

Me, Me, Me

by Linnéa Myhre

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1

I never learned how to listen to my body.

If exercise is on my calendar, it's non-negotiable. Should my body feel heavy when I wake up – a sore throat, or abdominal cramps - I am unable to interpret its signals. I can't separate laziness from exhaustion. I don't know the difference, I've no concept of how you make yourself stay at home.

Nowadays willpower is rated higher than the ability to feel. We want to push ourselves to the brink, even when we lack the strength or the wherewithal to pull it off. For some, this is the key to a better, more balanced existence, the payoff being a higher quality of life, body control and a sense of happiness. The key to the good life.

I've never felt that way. What I have, isn't willpower. It's something else. Something I've no idea what is. What I do know is that whatever it is, it isn't doing me any good.

I run even when my body doesn't want to. I lift weights without strength and jump rope even though it makes my chest hurt — I've heard it's supposed to help increase energy and endorphins, and make me feel happy and good about myself. And occasionally it does happen: Sometimes I feel stronger, healthier and happier after I'm done exercising. But more often than not, I just feel empty. And I wonder how you know when to stop.

I don't eat when I'm hungry. I don't eat what I want to eat. And if on some rare occasion my body were to give me even just the faintest clue of what I actually want - craving a bowl of oatmeal instead of those sandwiches that I always tend to eat - I still go for the sandwiches. I don't know how people change their minds so effortlessly when it comes to something so crucial.

And although I have, of course, occasionally had to eat something other than what I had planned, it's as if my body resists. As if something is terribly wrong.

The hardest thing to understand, however, is the purely physical aspect of it all. What my head tells me about food or exercise can usually be traced back to specific periods of imbalance in my life. But what to do when my period, which is supposed to happen every 28 days (if the Internet is to be believed) fails to materialize for three months for no apparent reason? Or when my fingers and ribs ache, every time my body temperature falls. Or when my breasts shrink instead of growing. Or that one time my shoe size shrank from a size 10 to a size 7. It may sound like an exaggeration, but it's actually true.

I'm about to give up any hope of understanding. Of being able to read and interpret my body's signals — the way most others seem capable of. Of being like everyone else. And feeling that my body is a part of me, that it's mine. I don't know if it's possible, or if it's already too late. And if it is: Who am I then?

2

I can't compete with the stars in the sky

I'm invisible

Britney Spears, "Man on the Moon"

Los Angeles goes hand in hand with all things pompous and/or glamorous. Hopeful boys and girls, lost in the transition between adolescent and adult, who travel to Hollywood with the hopes of becoming the next Ryan Gosling or Kim Kardashian. Typically with some experience from local musicals or amateur theater. Driven by dreams of transferring their talent to a bigger stage. Build their brand. Become a famous influencer or YouTuber. Get noticed in a minor role on Grey's Anatomy. Start doing comedy at Laugh Factory. Land a role in a Quentin Tarantino movie, and score an Oscar. Become someone.

The chances of succeeding are minimal, and most end up as minimum-wage waiters, while they remain unable to stop going to auditions. Some experiment with drugs and become 24/7 party people, viewing every karaoke stage as an opportunity, and every party as a chance to network with potential employers. Some become mentally ill, and without the safety net of a functioning healthcare system they end up as unidentifiable creatures on a street corner, howling about the end of the world, before at some point ending up as roadkill.

Many of these people are really talented. But they are also utterly identical. They all sing with the same voice, write the same stories and interpret the same roles the same way. They have the same ideas, the same body language, the same hopeful look on their faces. The same dreams, the same ideal body and the same professional, fake smile. Their clothes look similar, and they all have the same amount of Botox injected into their face. Separating the talent from the talents seems almost impossible.

Before I tell you anything about my trip to Los Angeles, I feel a need to stress that this is not the reason I'm here.

I'm not one of them.

I just look like it.

I'm twenty-eight years old and I have a Norwegian passport. I look healthy and relatively young, depending on who you ask. My skin is still smooth and my facial mobility is excellent - although I have to admit I fantasize about Botox on an almost daily basis. At five-foot-three my hair is usually slightly teased, in order to appear taller, while the ends are thin and worn, and a few inches too long. I have what I think is defined as a «normal» female body. And considering I've been an occasional bulimic since I was 21, my teeth are actually not that that discolored. Most of the time I wear the kind of workout tights that extend above the waist, white sneakers that have been out of fashion since two thousand and never, and a short, voluminous, bright blue bubble jacket that makes my upper body resemble a blueberry. This also happens to be what I'm wearing today.

“Ma’aaam,” says the customs officer, waving to me from inside his kiosk. My pulse is racing in-side my sweltering hot jacket as I hurry towards him, with my rolling suitcase in tow.

The man behind the counter has a short afro and a smooth shaven face with a mustache, deep furrows on his forehead and large, cracked lips. He avoids my gaze as I take my place in front of him, while he looks indifferently out into the empty space behind me. I hesitate as I place my passport on the counter. It is shiny and new, one of the most valuable pieces of paper one can have in one’s possession. A warm rush of pride runs through my body just thinking about it. It belongs to me - I want him to notice, and acknowledge that in an international context I am a kind of superhuman. But he continues looking out into space, as if I’m not here, as if my pass-port is just any random document.

With firm, rough hands he opens the smooth booklet and starts browsing, still looking into the distance behind me. I turn my head to follow his gaze, until it strikes me that any sudden movements might be unwise, that they might weaken his confidence in me, his patience.

“How are you, ma’am,” he mumbles, while continuing to browse through my passport. And although I feel uncomfortable answering this kind of meaningless, superfluous courtesy phrase, I’ve no choice but to deliver the line that’s expected of me.

“Hey man, how are you?”

“How long are you here for, ma’am?” he asks, still busy browsing, not that I understand why. Has he not yet noticed that the passport is new and untainted, with almost no stamps or traces at all — that there isn’t any more to see?

“Until March fifteenth — eight weeks,” I answer, proudly. Indeed, he is now in the presence of someone who has a been to America many times before, and for whom just a week or two is simply not enough. But then I suddenly start wondering if eight weeks might be considered a little too long, that it might actually seem more suspicious.

“When was the last time you were here?” he asks, still without looking at me.

“Uh, September perhaps? In New York?” I respond, suddenly in doubt.

“October,” he says, as if this is a quiz and I just chose the wrong option. “When was the last time you were in L.A.?” he continues, as he scans my passport for the correct answer. He looks up again — still not at me — and I’m struggling to keep from turning around again, in order to understand what he is looking at.

“Uh, end of December, beginning of January, exactly a year ago,” I say, knowing I have the right answer, although his expression still indicates otherwise. Pokerfaced, he inhales slowly, the way a host on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* would in order to draw out the tension. If my answer is correct, I get in, if it’s wrong, I can return to wherever the hell I came from.

“Are you traveling alone today, ma’am?” he sighs.

Relieved, I exhale for a brief moment, before performing my usual routine.

“I’m traveling with my boyfriend, he’s Norwegian too, but he has a Green Card so he’s in the other line,” I explain, pointing in the direction of a different queue, as the immigration officer half-heartedly looks in the same direction. “Anyway,” I continue, “he has a difficult name no one in America is able to pronounce, so people just calls him Zen. Even I do. He’s a musician and has lived here ten years. I just tag along to visit him here sometimes.”

I take a breath as if to continue, and although I realize I’m already saying too much, I’m unable to stop.

“And what do you do, ma’am?” he interrupts.

“Me?”

“Yes, ma’am. What do you do for a living?”

“Uh, I’m a writer,” I say.

“What kind of writer, ma’am?”

“Well... I write poems and stories, and sometimes I write songs, which I can sort of do wherever. Quite harmless, uninteresting things, you know, in Norwegian. Zen — my boyfriend, that is — is going to play a couple of shows while I’m here, but I’m just tagging along, like I said. On vacation. I’m not going to write anything here.”

For a moment the conversation stops, and it’s quiet enough that I can hear the breath from his nose as it collides with his mustache, followed by another deep sigh.

“How old is your boyfriend, ma’am?”

“Uh, thirty-four,” I say with hesitation, feeling suddenly unwell and somewhat nauseous. It’s as if something is pressing at the back of my throat.

He rolls his eyes before reaching for his passport stamper, as he opens a random page and presses it down firmly.

“Whatever, ma’am.”

I put a finger on the screen in front of me, and await identification. It is confirmed that I am the person I claim to be, whoever that is, as he waves me away with his giant hand.

I’m fully aware it may not appear so, but I feel the need to emphasize that I’m not one of them. I’m not going to L.A. to become a pop star, or an actress, or to achieve any kind of success. I’m not looking for new people to meet, network and make friends with. I am not looking for jobs to steal, money to earn or ways to stay here forever. I’m just along for someone else’s ride.

The problem is all inside your head she said to me

The answer is easy if you take it logically

I'd like to help you in your struggle to be free

Paul Simon, "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover"

We've booked a rental car in advance from a small, unknown company somewhere in the city. It's supposed to be a lot cheaper than the big car rental chains at the airport, with an impressive rating and ecstatic reviews, despite the company being called Carl's Cars. I found them online, after which I handed the responsibility over to Zen, so I wouldn't have to communicate with strangers.

Our Uber stops at the indicated address, and the driver starts unloading the suitcases. As we step out onto the street it strikes me that the area we're now in is neither the safest nor your average "totally legal and legit car rental"-kind. The buildings along the narrow street are tiny and dilapidated, with dusty, sun-bleached American flags plastered on doors and roofs. The sun went down long ago, and this January bleakness feels almost as oppressive as in Norway. The air is milder, but I'm freezing all the way under my ribs, even though I've pulled the blueberry jacket up so that it covers my mouth, and wrapped my arms around my body, hiding my hands in my armpits.

As the Uber driver departs, Zen scrolls on his cellphone, and without meeting my gaze he puts the phone against his ear. I stare blankly out in space while reflecting on my life choices. How I always end up choosing the wrong option: the wrong restaurant, wrong movie on Netflix, wrong hotel, wrong rental car, wrong line at the grocery store. In fact, I can't think of a single time in the course of my life when I've had the feeling of having made the right choice.

The moment Zen ends his phone call, it's clear that he is stressed. His gaze wanders, and his already narrow lips disappear into his mouth. He grabs a suitcase and turns away, while remaining frozen like that for a moment before he starts crossing the street. I stay still, crack open a box of energy drink I bought at the airport, and scroll randomly on my phone while taking extravagant sips. I study the silver-colored can to make sure that it's the right type. That the beverage in fact is sugar-free; didn't it taste a little sweeter than usual?

"It's here!" Zen shouts after a while, pointing toward a clump of bushes and trees. He has his guitar on his back, and his hat pulled far down over his forehead. His slightly tired face becomes a relieved smile under the subdued light of a single streetlight.

I collect my things, put the iPhone in my pocket and take another sip before I realize that I've opened the can too soon. My two rolling suitcases each require one hand, and with an energy drink that can neither be put a cap on nor placed in a pocket while rolling the suitcases, I'm forced to either a) make several trips, b) leave the delicious can behind, c) chug the contents before I leave, or d) press the can between my chin and neck and hope for the best. I think about Charlemagne's favorite math challenge, created by the teacher Alcuin, about a farmer with a rowboat, a wolf, a goat and a head of cabbage, all of which needs to be transported across a river. The rowboat only has room for the farmer and one of the three at a time. Knowing the wolf will eat the goat, and the goat will eat the head of cabbage, how is this problem solved? And what kind of boat is so small that it can only carry one head of cabbage at a time?

I guzzle the energy drink and cram the empty can in my jacket pocket, take hold of the suitcases and roll after Zen while considering the endless number of math problems I never was able to resolve.

Hidden behind the trees and bushes is a kind of shed, and in the doorway we are met by a woman with a child on her arm. She is clearly stressed, and possibly standing in for her husband, who I have to assume is Carl. In slightly awkward Spanglish she shows us in through the main door.

The office we are invited into is cramped and cluttered, full of boxes filled to the brim with spare parts and trash. The walls are covered with movie posters, mostly of films I recognize, and some I've also seen: classics like *Casablanca*, *Vertigo*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Scarface* and *Pulp Fiction*. I sneak a peak into the garage, where I notice several different posters of *The God-father*, which unfortunately I haven't seen.

I immediately write it down in my iPhone list of movies to watch the next time I am faced with picking yet another movie that I'll regret watching. In any case I consider this collection of movie posters as a sign of credibility.

In the middle of the office there is a medium-sized beige couch from the seventies. Not that I really know enough to recognize a decade based on a piece of furniture. In the corner is a large playpen, in which the Mexican mother places the child. She moves various objects back and forth on the desk for a while before she extends a hand and invites us to sit down. Zen approaches the sofa, while I remain standing in the middle of the office, studying the child in the playpen.

The child appears to be an unusually charming specimen. A boy, maybe two years old, with bristly, nut-brown hair, green eyes and a pearly row of perfect little teeth. He has been watching me since I came in the door, but the moment I meet his gaze, he gets self-conscious and turns away. He presses himself against the corner and pauses there, looking at me on the sly. I crouch down beside the playpen, but regret it immediately. I observe myself from the outside, wondering if it just looks strange — if it seems like I'm visiting a farm to look at the cute little bunnies on display in their cage.

I get up and vanish quietly into the garage, where I have not been given permission to go, in the same way I was never granted permission to treat this woman's child like a zoo animal. The room is elongated and extends into a dark area, where cars are lined up, one after another. The walls are covered with more movie posters, but upon closer inspection I notice that many of them are the same ones hanging in the office, and I feel slightly disappointed and quite suspicious, as I realize all these posters must be a charade, that these people surely are trying to trick us. I remain standing in the garage while trying to think of ways to get out of this obviously sketchy ordeal, before returning to the office where I have a seat on the arm of the couch, as I try to follow the transaction between Zen and the woman, as the critical party, ready to expose all attempts of fraud.

"You want one or two driver's licenses on the car?" she asks from behind her mess of a desk, typing away on an ancient computer.

"Well, we should probably have two," Zen says, talking to me. I nod curtly, and he asks for two.

"So, that will be an extra fee for the insurance, OK?"

"How much?" I interject, crossing my arms while leaning back slowly and confidently.

She hesitates, looks at her papers and over at the screen.

“That will be 480 dollars. If only one, 240 dollars.”

“She’s trying to trick us,” I mumble into the air, in our secret language, also known as Norwegian.

“Trick us?” Zen asks in surprise. “Insurance is expensive in this country. It’s just the way it is.”

“Didn’t say anything about that on the Internet. Just a total amount, and you should never pay more than the total amount.”

“It always ends up a little more,” Zen says with a sigh.

“You should never pay more than you agreed. That’s fraud,” I say calmly.

The woman looks at us both with a quizzical expression. The boy in the playpen has come out of his corner, and now he’s smiling excitedly.

“That’s OK,” Zen says, pulling out the cardholder from his inside pocket.

I jam my fists aggressively into the jacket pockets and turn toward the playpen. The child looks sheepishly at me before he places himself in the middle — as if this is the start of a performance — and starts moving around in a circle. At the same moment the woman suggests taking a look at the car, and both she and Zen get up and go to the garage. I remain and assess whether I should stay here and look after the boy, or head out into the garage to witness Zen being ripped off by a Mexican car rental crook. But before I am able to make a decision about that, the little boy’s movements become way too ambitious, and he starts spinning. He’s still all cocky and wide smiles, clearly trying to impress me, so I attempt smiling back, as I know no other response. Until he starts picking up speed.

“Please don’t spin so fast, you’re going to get really dizzy,” I mumble nervously and pointlessly in Norwegian.

The spinning kid knows he has my attention, that I’m impressed, and his tiny feet move back and forth in a constantly expanding circle, increasingly unsteady. Clearly dizzy, his movements now command the entire playpen, and his formerly sparkling eyes are now crossed in all directions. And yet he’s smiling, ever happier, even laughing out loud.

“Please stop spinning so fast, you’re going to hurt yourself” I plead, moving towards the playpen, my hands fumbling foolishly in front of me, uncertain whether I have permission to intervene and stop him.

But before I manage to do anything at all, he falls forward and strikes his head on the edge. He lands on his knees, and a scream follows. A deeply unhappy scream conveying what I can only assume is pain or fear.

I throw myself on the floor with one eye on the garage door, expecting the mother to come and rescue her little boy. For her to come running with consolation and maybe shed a tear or two. If so, this would be something we’d understand — that she’d have to prioritize tending to her child’s life and health, at the expense of our chosen form of transport. If I’ve understood things correctly, any child’s well-being is generally rated of the highest importance in life, right after money.

But she doesn't come. Even when the child's cries get stronger and more desperate she doesn't show up, and now I'm starting to feel sorry for myself too. For being stuck in this unfortunate, uncomfortable position: kneeling, while clinging firmly to a wooden miniature gate.

I throw my arm across the edge of the playpen and gently move it across his back, but he pulls away and starts crying even louder, and with horror I notice he has a big, fresh, red blister-like bump across his mouth. It looks like he's had a little too much Restylane, and I manage to crack a forced smile that I hope might rub off on the child and resolve this stressful and unnecessary situation. As a matter of fact, I happen to have been listening to a number of podcasts about childrearing lately, so I've picked up a thing or two on parental mirroring. I've actually learned a great deal from these podcasts, like for instance how parents easily help establish negative thought patterns that remain in their child's head for ever. About all the little mistakes adults make that destroy children, and that easily could have been avoided if they just paid a little more attention. Or even better: if they just listened to these podcast themselves.

However, my parental mirroring doesn't seem to be working, and right now I can't remember any other advice gathered from these podcasts. The boy just cries louder, and my smile cracks in desperation. I'm not doing it right. I stretch my hand towards him and touch his back even more intensely, while monitoring the door, in search of the female adult who has brought this poor child into the world. She should have been here long ago. But she remains absent, and won't return until she is finished showing Zen every inch of our suspicious rental car, when her child has cried relentlessly for several painful minutes, without any grown up supervision.

There she is, standing in the doorway, even more stressed than when she left. She doesn't even look at her son, as she hurries across the room, past the playpen, towards her desk. I get up to make space for her to pick him up, and wonder whether I need to fill her in on the incident that just occurred, but I don't dare or know how to. Zen enters the room with a pleased smile before allowing his gaze to effectively assess the crying child scenario. And then he takes his seat on the couch again.

I observe the woman as she presses down one key after another on the keyboard. After a couple of minutes of this very subtle sort of torture, she finally goes toward the playpen, picks the child up and sighs. She sighs as if she has done this a hundred times before, and I wonder if this is something that happens all the time. That the kid recently taught himself to spin, and now he can't stop doing it — the way some things are hard to stop doing no matter what age you are. And that this is her attempt to teach him that spinning is an insane activity that needs to stop. I can't recall having heard any good advice about this particular scenario on the podcasts. He stops crying as she tosses him from side to side a few times while she smiles somewhat apologetically to Zen, digging through a drawer with her free hand. Then, after a while she places the now silent, but still restless child in the swivel chair, as she points at the papers on the desk in front of her and asks for Zen's signature. Behind her the child stands up quickly and reaches for the many enticing objects on the desk. And as he presses on the copy machine and tries to lift the stapler, the office chair turns slowly but steadily in the opposite direction. If no one stops him he will absolutely fall, that much is certain, and I feel an unpleasant surge in my abdomen — the same feeling I have every time I dare to look over the edge from a slightly too great height, or when I accidentally see pictures or videos of women giving birth. But I don't say anything, I don't want to make a scene. Instead I turn in the direction of the suitcases and roll them out in the garage, one by one. I open the trunk and carefully load them in, while awaiting a scream of death from inside the office. I don't know why I listen to all these podcasts about childrearing. I don't want kids.