

Starting Strength

Your Back Trail

by

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At the end of the day you can't do anything about it. You're right, her family is huge. There are brothers, sisters, in-laws, aunts, uncles, cousins, and geezer Mom and Dad. There are hundreds of them.

With a family that big, every single day someone is going to be dying of cancer, every single day someone is going to be banging somebody they shouldn't be, every single day somebody is going to get a DWI, every single day somebody is going to be messing up – and you have to hear about it.

Are you going to stay at work late? Pick up some OT? Good idea. Yeah, I hear that HVAC systems aren't cheap. Money is just flying out of your ass. Yup, just one more thing.

Maybe stop at the gym on the way home? It's been a while. Oh, that's right, your knee still hurts. A bite to eat and a few drinks sounds good. You've earned it. Who's it going to hurt? And you don't know where your gym bag is anyway.

Because he's a dick, that's why. He saw the baby had a shitty diaper; you can smell it from here, and so could he. He walked to her room, saw what a disaster the kid had going on, kept moving, grabbed his keys and headed out the door. And even if he had changed her, he would have just left the dirty diaper lying on the dresser.

Change the baby, pull the sheets off the crib, and wipe the whole mess down. Now, take a shower, get dressed, load the baby – hey, don't forget your pump – and head to day care for the drop-off. Well done, you worked your ass off this morning and you haven't even made it to the office yet.

You know the gym is right down the hall. You remember they got that new squat rack a couple years ago. Your training buddies haven't seen you in a while. Maybe you could eat at your desk, hit the gym during lunch?

You are right: it hasn't been easy since you had the baby. Your body doesn't feel right. You've got some odd pain you're not used to. Maybe you should... You are just going to give it some more time. Sure, there is no rush; the barbells have gotten used to not seeing you.

What's that in your pocket? You're taking an Ambien to work with you? Oh, I see. Sounds like a good plan. You have an hour commute in traffic. Nobody can drive in this town, that's for sure. So, after you work all day, you take that Ambien before you walk out to your car to head home.

It certainly does start to kick in quick. What? Hell, I don't know *what* that other pill is. You found it digging around in your purse. Of *course* take it – it will make this commute much smoother.

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You are doing just fine. You got your left hand on the center of the wheel, and your right hand covering your right eye. Yes, it does get rid of that double vision, and with just the one hand on the wheel you are barely weaving at all. You texting too? Shit, even *I'm* glad you're almost home.

Pretty big apartment, looks even bigger with half the furniture gone. You didn't like that bed anyway. Heh! Am I right, girl? Kick off your heels, put your hair up and change into some sweats. Pour a glass of wine and settle on the couch. Remember back when you would get home and hit the weights? Yeah, you would wear those same sweats you have on now.

That's okay, screw the guy. He's a prick. The commute sucks and the house is empty, and the Ambien and the wine and that mystery bonus pill will help you relax. I understand, it makes everything seem like its going to be okay – even when you know its not.

Lock your phone up? The stupid weak-ass shitbag didn't even acknowledge he got those pics. Maybe putting your phone away is a good idea. Eh, it doesn't matter.

He didn't like your working out, did he? Your abandoning the barbell is the one thing he wouldn't criticize.

Hell yes your back hurts! You're *old*. You like to think you are in pretty good shape for a guy your age. But your face is looking a little puffy, and your nose is starting to get that road-map action going on. Your Dad had that, remember?

I know you're tired, so damn tired. You even feel tired deep on the inside, somehow. You used to go to the gym – you used to train. Then that set of squats went sideways. You hit the ground hard. It was pretty scary, wasn't it? Maybe it got into your head a bit. Who knows? It happens.

It's a lot easier to head home instead of to the gym. It was easy to skip squats because of the knee, and then your back. After squats, deadlifts were the next to go, weren't they? But you still showed up Mondays for bench, and then you must have slept on your shoulder wrong, or at least laid awake wrong on your shoulder – I know you don't sleep much.

That's it, just ease down in your chair. Listen to that old man noise you just made! A drink does sound like a good idea. What would you like? You have cheap bourbon, cheap scotch, cheap gin, cheap vodka – hell, you've got a full bar!

Ha! I know, it doesn't matter. Vodka? Good choice, you can pretend nobody can smell it on you. Want to mix it with some gummy bears? Like a high school cheerleader would? Yeah, I'm just kidding. I'll just set the plastic bottle here beside the remote.

What you got there? Is that your log book? *Damn* it's been a minute! Where did you find it? How in the world did it get *there*?

C'mon, let's open it up. Yeah, that's right, "checking your back trail." You remember the author? I'm surprised, you were a just a kid. You don't want to say it? That's fine, I will. "A man who travels wild country gets to studying where he's coming from..."

Tears? Are you kidding me? All right, enough. Get your shit together. Open the fucking book, start at page one.

Ha! Look, you were weak as shit! You didn't even know how to keep a log book. What the hell? You got days written down the page? No columns? look, you even wrote down crunches for fifty! That's okay, don't be hard on yourself, you were learning.

Here, flip a couple pages in. There you go. See? Nice even columns. You had squats, presses, and deadlifts on Monday, then squats, bench, and deadlifts on Wednesday. Friday was the same except

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you rotated back to presses. Weight \times Reps \times Sets, the way it's supposed to be. Look, you added weight each time, weak as hell though. Yes, you're right, you were still learning.

This is fun! Let's pick a page at random. Okay, this is odd. Squats, here are your warm up sets, and then one work set? 315 \times 20! You did a set of twenty-rep squats with 315! Just out of the blue?

Oh, you remember why, don't you? Yeah, she took off that morning. Of course, she needed to move on. No, I'm not putting her down. She made her choices, going to live her life, find happiness, broke your heart, blah blah blah sad sad sad etc.

You can't remember her face? You don't remember her face, but I bet you remember her sweet little... Okay, sure, of course. Respect. C'mon, but she did have quite the... yeah yeah, I'm just messing with you.

Okay, back to poor sad mistreated unappreciated you. Do you think the twenty-rep set helped? Getting under that bar, your head all twisted over some chick whose face you can't even remember now. Getting under that bar and taking a big breath and stepping back and focusing on nothing but getting tight and knees out and down in the hole and back up. Then the same thing for the next rep – twenty goddamn times with 315 across your back. Think the squats helped? No answer? You see where this is going, don't you?

So, now it's a different girl and the same story. You know, I'm seeing sort of a pattern here with you and your relationships. So, if you don't want to answer about those squats helping with the first one, let me ask it a different way.

You think your training can be relied on better than your obviously bad judgement about women? When the women aren't there for you, what is?

Look at this page, first time you deadlifted 315. That's pretty impressive – wait for it... for a *girl!* C'mon, I'm just fucking with you. That's a lot of weight. Remember anything about that day?

That's right, you were pregnant at the time and you just didn't know it. That is so very cool. It didn't take you long to get to 315, did it? I know, it's one and a half times your body weight. Hell yes, you were one strong bad-ass chick. You remember her? Try hard, it's been a while.

Yeah? As soon as what? You'll get back to the gym as soon as what happens? Ha ha ha ha! No, not being mean, it was just the way you said it. You said, "I would like to get back to the gym." Similar to, "I would like to win the lottery." It's a really weak-ass statement. Trying to convince yourself it's not your choice to walk up to that rack and get under the bar. Trying to convince yourself you're the first one who ever had to deal with this.

No, we're not going to stop; we are going to keep going. This is fun. Nope, there are no tissues here. Let them run down your face or use the heel of your hand to rub your eyes. It worked when you were six, and it'll work now.

You tossed it over there, *right there*. Pick it back up and open it; let's look at one more page. Damn, look at this: 350-pound pull for a triple? And you were no youngster either. Yeah, you're right. There is only strong or weak, and gravity don't give a shit how old you are. I'm sort of surprised you remember that.

Okay, so, this is a Sunday... didn't you used to do deadlifts on Friday? You remember why you hit the weights this particular Sunday? That's right: you had to take her to a couple of doctors appointments on Friday. Then Saturday was all day cleaning up the damn house and getting groceries. And picking up medicine and organizing that bucket full of mom's prescriptions.

Now that particular Sunday morning started about 4:30 or so with you having to change an eighty-year-old woman's diaper, and that turned into sort of an event, and it involved somehow getting

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her into the shower to clean up, didn't it? Then you changed the sheets on the bed and got a load of laundry started.

You started coffee and breakfast about the same time, and you managed to get her meds in her before some other calamity occurred. That's quite the party before the sun even comes up. She wanted to go to church, of course, and you had a couple hours, so *you chose* to walk down the steps to the basement and do your deadlifts.

You remember that? You thought about sitting in your chair, or taking a nap or maybe any goddamned other thing in the world, but you went down and did your pulls. Then you got her and you dressed, then her in the wheelchair, and out to the car, and out of the chair, and into the car, and the chair loaded up in the trunk of the car.

You arrived at church and everybody crowded around the car to say hello. Oh, it was quite the big deal, and they did seem happy to see her. But *you* were the one who bent down and picked her up out of that low-slung sports car. *You* were the one who easily and gently set her in the wheel chair.

That was you? Right? Because nobody else could do it, could they? They couldn't change her diaper or give her a shower, and they sure as hell couldn't pick her up out of a car that was six inches off the ground. That's right – they couldn't do *any* of that because they were useless and fucking weak and probably still are.

You remember after you wheeled her to the front of the church, how somebody started hammering on a piano and the whole damn crowd started singing? Remember how she stared up at the guy on the cross and was nodding her head to the music and was trying to sing through a body that had been ravaged by so many strokes you had lost count? She knew the words – you didn't, but she did.

Remember how she smiled that crooked drooped-face smile, the best smile she could manage, and she reached over with her thin little arm and patted you on the cheek? You remember that, right? Remember her singing, moving with the music, smiling and patting you on your cheek? Tell me you remember that.

How did you get strong enough to pick her up? *How did you get strong enough to be the only one there who could get her into the church on a fucking Sunday morning?*

No, look at *me*, not your feet. How did you get that strong? Did you get that strong by sitting on your ass and feeling sorry for yourself? Whining about shit you can't control? Watching TV and figuring out another reason to not go downstairs? *Is that how you got that strong?*

What? Say that again...yes, I want to hear you say it again. *I would like to get back in the gym.*

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! You know what your problem is: you forgot who you are and you got soft and you got weak. You *chose* to get weak. Your problem is you're weak. You *would like* to get strong again, but for some reason here you sit, on your ass, not doing what you know you have to do, what worked before, what you know you can do, and what you already know will work again.

Yes, *I'm* still here, listening. Rest easy, *I'm* not going anywhere. *I'm* with you, *I'll* always be here.

I am your Training.

You know, I look at your journal, and it's funny – I don't see the crippled-up drunk standing in front of me. I don't see the silly-ass chick that disappeared into big pharma simply because some goofball banged someone in her bed and moved on. I don't see that punk who feels sorry for himself because he is the only one in the world who has to work for a living and pay a mortgage and interact with family, or get over another girlfriend. I don't see the woman who thinks she's the only one in the world who

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ever had to wipe her own mama's butt, and who is so consumed with self-pity that she can't take care of herself. *I don't see any weakness in this book.*

You want to see weak? Take a look at that little baby laying there. You know that baby doesn't have any choices, don't you? That baby is completely dependent on the grace of others. That baby truly can't make any decisions. That baby is *helpless*.

I look at your log book and I don't see a helpless little baby. I see a woman who knows what to do and knows how to do it. I see a man who started down a trail he had never traveled before and got very strong. I see someone who got under the bar and *did the work*. I see someone who was able to help others get strong, and be strong for others who couldn't be strong for themselves. I don't see much self-pity in this book.

Sure, the people who walked the path in these log books may have been afraid. But even when things got scary they kept moving forward, they kept getting under the bar. And after double bodyweight didn't staple them to the floor, a whole lot of other stuff simply *wasn't that big a deal*.

I see someone who learned a lot more than just how to squat.

In the pages of your log book I see a person who can tell the difference between things they can change and things they can't. I see someone who makes their own choices.

Lets look back through your log book some more, and study your back trail carefully. Where in the world did that person go? Looking back over the trail you took can help you find that strong capable good person. Sure, you may be a little lost, but please believe me when I say that you are much closer to the trail than you might think.

I found time to check my back trail. A man who travels wild country gets to studying where he's coming from, because some day he might have to go back, and a trail looks a lot different when you ride over it in the opposite direction.

Every tree, every mountain, has its own particular look, and each one has several appearances, so you look back over your shoulder if you want to know country. It also helps you to live a whole lot longer.

– Louis L'Amour, Mojave Crossing

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