sets.

At 3:00 AM, her alarm goes off and she rolls out of bed. She was already awake. Pawing through stretchy pants in the predawn dark, she pulls on a pair at random, throws on a hoodie and her gym shoes, and sets out into the piss-colored light of sodium street lamps, jogging to her 24-hour gym.

Ruby experimented with different times. The hours right before midnight might have as many as a dozen night-owl bodybuilders deadlifting after restaurant shifts, while immediately before dawn there were small numbers of insomniacs and type-A office workers.

No, between three and four is the best time for her. She has the gym almost perfectly to herself—one inattentive attendant, a two-person cleaning crew at 3:45 on the dot, and a few other antisocial gym rats with hoods up and earbuds ostentatiously in. She's the only woman, but like them her every nuance of posture and glance suggests "piss off."

She gets to the gym and stretches on a scientifically-calibrated metal framework, then hits the elliptical, then does freeweights. The music in her ears is mostly beat-heavy instrumentals—the Yoshida Brothers, DuOud, Sayag Jazz Machine, Shanghai Restoration Project—stuff her sister sends her. She finishes up with a grueling HIIT tabata routine with the heaviest kettlebells available. It's far harder than anything she demoed for her students.

Her grimace is nearly a smile.

July 10, 2018

When Steven approaches Ruby, she's in a more receptive place. She's jogging around the park, and he's walking his medium-sized mutt. It's not her first time seeing him. Later, she finds out he knows Gerard. Later, she finds out they watched her for a week before he started coinciding with her. Later, she's in too deep to walk away, despite the bitter things she says about their stalking behaviors.

But this first time they speak, it's after nodding to each other at the park several times, becoming very slightly familiar faces.

"Hot enough for you?" Steven asks. Ruby says nothing but gives a not-unfriendly head shake, modified with a smile that would be offputting or rude if it was any smaller and tighter.

Steven timed his stride to get to the water fountain at the same time as Ruby, she always stops there at the end of her jog to top off her bottle, do some cool down stretches and check her fitbit. Today, his dog romps up, sniffing and wagging.

"Down there, hey Scout, down, be a good dog," he says.

"It's fine," Ruby says, squatting down to ruffle Scout's fur. "He's a good boy isn't it? Isn't he? Yes he is!"

"He's starting to be a fat boy, I tell ya what."

"Noooo, he's just fluffy!" Ruby covers Scout's ears, as if to prevent him from hearing Steven's comments, then scratches behind them. The dog is ecstatic.

"It's probably my fault," Steven sighs. "We used to run together, you know? But since my knee got sprung, I'm stuck walking."

"Oh, what happened to your knee?"

"Hyperextension. Not, like, a really *bad* one, like an impact, probably more a repetitive stress thing."

"Were you doing a bunch of lifts or something?"

"Air kicks."

"That seems...?" Ruby looks at Steven instead of Scout for the first time. "What kind of air kicks?"

"The karate kind, mostly front snap. I really should have been kicking into a bag or a makiwara, but demonstrating for classes and doing katas..."

"Doing...?"

"It's a kind of, uhm... rehearsal. Body movement training through repetition. I miss it a lot."

"Oh wow, your injury took you out completely?"

"No there... there was an accident and I had to shut down my school."

Ruby bites her lower lip, folds her arms. Her eyes narrow, but finally she asks, "What kind of accident?"

August 14, 2018

It's sundown, but Steven's dojo is still hot. It's converted office space in a strip mall, sandwiched between a tax preparer and a halal convenience store. The floors are hardwood, with

a darker stain and more wear than at Ruby's old community center. It has mirrors on the walls too, giving her a pang of familiarity—the same fluorescent squares set in a drop ceiling. The same smell of old effort, sweat and exhalation absorbed into the walls over months and years. Despite the gaudy dragon plaque hanging over the doorway into the changing rooms (which are *not nearly* as nice as Ruby's used to) she does visibly relax and warm up in the space.

Steven has given them lightweight karate outfits—white jackets and belts and drawstring pants. Ruby has a white workout shirt on under hers. The gaps between lapels show greying chest hair on Steven, and mounds of Gerard's depilated flesh. His pecs are so huge that they form cleavage when he brings his arms together, raising and crossing his wrists. They're all doing this. It's the opening move to the kata Steven is teaching them. He's the only one of them who wears a black belt.

“So this isn't aerobic?” Ruby asked him after his first time leading them.

“No, it's meant to be done perfectly, not with difficulty.”

Now she follows along. It's not much more complicated than her old workout routines, only there's no Taylor Swift playing. It's not hard for her to punch, kick and step.

“We're not going to fight or anything, are we?” she asks after he's run them through the kata a dozen times.

“No,” Gerard answers.

(Steven frowns so briefly that the other two miss it.)

“What *we're* doing isn't karate, or isn't *just* karate it's... karate is an avenue for it. It's Steve's avenue, like cross training is yours and weights are mine. But it's all the same thing, the same harnessing of *motivation*.”

“Steven,” Steven says.

“Right, sorry, sorry,” Gerard says, lowering his eyes and raising his hands. “Steven, not Steve. Sorry man. Maybe you just remind me of Captain America so much.”

Steven does not smile in reply.

“The purpose of kata is to train your body to take certain postures... to make them natural, reflexive. It gets into muscle memory so you don't have to consciously think about adopting a stance, or punching correctly, or holding your arms in the positions where you get the greatest biomechanical advantage.”

“All sports train your proprioception,” Gerard adds, in a tone that indicates his belief that he's helping. “You know, your sense of where your body is in space.”

“I think we all know what proprioception is,” Steven says, and *his* tone is one that, if he weren't dressed in the dignified garb of a martial arts instructor, might be called ‘slightly bitchy.’

They go through the kata, then learn another one, then do that a few times before Gerard gets restless again.

“Steve. Steven,” he says, correcting himself. “I get it, and it’s cool, and I’m feeling how the kicks move, but... I ain’t sweating. You know?”

“This is how the art is learned,” Steven says, closing his eyes in something a little longer than a blink.

“Yeah, your art, but my thing... *our* thing. I ain’t felt it. I have not been *worked*.”

“Gerard,” Ruby says, looking between the men.

“What do you suggest?” Steven asks, his voice brittle.

“Something that pushes the envelope. Something that makes, or requires...”

“Motivation,” Steven says, finishing for him.

“Yeah!”

“I’m sorry if you feel unmotivated, but...”

“Let’s fight,” Gerard says.

“You’re joking,” Steven replies.

“No, c’mon, put some skin in the game. You’re not scared are you?”

“Scared I might injure you.”

“*That’s what’s missing!*” Gerard grins, eyes bright, and lunges. For a huge man, he moves fast.

Steven avoids him, but stumbles in the process.

“C’mon, show me your badass shit!” the bodybuilder bellows, bobbing his head left and right.

“This is a bad idea!” Ruby calls.

Gerard takes a few clumsy, bearlike swipes at Steven, who easily dodges.

“You’re not using anything I ta-” he starts, when Gerard suddenly pistons a chunky fist into his gut. Steven’s body crumples in as he’s propelled backwards.

“C’mon,” Gerard edges forward, panting. “Can you feel it now? Feel what I took? *Feel me eating your pain?!?*”

Steven pivots neatly and mule-kicks Gerard in the knee.

While he’s lighter than his massive opponent, Steven is still close to two hundred pounds. All that weight aligns behind the kick, driven by one thick leg and backstopped by the other, enhanced by the drop of his torso, his core contracting to force more speed and power out through his heel into Gerard’s shin.

The snap is audible even through Gerard’s shrill and instant scream. It takes a second before Ruby realizes she’s shrieking too.

“*That’s what I’m talking about!*” Gerard manages to form his howls into words. “*That... was fuckin’ ... moto!*”

“Ruby,” Steven says in clipped tones as he kneels down next to his writhing ‘student,’ “There’s a mini fridge in my office. Get the cold packs out of the freezer.”

Gerard makes more horrible, childlike sounds of pain as Steven feels his knee. “The bones aren’t broken or out of alignment. We’ll get some ice on it. It’s all tissue trauma. You’ll be walking again in a week—three weeks at most.”

“*Do you feel the-?*”

“Hush.” Steven’s voice is brief and commanding as he positions icy bags of gel around Gerard’s knee. Then he turns his back and goes to a closet in the corner.

“What are...?” Ruby looks between Gerard and Steven.

“You’re going to break this,” Steven says calmly, hoisting out a plate of concrete.

“What? I don’t...”

“No, do it!” Gerard hisses. His face is bright red, contorted into a smile that still shows agony.

“Stand here,” Steven says, pointing his chin at a rubber mat as he puts the stone on the floor. Two smaller blocks support the paver as he positions it on the rug and throws another ratty towel on top.

“I don’t...”

“It’s to keep pieces from flying,” Steven explains. “It’s OK, the floor won’t get marked either.”

“I’m not worried about the *floor*,” Ruby replies.

“Ruby,” he says. “Look at me.”

She does.

“You are going to smash the brick,” he says calmly. “Stand like so. Hips down. Square. Good. Rotate your wrist like I showed you. Drop into it, aiming a few inches past the surface.”

Ruby tries to blink as he explains the timing, the weight shift, how to shout the right way.

“I’m not...”

“Just try,” he says.

Ruby takes a deep breath, braces herself, and then punches through the cement.

Gerard cackles.

“You see? *You see?*” he shrieks. “You did it, Steve! You put the moto in her! How long does it usually take a student to learn that shit?”

“Years, if they work hard,” Steven replies.

“I don’t believe it,” Ruby murmurs.

“You don’t have to!” Gerard cries.

Oct 23, 2018

Ruby is leading the exercises this time, so it’s tabatas—20 seconds of intense aerobic exercise, then ten seconds of rest, then another set until eight reps are done. Gerard’s body is draped with chains to increase the difficulty. Steven is red-faced and gulping air by the time Ruby and Gerard are merely flushed and glossy with sweat.

“In through the nose, out through the mouth,” she says encouragingly during a ten-second rest. “We’re halfway there!”

“Yeah!” Gerard roars.

Steven says nothing, just gasps and wheezes.

After fifteen minutes, Gerard sheds his chains with a crash.

“You’re gettin’ me girl,” he says, wincing and clutching his shin.

“Get some water!” Ruby says over the straw of her own bottle. “Steven? You hanging in there?”

He can’t speak, but nods.

“I know both you guys have had knee problems, so we’re doing push-ups then Russian twists! OK! Rest time is over, get on your mat in position! You’re doing great!”

Both men endure to the end of thirty minutes. As if by mutual, unspoken agreement, they both lie on their backs panting, neither rising, as if to do so would be a challenge to the other.

“...did you get...the moto?” Steven croaks at last.

“I’m not sure,” Ruby says.

“Then you didn’t,” Gerard replies. “When it flows in, you *feel* it. Maybe you just didn’t drive us hard enough.”

“I didn’t want to blow out someone’s leg, *again*,” she says.

“But if you had the moto, you could *fix* my leg. Or give this guy another five, ten minutes before gassing out,” he says, jerking a thumb at Steven.

“Hey fuck you,” Steven says weakly. Gerard laughs, as if this is an endearment.

“No,” Steven says, “I think this is turning into some straight-up, culty sadistic bullshit.”

“What?”

“I get it. Pain is power. You get people to give it, or accept it, and then you can... fulfill your promise. Teach them. Make them stronger or healthier. But...”

“But what?” Gerard asks. “Isn’t this what we always wanted? What we were always doing? Only now, it’s explicit and precise.”

“Maybe the price is too high,” Ruby says.

“*Too high?* I let Steven fuckin’ rampage my leg so you could have karate powers for fifteen minutes, and you don’t hear me whining! Jesus, it’s not like we haven’t *already paid*, the fail point is you leaving the money on the table! You *broke* us, Ruby! And we gave you that, and now you can’t even do shit with it?”

“It’s just... it’s so...”

“She’s right,” Steven says, when Ruby awkwardly trails off. “Before, suffering was never the *purpose*, you wanted to get knowledge and health and if you had to accept some pain, you tried to minimize it. Now you treat injury and exhaustion like it’s a currency and you’ve become greedy for it.”

“Heh. Pain miser,” Gerard muses.

“I don’t want to hurt people,” Ruby insists. “I said it over and over again, ‘listen to your body,’ what’s the point of having good lungs if you have to ruin your ankles and knees to get them?”

“Ask someone with shitty lungs,” Gerard replies. “Find me someone stuck in an oxygen tent with the long Covid and ask if they’d give up both knees to breathe easy. I bet we’d get takers. But we don’t even have to do *that!* Instead of *one* person’s ruined knees, we can get the same juice from *ten* people getting... getting fuckin’ boo-boos.”

“Accepting that injuries happen is not the same as causing them!” Steven replies. His color’s closer to normal now.

“You’re splitting hairs,” Gerard says. “What kind of asshole thinks they can get a black belt without ever once being *hurt?*”

“But it *is* possible, it’s the goal!” Ruby says. “You can train healthy, you can make steady, incremental improvements...”

Gerard interrupts her by making a loud, long fart sound with his mouth.

“OK, I’m out.” Steven slowly gets to his feet. “You’ve got something, Gerard. It does work, your... moto thing. But I don’t want to hurt people. I don’t like that price.”

“You learned how to kick through bricks because you *don’t* like hurting people? Get over yourself!”

“Steven, come on,” Ruby says, shifting from one foot to the other. “I mean, we’re in this together, we all... we all...”

“We all killed someone,” Gerard says.

“*That’s a damn lie!*” Steven replies.

“You going to chump out now? Jesus, you paid the cover charge with your student’s life and *now* you decide to get sober?”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“You’re way out of line.” Ruby has her hands on her hips, glaring. Gerard rounds on her.

“At least he can *do it*,” he sneers. “You worked that fat cow to death and won’t even let yourself—or *anyone else*—benefit from it.”

“*Shut your fucking mouth!*” Ruby screams, but Gerard isn’t paying attention because Steven has punched him.

February 9, 2018

It’s “Change It Up!” day. It’s before Ruby meets Gerard and Steven. It’s the day her life changes. It’s cold out and sweaty in the gym.

“Come on!” she says encouragingly. “It’s just twenty seconds! You can do anything for twenty seconds!” They’re running tabatas as Bon Jovi blasts from the speakers.

Because the exercise is Russians—sitting down, twisting right and left to work the core—Marjorie’s collapse is less dramatic than it would have been standing or running. One minute she’s wringing her abs back and forth, the next she’s convulsing. The movements aren’t entirely dissimilar. It’s only when white froth bursts from her mouth onto her yoga mat that Ruby notices.

“Stop! Stop, everyone stop! Hold on.”

Ruby dips her head for a moment before standing to get to her thrashing student. She’s tired too. It’s near the end of class, and it was a hard one.

“Marj! Marjorie, are you OK?”

Ruby tips the twitching student onto her side, pulling down at Marjorie’s arms.

“Snap out of it!” Ruby says, and slaps Marj on the face.

(This is the part that looks really bad on video.)

(The creep secretly videotaping exercise classes gets in trouble, but not as much trouble as he makes for Ruby.)

“Marj! Someone get help, call 911!” Ruby barks this out in her best instructor voice, and several students leap to comply—or, at least, struggle to their feet and try to hurry. She holds Marjorie by the shoulders, supporting her head, and when someone hands her a purse strap, she sticks it in Marjorie’s mouth.

When Marjorie goes limp, Ruby relaxes a little and breathes out. Then she puts her finger to the collapsed woman’s throat.

“Marj?” she asks.

“Marj?”

November 17, 2018

“Is this... really... necessary?” Mick Peltier asks, wheezing and huffing.

“Do you want to directly experience some weird stuff?” Ruby replies. They’re at the gym. She’s been leading him through stretches and now has him on a nautilus machine.

“Nothin’ bad ever happened after sayin’ yes to that,” he mumbles, and goes into another set on the abductor machine.

“I can believe you were a drummer,” she says during his bicep curls.

“I *am* a drummer,” he says, wincing. His workout gear is ratty Chuck Taylors, cargo shorts, and a Zildjian logo t-shirt with the sleeves torn off.

“I just mean you have the muscle tone. Classic skinnyboy core though.”

He only grunts in reply.

“Come over here,” she says, slipping the pin beneath the lowest weight on a machine. “Pull this.”

“No way.”

“Just try,” she says and then, when he can’t even budge the bar, “Try *harder*.”

“Ngggh!” He grunts hard, straining his whole body, but no dice.

“OK. Come on. We’re going to the juice bar.”

“Oh thank God.”

Once there, she says “I had a woman die in one of my classes.”

She watches him carefully.

“Damn,” he eventually says. He’s still ruddy and breathing heavily.

“The same thing happened to a bodybuilder named Gerard, and to a martial-arts instructor named Steven.”

“Huh,” he says, leaning in. “So you think... what? Some kinda vengeful ghost action? Demonic influence?”

She narrows her eyes. “I had not considered that possibility. I think it’s more likely that this is just a thing that happens. These activities have some risks.” She looks down at her fingernails, picks at her pinkie with her index. “Maybe you saw the video?”

“...no, I don’t generally seek out death videos online.”

“Superstitious?”

“Just seems gross.”

“Fair,” Ruby says. “It really did a number on me, so when they said something good could come out of it...”

“By ‘they’ you mean Gerard and Steve?”

“Steven. Yeah. I wanted to believe. It was mostly Gerard’s... thing.”

“Wait, Gerard *Marx*? And Steven, what was his name...”

“Portillo,” she murmurs.

“The found-dead-under-mysterious-circumstances dudes? Wasn’t one of them... like... chopped up?”

“This was a bad idea,” she says, standing.

“Hey, wait, come on!” he says, rising as well. “You can’t leave it there. I mean... shit, with that setup, I’m going to imagine some dark stuff. Are you going to say anything worse than what I’d come to on my own?”

She gives him a hard look.

“Gerard had this mystic theory,” she says. “That we could... amplify and refine the process whereby suffering is transformed into physical gains.”

“Like biological alchemy?”

She shrugs. “No pain, no gain.”

“How’s that end with those dudes dead?”

“Because they were playing god,” she says. “Hurt ten people, say... or trick them into hurting themselves... then use it to improve someone else. Or, as it turned out with Steven, yourself.” For a moment, her hard eyes go harder. “Gerard had a stable of gung-ho meatheads who thought it was *cool* that he’d had someone get an infarction while lifting under his supervision. He’d work them too hard... he mentioned rhabdomyolysis... then use it on people he thought deserved ‘fixing.’ Talked about a girl who lost the use of her legs. Said he wanted to see if he could cure the blind like Jesus. That was his phrase. ‘Like Jesus.’”

“Whoa.”

“As for Steven, I have no idea who he was hurting, or how, to... fill his tank. But when he died, his fists weren’t normal. He had a *stinger*.”

“A...?”

Ruby gestures to the knuckles on her right hand. “Like a hook, or a talon.”

“The news didn’t mention anything like that.”

“Would you? If you were the cops, would you tell a reporter ‘Oh hey, this guy had a weird penetrating bone spur’? If you were a coroner, would you lead with that or bury it in the report as something unimportant?”

“Ms. Smolenski,” Mick says, leaning closer to her, “What happened?”

“Basically, Gerard went crazy with power and Steven just went crazy.”

“Did they kill each other?” he asks.

“I probably shouldn’t answer that,” she responds. Then she leads him back to the weight machine.

“Brace your feet like this,” she says. “Hands here and here on the bar. Pull smoothly, with everything at once. Shoulders back and down. Inhale as you do.”

Mick wrinkles up his face, then cleanly lifts the entire stack.

“Shit,” he breathes.

“I’ve got some people now,” Ruby whispers, crouching beside him. “They know the whole deal.”

Slowly he turns to meet her gaze. Her blue eyes are as brilliant and empty as a blowtorch flame.

“I can do this ethically,” she says.