

ESSAYS

The Race of the Vagina Monster: An Excerpt from Field Notes

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There are eleven of us at pole-dancing class on Monday evening, instructed by Jess, a short, young woman with blond hair long enough for some elaborate hair-flicking. We have successfully completed our five-minute warm up and Jess bounces around the room, excitedly telling us that we are about to do something fun. Now, I'll admit it: I've never been to a gym, let alone a pole-dancing class, and something about Jess' tone makes me feel more than a bit anxious. As I look around the room, I see shifty glances from my fellow pole-dancing beginners.

“We are going to do a new exercise: its kind of a relay, so divide yourselves up into four groups, two groups at each side of the room facing opposite the other two.”

We follow her further instructions until we are sitting down in lines, one behind the other, cross-legged on the floor. I've placed myself at the back of my line, so I can give myself as much time as possible to work out what to do. Jess joins the front of the group opposite my own, fiercely establishing herself as our competitor. She claps her hands, smiles broadly, and tells us that we are going to do:

“The Race of the Vagina Monster.”

The room echoes with nervous giggles as Jess shows us how to complete the race. I watch in awe as she lies on her back and begins to wave her outstretched legs in the air. Each leg wave moves her body about half an inch along the floor towards my group.

Not only does Jess glide across the floor while her legs are churning air, she also manages to chat to us, telling us about the places in our bodies where we should be feeling some strain. As she approaches the other side of the room, I worry momentarily that she will kick one of us, but she passes our group, spins round and yells for the race to begin.

“The first team to get all their Vagina Monsters to the other side of the room, one by one, wins!”

There is a lot of cheering and encouragement from the groups and a lot of confusion and surprise from the racers:

“C'mon! You've got it! Go go!”
“AAAARARGGHGHGHG, THIS HURTS!”
“WHAT THE HELL, JESS?”
“Oh my god! ... Wait, can we use our elbows?!”
“Yes! Absolutely! You should be on your elbows!”
“Woohoo! You can do it!”
“Show us the goods!”
“You've got it, go for the wax on/wax off thing”

At last it is my turn, and my nerves are confirmed – I had not nearly expected how strenuous it would be, and I am a bit embarrassed by it all. But the other women's cheers make it much easier to laugh at myself; we are all laughing at ourselves, and each other. My legs – unable to straighten fully due to my own lack of flexibility – are now the focus of Jess's (well intentioned and positive) criticism, and I finally make it to the other side and snort with the team at how ridiculous this all feels. There is just one fellow pole dancer left inching across the floor and we turn to focus all of our cheers and encouragement towards her; Jess joins

her on the floor and they reached the other side of the room, Vagina Monsters together. The room bursts into applause and cheers for each other.

The Race of the Vagina Monster was one of the most bizarre things we did at pole class. Jess promised us it would be a challenge, and it certainly was, but the required stretching and flexing was a great warm up for pole-dancing. As we pushed ourselves across the floor we were learning how to become comfortable with our bodies, using them in ways that would come in useful for hanging on a pole with only grip from upper thighs challenging gravity. We gained greater understanding of the dichotomous relationship between sexual acts and friendship, in which we found we were using our bodies not as voyeurs engaged in performing for the pleasure of others, but instead as a group promoting female empowerment and bodily autonomy. We all felt uncomfortable at the start of The Race of the Vagina Monster, but then again, not everyone hopes for the chance to wave their legs about the air in front of near strangers while slowly and painfully inching across a squeaky, waxed floor.