

Burning Away

by Jocelyn Diemer

I can feel the sunlight pressing against my eyelids, willing them to open and face the day ahead of me. I give in to the harsh brightness and open my eyes. The ceiling of my dorm room is mottled with old water stains, and sometimes I lay here in my bed for ages, looking for pictures in the random array of blotches.

Today though, it's impossible to daydream because of the churning hollowness of my stomach. I sit up and try to ignore the dizziness that blurs my vision and makes my head spin. It will go away after a few seconds, it always does.

The clock on my desk tells me that it's seven o'clock, which means that it's been 22 hours since I visited the dining hall yesterday. I take a big gulp of water from the bottle beside my bed and my stomach stops growling, its hunger satiated, at least for now.

I lower myself down to the carpet, moving slowly to avoid another dizzy spell. I ignore my shaking biceps as I hoist my body up, feet pressed firmly into the floor. With every push-up, I imagine the banana, all 120 calories of it, burning away. I slipped up yesterday, lost control, but I'm going to make it up.

I finish my push-ups and move on to jumping jacks, making sure to land lightly on my toes so that I don't wake the kids in the room below me. By the time I'm done, my forehead is drenched and I can feel sweat trickling down my spine. The sensation makes me smile.

Thankfully, the men's room with the shower stall is unoccupied. I close the door and double check that it's locked before stripping off my t-shirt. I lean in close to the mirror, searching for the jawline that just won't appear. I run a hand over my chest and

stomach, frowning at the softness that still clings to my bones. I can feel my abdominal muscles tighten as I flex them, but my stomach still looks doughy, and I can't seem to get rid of the chub that makes my hips look rounded and girly.

It's cold in the bathroom, and I can feel my fingers trembling as I slip off my sweatpants. I turn the hot water tap as far as it will go, and step beneath the scalding spray, savouring the feeling of the heat against my aching muscles.

I wipe a hand across my eyes to clear them of water, but the blurriness doesn't dissipate. The air in my lungs feels hot and thick. My head begins to spin, and I sink to the floor. I lean against the wall of the shower stall and close my eyes. The pounding of water against tile fills my ears and I give myself over to the dizziness.

“Aaron! It's time to wake up, man!”

The voice is familiarly deep, and I can't tell if it's amused or concerned. I open my eyes, and am greeted by a set of green eyes staring at me from out of large, bearded face.

“Marc?” I look around and realize that I am completely naked and sitting in the bottom of the shower. “Get out of here, you perv!” I stand to grab the towel from where I left it on the seat of the toilet, but as soon as I stand up my vision goes fuzzy and I have to grab Marc's shoulder for support.

“Hey, I'm sorry man, but there's other people who need to use the shower and you've been in here for, like, 45 minutes. I called the RA to get the key.” Marc frowns at the hand gripping his thick bicep. “Are you okay? You look kind of pale and –”

“I’m fine!” The dizziness has faded, leaving a cloud of embarrassment in its wake.
“Please just give me some privacy, okay?”

Marc still looks worried, but the sharpness of my voice must convince him. He steps back into the hall and closes the door behind him.

I sigh and towel myself off. As freaky as it was to have my sort-of friend find me passed out in the shower, I can’t help feeling a strange sense of accomplishment. The fainting was brought on by a lack of food in my stomach, which means that the banana is out of my system and hopefully the stupid love handles will disappear soon.

I pull my phone out of the pocket of my sweatpants and check the time. *Shit*. I guess passing out isn’t so great when you have classes to get to. I throw on my clothing and sprint out of the bathroom.

I get to the lab with a couple of minutes to spare, so I take a moment outside to catch my breath. I can feel my heartbeat pounding on the inside of my skull. Gulping down a mouthful of water, I’m about to enter the classroom when a huge hand plants itself on my shoulder.

“Aaron, can I talk to you?”

I roll my eyes and turn around. “What do you want Marc, I’m supposed to be in class.”

I sigh at the look of concern on Marc’s hairy face. “I’m worried about you man, it’s not normal to pass out like that. Have you eaten enough today?”

I can feel all of the blood in my body rush to my cheeks, and suddenly I’m filled with white-hot anger. “What’s your problem dude? Why are you so obsessed with me? I’m FINE.”

Marc raises his beefy hands and I can tell that he's trying to placate me, like I'm an angry kid. Shaking my head in disgust, I turn around and march into the lab.

My stomach churns and rolls like the ocean on a stormy day, and it's impossible to focus on what the prof is saying. I gulp down mouthful after mouthful of water in attempt to fill the emptiness, but it doesn't work. Finally, I can stand it no longer. I stand up carefully and, ignoring the lights swimming in my vision, quietly slip out of the room.

I walk across the campus on shaky legs, attempting to talk myself out of what I'm about to do. The dining hall looms in front of me and I try once more to turn around, but my hollow stomach won't let me go back.

I push open the door, surprised at how heavy it is, and walk over to the glass refrigerator. I pull out a carton of chocolate milk and grab a granola bar from a basket on the counter. I stare for a long moment at the bunch of bananas next to the bars before taking one.

As I climb the stairs to my room, I convince myself that I will only have half of each item. I won't let myself eat all of them. I sit on the carpet and unwrap the granola bar, unpeel the banana, open the milk carton. My hands tremble, and before I know it, I'm looking down at an empty wrapper, an empty peel, and an empty carton. My heart sinks.

With a sigh, I stand up and look down at my bloated stomach with disgust. I begin to do jumping jacks, counting as I go.

One, two, three, four... I won't stop, not until every ounce of that food is burned away like newspaper in a fireplace.