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Punching Bag

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Punching Bag

As she walked in, she realized it had been awhile. New faces at the check-in desk, a bright color on the walls, a specialized key card scanner for the locker room.

Heading straight to the locker she had always used, no one looked at her. Though all of the lockers in the gym were identical, she recognized hers: the rest of the uniform line of lockers bore an odd number, but the number engraved in hers was 768. That locker intrigued her when she had first started coming. It made her feel less lonely, less singled out. Were the odd numbers right simply because more of them stood in a straight line? Or maybe it was the even number that was correct. But nobody was able to see it that way. Everybody agrees with what the majority sees. She scoffed in her head. *Safety in numbers*. The connection she used to feel with the odd number now seemed silly and nauseatingly naïve. She muttered to herself again that she had been gone too long, and she noticed that the locker was occupied by a coat and boots. Perhaps that was a good thing, she thought. She chose an empty locker. She didn't look at its numbered plaque.

She walked into a smallish room that was always empty except for a heavy black leather punching bag suspended from the ceiling on a chain. No one knew what to do with it, as the boxing classes at the gym had long ended, and those who were dedicated to boxing often had their own bag at home. Because the room was vacant, the punching bag was hers.

She remembered the hours spent punching the sack. Kick, jab, hook, kick, jab, hook, left, right, left, right, duck, kick, jab, hook...an endless cycle of predictable perfect rhythm. Hide the face with the right hand and the heart with the left. Always return to the protected position: home base, guard up. Comfort washed over her as she stood staring at the punching bag that hadn't changed since she had last come. Worn from contact—soft, almost—but perfectly usable.

But she remembered why she came. Why she had always come.

Escape and vent. Take it out on something, not someone.

Standing there she began to shake with rage, and she struck the punching bag in the gut, then a left cross to the chest, an uppercut to the chin, a hook to the ear, a twist, and a roundhouse planted solidly to the face. Soon the bag

blurred into a black mass, but she punched and kicked until she couldn't stand and her panting became gasping and her sweat became tears. She sunk again to the floor in front of the bag—the bag that had done absolutely nothing wrong, yet its purpose was to receive abuse. On her knees she clutched the bag and pressed her head to the leather, breathing it in and leaving trails of sweat as she crumpled to the ground.

Everyone told her she wasn't strong. They were right, she thought. I have strengths, but I am not strong. A strong woman wouldn't let this get the best of her. A strong woman sees pain coming and takes it again and again until it passes and then she recovers, or rather, rests. And she better not mention it because there are plenty of other people out there, in this gym, in this city, on this planet, that have gone through much worse. No use feeling sorry for yourself when there's no one to see your self-pity. She learned this from her mother. Hide the face and the heart. Guard up. Her father told her she wasn't strong, not strong enough to keep him away. Laying on the ground, she realized that was true. She couldn't keep him off herself, but now, like her mother, she could hide her face and her heart.

She laid there for a while, or at least long enough to allow her eyes to sting with the salt of sweat rather than of tears. No one would notice anyway.

Why did she feel like the only sane one in this place? To be human is to feel, to break down, to hurt. The others? The smiling ones, the ones with routine, the ones who wished her a pleasant morning whenever she walked by? They were the odd ones. But they looked so very normal. They had nothing to bury, nothing to guard, nothing to numb. She knew they never went into the punching bag room. Wouldn't that be nice, she thought, to never return to the punching bag? Wouldn't that be nice?

Retrieving her items from her locker, she glanced over at the golden 768. On her way out, she told the front desk about the error. They'd fix it right away, to be sure. And why is there a room with a punching bag that no one ever uses? You know, you're right, they said. We'll look into that. It was time to board it up, cover it up, fix it.

Walking into the gym soon after, she chirped good morning to the check-in employees and looked at her schedule for the day. She walked up to locker 767, a perfectly shiny emblem gleaming among the row of odd numbers. She strode past a locked room that had once held a punching bag.

About Maren Schettler

Maren Schettler is a freshman English major at the University of North Dakota pursuing journalism. She has a passion for writing as it is a way to creatively express unseen truths and give people a chance to look at things through different perspectives. Aside from academia and writing, Maren enjoys spending time outdoors with her family, reading, listening to all types of music, and playing flute.