

Shirley's legs trembled as she grimaced at herself in the mirror, her face the same hue as her fuchsia top.

"You can do it," the voice called from behind her.

It took all her efforts not to tell that voice where to go. The expletives were right there, swirling in her thoughts, begging to be released.

"I *am* doing it," was all she could say as she struggled to get her breath back. Her motivation was waning by the second. Not helped by that entirely too cheery voice.

"You're doing great. Just a bit more effort."

*A bit more effort?* Shirley tried to focus on her reasons for being here. That group photo her best friend posted on Instagram, for starters.

The minute the image popped up in her Instagram feed, Shirley wanted to message Lyn and demand she take it down, delete it from existence. Of course, Lyn looked good. She always did. But she had the time to devote to looking her best, didn't she? And the money. But most of all, no kids draining the life out of her. Kath looked amazing in the image too. She had that birthday girl glow, thanks to a mix of Prosecco and party antics. Her new haircut enhanced her petite features too. Sally looked the epitome of success. A glowing tan was the only fake part about that woman. The vintage fashion, authentic. As was her smile. They'd all been friends for years. Decades, even. This was the first time she'd felt less than.

After staring at the photo for far longer than was healthy, Shirley decided not to mention her thoughts to Lyn. It was for the best, really. Why draw anyone else's attention to her very prominent frown line, the definite sagging of her jowls, and those extra chins that always found their way into every photo taken of her in the last ten years? Okay. Twenty.

Instead, she'd visited the health food aisle of the supermarket, stocking up on all the supplements her friends swore by, like magnesium, collagen, and keto gummies. They'd lightened her bank balance, but she'd yet to see a return on her investment physically. She'd also bought sugar-free biscuits and pumpkin seeds for snacks. They sat in the pantry untouched since her purchase three weeks ago. The kids wouldn't touch any of those either.

Then there'd been comments. She knew the kids were joking when they poked and prodded her ample curves, yet she too had noticed the wobbles. Maybe she did have tuck shop arms? That's not all she had, and she knew it. Her stomach bulge had been hidden under flared skirts for years, but slight it was no more. The elements of life were to blame. Only a kaftan could conceal the elements now.

Last week, a young girl offered up a seat on the train for her. Shirley sat down gratefully until the girl continued looking at her stomach. Then it dawned on her, the reason for her generosity. Wasn't it obvious her child-bearing days were well and truly behind her?

So when the letter arrived in the mail that very morning, there was no choice. A school reunion in three months was going to take effort. So here she was, at Fabulous Fitness. Ever since a traffic accident in her late teens, Shirley used the excuse of a 'dodgy back' to get out of any form of exercise. Too much water under the bridge, so to speak. Or too much wine and not enough water. Now she had no choice. She'd poured herself into Lycra, teamed it with an oversized t-shirt and driven straight to the gym.

Her arms trembling, Shirley pulled again and again until the vibration of the timer gave her welcome relief. Her heart thrumming in her ears, she stood up, grinning at her gym instructor. The ground swayed a little and she reached out to grab the treadmill rail. Maybe that was the endorphins kicking in. Or not enough oxygen getting to her brain? Either way, for once she was keen to get home and step on those scales, just to see how much weight she'd lost.

"Well done, Shirley, that was a good warm up. Now let's get started with the workout."

Shirley blinked. *Now let's get started?*

"Thanks, but that's enough for me today." Her words came out breathy and brittle.

"But you haven't done anything yet."

Shirley glanced at her watch. Had the past ten minutes been in her imagination?

“I’ve just... what have I been doing then?”

“This was your introduction to the equipment. We move in here next.”

The instructor opened a door revealing a much bigger room. Shirley took it all in. Hundreds of contraptions like the ones she’d been using, many bigger, more complex. A swarm of Lycra adorned nymphs with sweat bands and glistening brows moved amongst the machines. None of these people looked happy, despite their pert bums and toned thighs.

Shirley picked up her towel and water bottle, as the reality sunk in.

“Thanks, but I’ve decided to pass on this free gym trial.”

She felt like a super model as she strutted out the door. Who cared about tuck shop arms? And as for that stomach bulge, she’d carried four kids in there. She should be proud, not ashamed.

Climbing into her car, she pulled out her phone. Lyn answered on the third ring.

“Hey, Shirl, I’ve been meaning to call. Did you get the school reunion invitation?”

Shirley faltered, her bubble of bravado bursting. “Yes, I got it. I’m thinking I might not go.”

She pulled the phone away from her ear as Lyn squealed in response.

“There’s no way you or I are going to miss it. I can’t wait to look those girls in the eye, anyone who teased us, and ask them what they’ve done with their lives.”

Shirley remained silent. *What had she done with her life?* She’d studied teaching at university but gave that up when she had her kids. Now she was working four days a week as a personal carer for special needs children. The rest of her time she was looking after the special needs of her own kids and her husband - cooking, cleaning and being a taxi driver. Hardly the career she’d dreamed of when she’d still been at school. She’d wanted to be an English and Drama teacher. Now her whole life felt like a drama. Unfortunately, not one she could sell tickets to.

“Are you still there?”

Lyn's voice snapped her back from her mental tour of 1995, and the mean girls doing laps of the high-school corridors.

"Yeah, I'm here. But what have I got to brag about?"

"Please tell me you are joking?"

Shirley stayed silent again until Lyn's voice made her jump.

"You have the hottest husband who couldn't be more devoted to you. And the most adorable kids. Isn't Jenny in that accelerated music program? And little Sam's an up-and-coming soccer superstar. But you, you're so inspiring with your career. You're like Mother Teresa."

Shirley smiled. She knew Lyn had the hots for her Cam. It was something she'd mentioned constantly, all in good fun. But that was the first time she'd said something complimentary about her kids, or her choice of career. To be fair, their catchups were about forgetting work and home life and having fun.

"Besides," Lyn said, "we've aged better than most of the crew from St Barnabus. Have you been following any of them on Instagram?"

The mention of Instagram reminded her of the original purpose of the call.

"Lyn, that reminds me. You know that pic you have on Insta, the one of us from Kath's birthday party?"

"That's such a great photo, isn't it? I'm getting it printed for Kath as a memento of her party, but I'm getting copies for each of us too. A reminder of how fabulous we all are."

Shirley bit her lip. This conversation was not going where she expected.

"Anyway, sorry love, but my client's arrived. I've gotta go. But call me tonight, if you're not too busy with that hunk of a husband." The laughter disappeared as the call disconnected.

Shirley sat looking at her phone before opening Instagram. She searched Lyn's profile for that photograph. This time instead of her chins and sagging jowls, she noticed something else. All her friends looked happy. *She* looked happy. Thinking back to that day she realised it wasn't just a fake Insta moment either. She *was* happy. And Lyn had been on the money with her compliments too. She pictured Cam this morning, delivering her a coffee in bed before he

headed off to work, telling her to enjoy her day off. She *did* have a hot, devoted husband. Then she remembered the school drop off, as her four had scrambled out of the car with mumbled I love you's. She *did* have the best kids. Most of the time, anyway. And she did love her job. And she also had the most wonderful, supportive friends.

She hit the like button, then read the comments. Other friends had commented on the post. *Looking good girls* and *You haven't changed*. She liked those comments too, before adding her own. *See you all at the reunion. xx*

Glancing at her watch, Shirley did a calculation. There was still over two hours until she was due to collect the kids from school. Precious free time to do whatever she wanted. Time for something much more enjoyable than a gym workout. Like shopping. Weren't kaftans back in style?