

Gymnastics

BY LISA GREGOIRE

You lean against a display case of branded bodysuits in the glassed-in viewing room at your kid's gymnastics gym and deconstruct the odour as you do each week. Cheese feet, coffee, sweaty vinyl, oxidizing aluminum. You add fruit cocktail in syrup. The smell hangs in the air like regret. It gets in your hair and sticks to your teeth.

Welcome to the parent-terrarium, complete with fluorescent lights, fake yucca plants, foggy glass, and Gortex skin sheds on the backs of chairs. It's humid from everyone yawning and sighing. You look up to the stained ceiling tiles. *When will they feed us?* Everyone is hungry because they didn't have time to eat. Everyone is squinting with tiny pupils across a hangar-sized warehouse, searching for their limby progeny in a sea of ponytailed facsimiles. Out there, beyond the glass, is your spawn: a squealing, sparkly, horror-film centipede.

After five minutes, most moms forget the children. They grab books and phones, turn chairs toward themselves and prop their feet up, cheap tights cinching into plump legs like grout. Dads balance elbows on knees, scratching their abs or stretching their necks and wheeling their shoulders periodically, like they just worked out big time but really, they're checking out comely moms.

It's meet-the-coach night at Champion Gymnastics, a sprawling club in a business park strip mall between *Wine Kitz* and a discount tile place called *Floored* that has googly eyes in the double O because *you won't believe those prices!* Champion produced a silver medalist in vault in the 1979 Pan Am Games. A framed and faded eight-by-ten of a muscular Ellie Schnagel and her gleeful coach Joyce Winters hangs in the terrarium, presumably to suggest our money's well spent.

It doesn't appear Champion has produced any medalist of note since then, but that's fine. Your daughter Trisha is not podium material. Sure, Trisha loves her sequined rainbow bodysuit and does the star jump dismount off the beginners' floor beam with verve and a wide-open mouth, but she also loves hammering nails into wood and gobbing on leaves to make them shiny. She's seven, discovering herself. Your husband Max is a realtor now and rarely home in time to take Trisha to class. You play martyr to earn points, but you secretly enjoy it because once the sitter comes for Owen, you have the evening to yourself. Your spinning-top life slows, wobbles, gently tips over and stops. It's no mani-pedi with a flat white but you take what you can get. Sometimes you bring a travel mug of wine and watch the sun set between a government low-rise and a city bus garage. Sounds dreadful but it's not. Business parks empty out at night and a soothing tranquility descends.

Trisha and her fellow gymnasts invade the terrarium like stick bugs and drag parents into the gym, grinning like they're in commercials.

"Welcome parents! I'm Cookie. I'll be your child's coach for the next nine weeks." The coaches all have nicknames. The last one was KitCat and before that, Bubbles. Parents and

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kids sit in a circle on a gritty blue mat. You cross your legs and pull your feet in to hide threadbare socks. The waistband of your jeans cuts into your gut, so you tug your T-shirt down.

“We’ll be learning lots of new skills this session to earn our red ribbons, isn’t that right champions?” Cookie’s legs are the breadth of my arms but smoother and more muscular. Anyone could look like that without kids.

“We’ll be learning vault and practicing our forward...”

The man across from you has dark eyes and curly hair. His socks are new. His pants are pressed. His watch is big, his lips full. You see it all at once then turn away, breathless. He’s a ringer for Jeremy in *As the Days Turn*.

“...so if you have questions, just come up and ask!” Cookie says. “Ready champions? Let’s *do* this!”

You rise stiffly and pull your skinny jeans down at the knees to dislodge the wedgie from your crotch. Mr. Daytime TV chats up Cookie. She touches her neck as he pockets his hands.

“You’re Trisha’s mom.”

“That’s right,” you say, turning to the voice.

“I’m Genevieve but most people call me Gen. Or Genny,” the woman says. “I’m Kendra’s mom.” She looks down fondly. You follow her eyes to a girl playing a hand slapping game with Trisha.

“Kendra, yes.”

“She’ll probably quit and join cheer,” she says, popping gum in her mouth. The woman’s face looks like a mannequin’s, sharp features with eyebrows plucked and penciled-in. She’s younger than you by a few years and deeply tanned. She’ll regret that later.

“She wants to be a flyer,” Gen-Genny says. “And she’s tiny enough to do it. But if she grows...” The woman shrugs and makes a *what can ya do?* face. You have no idea what a flyer is or why they can’t grow so you just smile and shrug.

“OK girls, let’s head to the tumble track,” Cookie says, and they all follow like she’s shedding Skittles.

Your daughter turns to you, kisses the tip of her index finger then shoots you with her hand. You grab your chest, pretending to die of love. It’s your thing. When Trisha turns away, that empty room in your heart fills with a prism of colour. *One one thousand. Two one thousand.* The room goes dark again.

Some sad sacks think their sadness is so big that they risk cracking the ground by walking. You used to be like that. But nature doesn’t care if you’re forty and boring and convinced your husband, who’s crazy about HIIT and wears slim suits now, is sleeping with Zinia, his real estate partner. All this came to you at gymnastics one night as you sat on a bench and wept.

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Distracted by stars, you suddenly realized that nature was totally ignoring you. Nature was busy changing. Months passed before you fully understood the deceitful impotence of sadness. At the time, you only caught a whiff of revelation, a promise of relief in there somewhere.

Genny-Gen heads to the washroom so you grab your Keds and slip outside, closing your eyes and expanding like a soufflé under the buzz of parking lot lights. You exhale mom underwear and warped kitchen cupboards that don't close anymore, then walk toward a lipstick sunset across the street. A few early stars wink above. The asphalt driveway leading to the government office is lined with old maples whose few remaining leaves are hairspray still. The air is sweet with fall decay. Migrating geese tear at the green grass, gorging like they're late to a buffet. You know how they feel. You're always that hungry.

Animals preside over the urban fringe after dusk, slinking out of reedy wetlands and skittering across fields, the frogs so loud at times you have to sit somewhere else. It's warm for October. You push up the sleeves of your sweater as you pass the parking lot and its single occupant, a silver SUV.

You peek into the darkened office lobby and admire the modular Swedish furniture. You imagine your grainy monochrome self on a security screen in some basement room where a pale, skinny guy eats meatball subs and scrolls porn and sports. You round the corner of the building for your weekly circumnavigation. Your stomach rumbles. You swim fingers through a crowded purse and find a restaurant mint, untwist the wrapper and pop it in your mouth, smoothing the folds of the crinkly wrapper with your fingertips as you flip the candy from tongue to cheek.

You step over browning hostas and cup your hands to glass to gaze into the warren of first-floor offices to check on your imaginary friends. The first is Sylvain's office. He's a senior operations something-or-other. His office is cluttered with binders and paper. Hallway lights illuminate an oversized pad of paper on a folding stand with the words KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS written on it. On a coat rack near the window hangs a man's suit jacket and white dress shirt. There's a bike pump and water bottle by the door. You wonder how much longer Sylvain will bike to work.

The next office is a woman's. Rebecca, you call her. Rebecca's a people person, director of communications type deal. Two pairs of shoes rest on a mat by the door, black pumps and

warm for October.

You push up the sleeves of your
sweater as you pass the parking lot.

black flats. Rebecca's ready for anything. A quick-dry, long-sleeved shirt and sport tights hang from her coat rack above a pair of turquoise sneakers. Rebecca runs at lunch. There's an upholstered chair in the corner. You picture her there with green tea, editing the company's strategic plan. You had a government job once. You didn't go back after Owen's mat leave. You can't remember why.

You scratch your tongue on shards of dissolving candy, digging to get at the soft chocolate centre even though it hurts. You taste something tinny. Your tongue might be bleeding. You step back over the hostas and continue to the rear of the building as the sunset fades to indigo. The back of the building opens onto a landscaped courtyard with picnic tables and umbrellas. Inside is a cafeteria with high tables and stools like you see in bars. You picture yourself there wearing something expensive and modern. *Cobb salad, dressing on the side please. Oh hi, Sylvain! Sure, this afternoon's fine. How are those key performance indicators coming along? Sometimes Sylvain stops you in a stairwell—you both take the stairs to stay fit. Hey, you OK?* he says. *You seem out of sorts. You want to get a drink after work?* And you say, *God, I'd love that.*

You never go for drinks in real life. You fill the freezer with black bean brownies for the kids' lunches and turn your back to the mirror when you brush your teeth. Max quit a good job selling insurance last year to sell real estate instead. He's still learning so he has to work long hours. With Zinia. They smile up at you from neighbourhood *For Sale* signs, heads tilting toward each other jauntily like they're on vacation. You're starting to think they look good together. You turned your sewing hobby into a second income because money's tight. Now you alter pants for stylish young men and make pillow covers for interior designers. Last week you sewed the crotch on a beekeeper's onesie.

You check your watch. Trisha's gymnastics class is half over. You head to a bench under a big beech tree. This is probably where Rebecca relaxes with kombucha. Something catches your eye on the building's second floor—a man and woman embracing, backlit. You hide behind the tree to watch. He runs his hand down her back. The woman pulls away and covers her face with her hand. *Is she crying?* The man wraps his arms around her. She buries her head in his chest. They stand like that for a while. You exhale the breath you've been holding. He tilts her face up and appears to thumb away her tears then presses his mouth to hers. He lifts her up onto a desk then stands between her legs. She unbuttons his shirt. He pushes her skirt up her thighs. She leans back on her hands. Your legs start to shake. Your stomach curtsies. You trace the shape of your lips with your finger.

You hate her. You want to

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They descend to the floor, out of view. You run your hand from your face, down between your breasts to your trembling stomach. You lean your back against the tree and think about necking with your boyfriend in the back of his dad's car when you were sixteen, your sweaty legs stuck to the seat, a scratchy crack in the vinyl upholstery sharpening your desire. You look up at the building, no one's there. A bus rumbles by on the empty street toward the garage. *Out of Service.*

You're sweating. You take off your shoes and socks. The grass is cool and damp and prickly with pine needles. You walk slowly across the green expanse, past the parking lot toward the gym. You hear a noise and turn around. It's a woman leaving the building. You duck behind a tree. She walks hurriedly on clicking heels, holding a phone, texting as she goes. You know what her screen says. You've had the same exchange with Max.

working late?

sorry on my way now c u soon

You hate her. You want to be her.

The woman heads toward the silver SUV and beeps it open. She climbs in and pulls the door closed. The interior light dims and she disappears into darkness. She's basking in afterglow. She's wracked by guilt. You can't see her face so maybe both.

After a few moments, she turns the ignition. The headlights blind you unexpectedly. You freeze sideways behind the narrow tree which is right in the beam of light. You suck in your belly and hold your breath. Tree bark digs into your right shoulder. You feel like a fucking idiot. The vehicle doesn't move. The headlights are relentless. You think of things to say when she confronts you like, *Beautiful night, eh?* Then the headlights retreat and she pulls away. You exhale, lean over on bent knees and laugh from relief and shame. What a great story this would be if you had someone to tell. You'd say *I used to be depressed and now I just make-believe!*

You get to Champion, wipe your bare feet on the mat by the door and pull your socks on as other parents scooch around you. The class is about to end and the terrarium is jammed like a Manhattan subway station as arrivals and departures collide. Genny-Gen smiles with her crisp eyebrows and weaves through the crowd.

be her.

“Sneak out for a walk? Next time let me know! This place is suffocating.”

“Isn’t it?” you say, carefully noncommittal.

“The sunset was probably gorgeous.”

“It was, yeah.”

“Sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Rhonda.”

“Help me, Rhonda!” she says, with a little elbow jab.

You try to smile. You don’t try very hard. She looks back into the gym.

“There’s your little champion,” she says, pointing at a rainbow doing cartwheels. “She’s an excellent tumbler.”

You watch and smile. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without Kendra. She gives me a reason to get out of bed most days. You know?” She says it like she’s really asking. Her face isn’t sharp anymore. It’s soft and lonely and familiar. She sniffs and smiles tight to hold something back.

“Yeah,” you say, nodding. “I *do* know.”

Across the street, a man exits the office building with a backpack and helmet. He heads to the bike rack, grinning.