

A horror aficionado should have known full well what awaited them if they chose to work out in an empty gym an hour before midnight, but that hadn't stopped me. In fact, it had excited me a little bit, both because of the spooky vibe, and for the much more practical reason that my social anxiety dreaded even making eye contact with another human being while we were both getting gross and sweaty. Ew.

So I was actually thrilled when I found the gym across from my apartment complex deserted, delighted when I stepped onto the elliptical and noted the gym's perfect horror setup: the row of ellipticals looked immediately out darkened windows, reflecting imprecise shadows back at me; behind me, varied groups of gym equipment stretched all the way to a row of mirrors along the opposite wall. A light was even flickering in the very back corner, and I spent the first 20 minutes of my workout—the most grueling, I believe the general public has collectively agreed—blasting power pop through my ear buds and plotting my gruesome demise in movie-scene detail.

What if, in that dark corner, a creature was waiting and watching me? First, I imagined your classic little Victorian ghost girl, visible only as a ghastly blue, smoky outline in total darkness, watching me with displeasure for ... what? Daring to work out in her own personal haunted gym past her bedtime? I discarded the idea; the trope and the setting wouldn't mesh. Next, my imagination brought me something smaller, for whatever reason. Only the size of a newborn baby, curled up in the fetal position, broken and lumpy in ways that didn't make sense but my mind wouldn't let me get a closer look at. I didn't know how this Thing would hurt me, but it thrilled me more than the little ghost girl had.

The one I kept coming back to, however, was a classic. The mirrors behind me. When I looked over my shoulder, too much gym equipment was in the way to see myself directly, but

sometimes, if I stretched my neck, I caught a flash of my leggings, bright blue and out of place amongst the lifeless chrome and concrete. As soon as I faced forward, I imagined the doppelganger in the mirror twisting her head to look back at me, a sharp-toothed, evil smile on her face. I knew exactly what she would do. When I wasn't looking—maybe even at this very moment—she would step out from the mirror and creep up behind me, claws lengthening to a very *Nightmare on Elm Street* style, sharp enough to rip me into literal shreds of myself. It would make horror movie analytical sense, too—my recent weight gain had been disrupting my enlightened state of mind more than I would like to admit. My doppelganger was the stand-in for the constant struggle of control over the body, she was the response to my long-healed eating disorder flaring up again: I had attempted to control my functioning body, but as consistent cellulite and expanding tummy continued to remind me, I had never really been the one in control here.

When I first noted the feeling, I accepted my share of the blame. I had been willingly engaging in horrific daydreams while I was alone and it was dark outside. My anxiety and I had coexisted long enough to know that was a recipe for a bad night. In fact, strange as it may seem, it was my anxiety that had helped me acquire my love for scary stories and scream queens on the screen. Horror movies—as I discovered after years of avoiding them and their terrifying commercials—took my everyday feeling that something just out of view was wrong and made it real. And after that—after the scare became apparent, the adrenaline coursed through my body, the heroes were slain or the monster eventually defeated—the feeling was gone. Over. Dealt with. The fear had been faced and survived. That was the problem with anxiety. When you felt that something was wrong, no monster ever appeared to prove you right. And so the feeling of

discomfort—that something was wrong, that you were being watched, that you were making a critical mistake—lingered on and on and on...

Right now, I was feeling watched, and I knew it was at least as much my fault as it was the gym's for seeming extremely murder-y at this hour. I had indulged my gory fantasies, but I had to cut that out now, because the amount I was looking over my shoulder—checking for mirror girl—was going to cause me to fall off this elliptical and die in a very non-supernatural, humiliating way. I was being silly, but if I scared *myself* with my intentionally scary thoughts, that wasn't silly, that was just stupid, and I had been dealing with my anxious self long enough to know *better* than that, *hadn't I*? One thing no one really talks about with anxiety is how annoying it is.

Like, for example, if I knew I had scared myself thinking about monsters and the claws that came with them, I should be able to tell myself to stop, switch my line of thought, and continue with my exercise, right? Right. That was certainly what I was trying to do as I bounced along to Sabrina Carpenter's latest bop. I began mouthing the words, forcefully and repeatedly pushing aside the image of mirror girl coming step by step—in no shoes, for whatever reason—closer to my prickling spine.

I couldn't help it. I looked over my shoulder. Nothing, though most of me was obstructed from sight in the mirror by the various gym equipment. If she stepped out, she wouldn't be in the mirror at all, would she? That would be my first clue. I stretched my neck trying to get a glimpse of my pumping blue legs, turned back when I felt my unsteadiness on my machine. *Stupid*, I thought. *Gonna die in a stupid way when you know for sure there's nothing behind you.*

I looked strategically forward, the Feeling remaining, my heartbeat squeezing itself into knots that had nothing to do with my workout speed, which was stupid, too, because the cardio was doctor-recommended specifically to deal with this Feeling. *Your overdrive of anxiety is a misplaced fight or flight signal*, they'd said. *Going for a run can trick your body into thinking the threat has been avoided, and you'll calm down.*

There was no face reflected back at me in the dark window in front of me. There were no moving shadows. There was nothing in front of me, and that meant, for a fact, there was nothing behind me. But I couldn't be looking everywhere at once in the windows. The dark windows, where I only showed up insubstantially, and less tangible items might not show up at all—

I whirled around, sure that I'd felt a breath on my neck. There was nothing. Sabrina Carpenter faded in my ears, and for a millisecond there was just the sound of the slowing elliptical. As sure as I was that I'd felt a breath on my neck, I was just as sure that I'd imagined it, or that I'd kicked it up from under my shoes. Two sides of my brain screamed demands at me, both equally angry. *Are you really going to be the girl who feels breath on her neck in a horror movie and hangs around?* one side said. *Are you really going to run away scared because you worked yourself up into a panic attack?* the other demanded. *Or are you just trying to get out of exercising because you're a lazy, fat little piggie?*

"Jesus," I whispered to myself, knowing *that* was going to have to come up at next week's therapy session. Unfortunately, that old, familiar voice still had its power with me. I sped to as dead of a sprint as you can get to on an elliptical without flying off, and began bargaining with myself. If I just made it to two miles, 30 minutes, whichever came first, I could be done. Nothing was behind me. I'd checked, and checked again. As Chappell took over for Sabrina in my ears, I checked again. I didn't want my earbuds in anymore; I was straining past the music to

the sounds I kept imagining were there. But I was too afraid of what I'd hear to turn the music off.

My heart was pounding, my breath hot and panting, and still the Feeling remained that I was watched, I was vulnerable, I was about to figure out what all this formless fear had been preparing me for all these years. *No, you're not*, I told myself. *You never do. That's what makes reality different from a horror movie—*

A hand brushed past my hair.

I whipped around. There was nothing there, but I felt it, I *felt* it. Two minutes to go until the 30-minute mark, but I was done, I was getting out of here, I was about to get gone with the speed a child has flying from their bed to their mother's when it was the dead of night and you know there are monsters in your closet just waiting for you to prove you're awake so they can grab you. I was—

Lights flashed past me through the window. A car pulling up to the next-door apartments, dropping off a bad date or about to pick up some good friends. It idled by the sidewalk, in full view of my windows, and I relaxed, relief spreading through my body. Maybe it's because the supernatural feels infinitely less likely to kill me with possible witnesses present. Maybe people just regain their logic when they see other people after they absolutely lose their shit by themselves. Mirror girl felt as made up as I originally knew she was, every other experience of the last few minutes the overactive imagination that I'd survived for decades now.

I finished out my two minutes, grabbed my water bottle and phone, and left the gym as the car pulled away from the building, its gaggle of 20-something party girls safely inside. I felt a small knot begin to twist inside me with their disappearance—my anxiety watching the parked

cars for sneaking kidnappers and murderers, the sky for a bolt from the black to strike me dead—but I was almost to the door. Once I got inside my apartment, I could lock the door, I could turn all the lights on, I could know I was safe. I could watch a horror movie with a distinctly human vs. human theme, where I'd know what I was up against. I could laugh at myself for being anxious about nothing, and promise myself it wouldn't happen again.

Except I knew it would. That was the part that was so awful. Nothing had happened in the gym, which in my stupid brain, didn't mean nothing *would* happen. There would be other nights I tried to avoid my anxiety of a crowded gym and ended up with something worse. There would be other times I worked myself up over Nothing. And Nothing would never come. I would never defeat the threat my brain told me was there, and so I would never have peace. Some days, I thought I would prefer dealing with mirror girl. Quick and clean, get this horror show over with, kill off this useless, stupid Feeling.

I reached the door of the apartments, dug around in my pocket for my keys...and then remembered them swinging from the handlebars of the elliptical.