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## The Man in the Mirror

*As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.*

✎ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

The party was getting louder, but I wasn't adding much to the volume. The New Year was about to arrive, and I was facing that prospect with a lot more dread than glee. I hadn't wanted to be alone, so I was at a nightclub hoping for safety in numbers. But I felt alone anyway. The witching hour had almost arrived and everyone's eyes were on the television. The ball atop One Times Square was being readied for its big splash. The ghosts of coaches past were in my ear: *Keep your eye on the ball*, they'd always yelled. I watched the ball, but what I was really thinking about was my New Year's resolution.

I am going to quit taking steroids, I told myself. This is it, I vowed. I was serious about my good intentions, but then I

had been serious before. When I first started taking anabolic steroids I had told myself it would only be for six weeks. That had been three and a half years before. Since that time I had tried quitting a number of times only to go back to them.

Like Mark Twain said, "Quitting smoking is easy. I've done it hundreds of times." Quitting steroids was like that for me. I would stop using them but then start up again. I was afraid of the consequences of taking steroids but even more afraid of shrinking away without them. My fake muscles were my self esteem. What I didn't know was that my house of cards was about to fall apart.

Mirror watching is one of the great pastimes of body builders. It is the rare reflection that they can walk by without posing, and I was no exception. After using steroids for several years, along with working with weights, I had the body of a musclehead. I was five foot six inches tall, but weighed one hundred and ninety pounds, with overdeveloped chest, shoulders, and upper arms. At the time, my whole life was based on my physique. Because of that, whenever I tried discontinuing steroids it always made me depressed. On those occasions when I stopped using, my mirror watching would make me anxious and upset for I could see my muscles shrinking. For me, that was like losing a limb, and the next thing I knew I was using again to regain that bulk.

But not this time, I told myself. This was one New Year's resolution I was going to keep. I was going to get off the juice and quit forever. Before doing so, though, I had opted for a big send-off. Several hours earlier I had injected myself with a

mega-dose of testosterone. In my years of using steroids I had been taking a veritable cocktail, including Dianabol, Deca-Durabolin, Testosterone propionate, Equipoise, Winstrol, and Sustanon. But now that was all behind me, I told myself.

The party was getting louder with the anticipation of New Year's spreading a fever to the revelers. A casual acquaintance I knew approached me and said, "Hey, you're looking good, Jeff."

In my case I knew that seeing was not believing. I wanted to believe in what the mirror was showing me, but I couldn't. My body was big, but I knew I was a balloon with a leak. I didn't want to live a lie anymore. Somewhere deep down I knew my life of deception was killing me.

"So what are you lifting?" my friend asked.

I went into my gym talk patter, bragging about how I had bench pressed 225 pounds 27 times and done some reps with 350 pounds or more. It was easy to escape that way. When it came to escaping from reality, I was a Houdini. Although I was about to graduate from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with a degree in economics, most of my college experience had been spent in the weightroom instead of the classroom. Truth to tell, I was terrified at the prospect of going out into the real world. My parents had spent good money for me to go to school and had no idea their son was a junkie whose drug of choice was anabolic steroids. I was so scared of leaving my artificial world that I had convinced my parents that I needed to take some more courses.

The friend drifted away. When it came down to it, I really didn't have much to say. I had become a meathead. I didn't

like myself, so it was self-fulfilling to not have others like me. My relationships with women rarely lasted more than a date or two. Some of them would tell me how strong I looked, but I felt anything but that. My body was a total mask; the muscles hid how weak I was. I usually acted like a total jackass with women, treating them like dirt so as to sabotage any chance of a relationship. In spite of the muscles I felt self-conscious. Because of the steroid use, my testicles were no bigger than grapes. Testicular atrophy is just one of the wonderful byproducts of steroid use.

“Ten, nine . . .”

The countdown had started, and everyone but me seemed to be smiling and happy. Couples were already locking lips, ready to bring in the New Year's with a kiss.

I thought of my resolution and how I had gotten where I was. It hadn't been that long ago that I had never even heard of steroids. I first became acquainted with these drugs after my friend Mark and I joined a local gym. The idea at the time was that we would work with weights so as to look buff and impress women. Mark and I didn't have any proper training, so we just went from machine to machine doing haphazard workouts. From the first, though, we lingered to watch the muscleheads.

“I want to look like those guys,” I said, and Mark echoed his agreement.

We started spending more time at the gym and hung around the bodybuilders as much as we could. Occasionally

they would throw us a bone, telling us how to do an exercise or work a repetition. Mark and I kept flailing about with the weights, but we didn't see much in the way of improvement. Try as we might, our bodies weren't looking anything like these guys. Eventually, though, the muscleheads let us in on their little secret: they were taking something called steroids.

It was a club that we wanted to join, no questions asked. The idea of getting muscles seemed like a no-brainer. At the time, Mark and I didn't think to ask if there would be any ramifications from these drugs we wanted to take. The only thing we wanted to know was where we could get them.

“Eight, seven . . .”

While people at the party were raising their glasses, I was looking into mine. My glass was empty, and so was I. I stared a little deeper into it, and my looking glass took me back to a time when I ventured out to get steroids with Mark. We had already done a few cycles from steroids purchased from a dealer at the gym, but now we were moving on to a “legitimate” supplier.

The muscleheads had told us about a doctor who would write prescriptions for us, no questions asked. Our gym “doctor,” Big Bob, had told us what we should get and the doses we should administer to ourselves.

Our Dr. “Feelgood” had an office near Amherst that wasn't far from campus, although the neighborhood was in a shady part of town. At the time it was a rush to be slumming for

steroids and only added to our excitement. Mark and I thought this was all a great adventure. The first time we stepped into Dr. "Feelgood's" waiting room, we thought we were on another planet. Most of those waiting to see the doctor were junkies, and some were clearly under the influence. There were others who appeared ill at ease and anxious, individuals clearly in need of a "fix." Some people around us were snoozing, while others were amped, talking a mile a minute, and still others were carrying on conversations with themselves.

Amidst all the dregs and outcasts, though, Mark and I saw a very attractive looking woman. Both of us headed over in her direction and managed to get seats on either side of her. Being young and dumb, most of our attention was focused on the woman's large chest. Our eyes must have finally gone north, for we ended up striking a conversation with her. Mark and I each tried to outdo the other. Each of us was hoping to get her name or number, but before we got too far our busty friend was called in to see the doctor.

When she was out of sight, I told Mark that he might as well give up, because she only had eyes for me. Mark told me that I was crazy, and that he wouldn't be surprised if he hooked up with her before she left.

One of the junkies woke up long enough to take pity on our stupidity. "He's a she," he said.

In outraged unison, Mark and I said, "What?"

"The doc gives her drugs," the junkie said. "It's like hormone replacement or something that makes him look more like a her."

The junkie didn't waste any more words on us. I got the feeling he thought we were too stupid to even try and pan-handle from. His head nodded off, and Mark and I looked at each with stunned glances. Too late, we started putting together the clues. Our woman did have a deep voice, and she had worn an awful lot of makeup. Come to think of it, I remembered how she had large hands and feet.

The two of us grew very quiet, and our argument never resumed. We stopped bragging about which of us she liked more. That was something we each would have been glad to concede to the other.

“Six, five . . .”

Everyone else at the party was yelling out the countdown. My eyes wandered over to an attractive girl who had caught my eye earlier. She was with her girlfriend, and both of them were calling out the countdown together.

I looked at her a little more critically. Yes, she was a real girl. Once burned . . .

The doctor didn't look much better than his patients. He was unshaven and had a world-weariness that made me tired just looking at him. His practice seemed based on writing prescriptions as fast as he could. No one was ever in his office more than five minutes.

Dr. “Feelgood” asked us what we wanted. He didn't inquire about why we wanted the steroids; enough muscleheads already visited him so that he was familiar with the routine.

The only problem he had with making out our prescriptions was getting the right spelling.

I said we needed some Dianabol.

He nodded and started jotting. "Is that b-a-l-l?" he asked.

I corrected his spelling. In subsequent visits his spelling never got any better. Mark and I always coached him on how to spell, and with his shaky hand he'd scrawl the words we so wanted.

"Four, three . . ."

The shouting at the party was reaching a crescendo. People were blowing on horns and noisemakers were being shaken and rattled.

Unexpectedly, I remembered my college roommate's favorite toast: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die."

At that moment, those words resonated through my head.

The pharmacy that filled our steroid fix was in an even seedier part of town. The first few times we picked up our prescriptions, we felt awkward and uneasy going there. Mark and I had been raised in Randolph, a nice Boston suburb. We had caring parents and middle class values. At the onset of our steroid use, what we were doing felt wrong.

"It's only for six weeks, though," I rationalized to Mark, and he was quick to agree.

Our great plan was to do a "cycle" of steroids. We figured it would be like getting a summer tan. All we were going to



do was put on some muscles. Of course, to obtain these results meant doing some things we had never done before. When it came time to inject my first needle, I was too afraid to do it. Big Bob the gym doctor was the one who had to dart (meathead slang for inject) me.

Unfortunately, my fears didn't last. All too soon I became adept at poking myself in the thigh and not even thinking about what I was doing.

The results, and my addiction, were almost immediate. In that first six week period I put on twenty pounds of what I thought was muscle. I would look in the mirror, and see the results. I had muscles, and I thought that made me a real man. At the end of six weeks I did stop, but not for long. I couldn't stand the idea of "deflating." I didn't want to lose this new-found power.

I'll do it another six weeks, I decided. The self-deception began to get easier and easier as time passed, until finally I couldn't tell a lie from the truth, and I didn't even want to make any distinction between the two.

"Two, one . . ."

Someone exploded a cork from a champagne bottle, and bubbly shot out. People were jumping up and down. One group was singing:

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And never brought to mind,  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And auld lang syne.*

*Auld lang syne* translates to “times gone by.” It was time for out with the old and in with the new. That was what I wanted more than anything else, although anyone looking at me might have wondered why. The steroids had delivered. I weighed 190 pounds and I was that image I had always wanted. So why was it that I was so desperate to give up the juice?

A major part of that impetus came from Adriana DiGrande, a speech therapist who had helped me with my stutter during my time at college. Because I worked so closely with Adriana, her opinion mattered greatly to me. She had helped me overcome my fear of speaking; Adriana was my confessor and rock. I was used to her being positive and cheerful, so when she confronted me during winter break I was shocked.

In her most severe voice, Adriana said, “Jeff, why don’t you grow up? You need to go to a treatment center.” If I didn’t, Adriana warned, I was going to die.

I needed that dose of tough love. I had thought I could hide my steroid and alcohol and drug abuse from everyone. They say the best mirror is an old friend. Adriana was the best mirror. Of course she didn’t tell me anything that I didn’t already know. When I was a little boy there were a series of margarine commercials featuring a woman who was supposed to be Mother Nature. While eating what she thought was butter, and extolling its virtues, Mother Nature was told it was margarine. That didn’t go over well. In a fit of pique, she would say, “It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature!”

Lightning would flash and the pastoral scene would quickly change to one of chaos and discord.

I hadn't fooled Adriana, and I hadn't fooled Mother Nature. In fact, Mother Nature was about to strike back at me in all sorts of ways. Little did I know that real lightning bolts were about to rain down on me.

The ball descended down the pole. New Year's was here.

This time I won't drop the ball, I promised. I am done with steroids.

At that moment, in the midst of all the merriment and celebrating, I had no idea what the next year would bring. Had I known, I probably would have run from the party screaming.