

Veterans of the YMCA (essay)

Part of the eating disorder culture bullshit that was pumped into the vents at my school to be dispersed among all was the idea that even though we were dancing eight to ten hours a day, that wasn't considered "exercising." I know. Wild. So many of us would be on the treadmill or elliptical for hours in our tiny apartment gyms at night. I had a membership to the YMCA at the time, which, quite honestly, was the best part of downtown Pittsburgh. The people were real and friendly and came in all shapes and sizes. There was even a group deemed the "five am crew" (catch me *not* at that) that ended up producing some pretty cute love stories. Yet, I digress. I took group fitness classes at the YMCA most days of the week, including Saturdays and Sundays, because I could just follow along with the movements without having to think.

One weekend morning in particular, I was sitting on my mat and stretching out my hips when the teacher tap tap tapped on her microphone. "Allllright, party people. Let's get started." I looked around, and everyone else was similarly horizontal on their mats. "But first," the chipper instructor cut in, "Who is here for their *very first* body pump class today? Please stand up if this is you!" Several hesitant people in the room slowly made their way to a standing. "Let's hear it for our new friends!" The room broke out into a weak applause accompanied by an overly excited "hoot hoot" from a dad in short shorts in the far corner. The noise died down, and the newcomers gratefully took the lull as an opportunity to sit back down. "And how about our veterans who joined us today??" I got to my feet, checking myself out in the mirror- thin, cut arms, muscular indentations lining my legs. Yes, this class clearly wasn't my first rodeo.

Applause started, but slowly. I looked around me. No one else was standing up. *I repeat, no one else was standing up.* I was the target of every pair of eyes in the room. How did this happen? The liars! I could spot multiple people right away who were regulars every week! I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. Up to my forehead. As the hesitant, but present, clapping slowed down, the instructor plastered a smile onto her face, "Thank you to all those who have served our country on this Veteran's Day... And now, let's load up our bars for squats!!"

I'm frozen. I cannot *squat* next to all these people who now either think A) I am a veteran even though I am *eighteen years old*, barely over a hundred pounds, and *blonde*! I don't know why the blonde part makes it worse, but it just does. Or B) That I'm *lying about being a veteran??* As I turn around and slowly bend down to put ten pounds on each side of my squat bar, I avoid every single pair of eyes in the room. Great. I may only be squatting twenty pounds, but I have protected this country for you all.