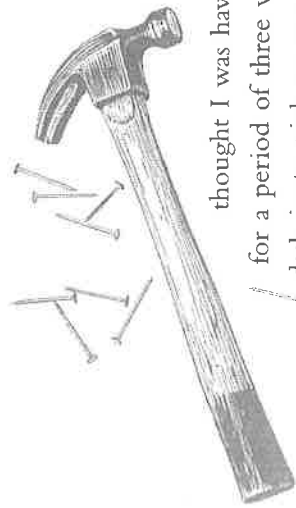


that read: LFT WTS. Another one, PRSS 250, I didn't recognize as a vanity plate until I understood the prestige of bench pressing 250 pounds.

I personally couldn't bench press a fully loaded steam iron. I didn't join the health club to lose weight, or to meet the young Adonis who admired my (dubiously defined) deltoids. I am content with my lot in life, save for one irksome affliction: I am what's known in comic-book jargon as the ninety-eight-pound weakling. I finally tipped the scales into three digits my last year of high school, but "weakling" I've remained, pretty much since birth. In polite terminology I'm cerebral; the muscles between my ears are what I get by on. The last great body in my family was my Grandfather Henry. He wore muscle shirts in the days when they were known as BVDs, under his cotton work shirt, and his bronze tan stopped midbiceps. He got those biceps by hauling floor joists and hammering up roof beams every day of his life, including his last. How he would have guffawed to see a roomful of nearly naked bankers and attorneys, pale as plucked geese, heads down, eyes fixed on a horizon beyond the water cooler, pedaling like bats out of hell on bolted-down bicycles. I expect he'd offer us all a job. If we'd pay our thirty dollars a month to *him*, we could come out to the construction site and run up and down ladders bringing him nails. That's why I'm embarrassed about all this. I'm afraid I share his opinion of unproductive sweat.

Actually, he'd be more amazed than scornful. His idea of fun was watching Ed Sullivan or snoozing in a recliner, or ideally, both at once. Why work like a maniac on your day off? To keep your heart and lungs in shape. Of course. But I haven't noticed any vanity plates that say GD LINGS. The operative word here is vanity.

THE MUSCLE MYSTIQUE



The baby-sitter surely thought I was having an affair. Years ago, for a period of three whole months, I would dash in to pick up my daughter after "work" with my cheeks flushed, my heart pounding, my hair damp from a quick shower. I'm loath to admit where I'd really been for that last hour of the afternoon. But it's time to come clean.

I joined a health club.

I went downtown and sweated with the masses. I rode a bike that goes nowhere at the rate of five hundred calories per hour. I even pumped a little iron. I can't deny the place was a lekking ground: guys stalking around the weight room like prairie chickens, nervously eying each other's pectorals. Over by the abdominal machines I heard some of the frankest pickup lines since eighth grade ("You've got real defined deltoids for a girl!"). A truck perpetually parked out front had vanity plates

Standards of beauty in every era are things that advertise, usually falsely: "I'm rich and I don't have to work." How could you be a useful farmhand, or even an efficient clerk-typist, if you have long, painted fingernails? Four-inch high heels, like the bound feet of Chinese aristocrats, suggest you don't have to do *anything* efficiently, except maybe put up your tootsies on an ottoman and eat bonbons. (And I'll point out here that aristocratic *men* wore the first high heels.) In my grandmother's day, women of all classes lived in dread of getting a tan, since that betrayed a field worker's station in life. But now that the field hand's station is occupied by the office worker, a tan, I suppose, advertises that Florida and Maui are within your reach. Fat is another peculiar cultural flip-flop: in places where food is scarce, beauty is three inches of subcutaneous fat deep. But here and now, jobs are sedentary and calories are relatively cheap, while the luxury of time to work them off is very dear. It still gives me pause to see an ad for a weight-loss program that boldly enlists: "First ten pounds come off free!" But that is about the size of it, in this strange food-drenched land of ours. After those first ten, it gets expensive.

As a writer I could probably do my job fine with no deltoids at all, or biceps or triceps, so long as you left me those vermicellized muscles that lift the fingers to the keyboard. (My vermicellis are *very* well defined.) So when I've writ my piece, off I should merrily go to build a body that says I don't really have a financial obligation to sit here in video-terminal bondage.

Well, yes. But to tell the truth, the leisure body and even the GD LINGS are not really what I was after when I signed up at Pecs-R-U.s. What I craved, and long for still, is to be *strong*. I've never been strong. In childhood, team sports were my most reliable source of humiliation. I've been knocked breathless to the



ground by softballs, basketballs, volleyballs, and once, during a wildly out-of-hand game of Red Rover, a sneaker. In every case I knew my teammates were counting on me for a volley or a double play or anyhow something more than clutching my stomach and rolling upon the grass. By the time I reached junior high I wasn't even the last one picked anymore. I'd slunk away long before they got to the bottom of the barrel.

Even now, the great mortification of my life is that visitors to my home sometimes screw the mustard and pickle jar lids back on so tightly *I can't get them open!* (The visitors probably think they are just closing them enough to keep the bugs out.) Sure, I can use a pipe wrench, but it's embarrassing. Once, my front gate stuck, and for several days I could only leave home by clambering furtively through the bougainvilleas and over the garden wall. When a young man knocked on my door to deliver flowers one sunny morning, I threw my arms around him. He thought that was pretty emotional, for florists' mums. He had no idea he'd just casually pushed open the Berlin Wall.

My inspiration down at the health club was a woman firefighter who could have knocked down my garden gate with a karate chop. I still dream about her triceps. But I've mostly gotten over my brief fit of muscle envy. Oh, I still make my ongoing, creative stabs at body building: I do "girl pushups," and some of the low-impact things from Jane Fonda's pregnant-lady workout book, even if I'm not. I love to run, because it always seems like there's a chance you might actually get somewhere, so I'll sometimes cover a familiar mile or so of our country road after I see my daughter onto the school bus. (The driver confessed that for weeks he thought I was chasing him; he never stopped.) And finally, my friends have given me an official item of exercise equipment that looks like a glob of blue putty, which you're sup-



posed to squeeze a million times daily to improve your grip. That's my current program. The so-called noncompetitive atmosphere of the health club whipped me, hands down. Realistically, I've always known I was born to be a "before" picture. So I won't be seen driving around with plates that boast: PRSS 250.

Maybe: OPN JRS.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AT BREAKFAST



I have a child who was born with the gift of focus, inclined to excel at whatever she earnestly pursues. Soon after her second birthday she turned to the earnest pursuit of languor, and shot straight through the ranks to world-class dawdler. I thought it might be my death.

Like any working stiff of a mother keeping the family presentable and solvent, I lived in a flat-out rush. My daughter lived on Zen time. These doctrines cannot find peace under one roof. I tried everything I could think of to bring her onto my schedule: five-minute countdowns, patient explanations of our itinerary, frantic appeals, authoritarianism, the threat of taking her to preschool *exactly* however she was dressed when the clock hit seven. (She went in PJs, oh delight! Smug as Brer Rabbit in the