

Sweating Liquids

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The beads of sweat travel down the face, contouring her chin, down the hairs of her neck toward the dip her clavicle makes into a tiny puddle. Another bead in unison appears at the apex of her knee and makes a straight path through the dry unshaven skin, resembling a snow plow running over flakes of snow. Winter is a time when shaving legs becomes futile. It becomes a scraping of flaky skin rather than stripping stubble to make nice smooth shiny surfaces. Winters are difficult on everything. The sauna at the gym is where she comes every evening, to her hibernation chamber. The sauna at the YMCA is where she can think of the previous summer. Sweating makes her happy, for more than the obvious reasons during this frigid winter.

She had spent the last summer in New Orleans; July, the worst month one could possibly decide to go down South. The southern parts of the country where beaches do not exist. New Orleans ceased to be a festive town but rather just another speck on the toilet bowl of the Mississippi. Humidity was one hundred percent in the morning, rising to one hundred and fifty in the afternoon preceding the daily showers. It was lush, not with vegetation, but with mosquitoes. The majority of the time was spent on the couch, in the front parlor of the house. Their minds were unable to think and their bodies were unable to move because the heavy heat weight down any type of activity and drowned their abilities. She laid on her back staring at the high ceilings occasionally turning to look at the beautifully tiled fireplace. She thought it might be the cooler to lay near the fireplace, to absorb the cooler temperatures of the tile design on her back. Instead she remained in her position while sweat poured out and soaked the couch. Every fiber of the flowered printed cushions acted as pours of a sponge.

Sweat radiates off of her body now in the sauna. She turns a page of the book she is reading. She has read two chapters in this room. This must mean she has been lounging for about 25 minutes. The sign on the door reads:

**WARNING: Do not exceed 30 minutes in Sauna.
Excessive exposure can be harmful to your health.**

She wonders to herself if this proves that a summer spent in New Orleans can be just as hazardous? She turns another page scanning the words for a recognizable place. She has no idea what the actual story of this novel is, even by the fifth chapter. She can only recognize a couple of names of the characters in this slow moving tale. It doesn't matter though, the characters are really not important. The narrative is not the reason she began reading this book again. It was a book she bought during her freshman year of college, because a professor, whom she admired, recommended it to her. He was from the South, Alabama maybe, and this story had brought back a feeling of nostalgia for him. She has picked up this book again for the tenth time, for the same reason she comes to the sauna every evening. Until now, she could not get a feeling for the book, but now having experienced New Orleans first hand, she too may allow herself to relate nostalgically to the story.

She keeps scanning the page for locations. She may not retain the names of the characters, but she knows where they are; which highways they travel, which businesses lie on the various corners of Elisyan Fields, which stores are on Magazine Street and which bars they frequent down in the French Quarter. Her eyes skim the words and her mind wanders back to the recent past. Once in a while her visual pacing repertoire and her thoughts will make a connection with the words on the page. She retrieves her summer and dreams of it in her tank tops and shorts. It is a way of surfacing from the hibernation under layers of itchy wool sweaters.

When they weren't being stagnant in the swollen house, they went to the YMCA of New Orleans. He was an athlete, or rather was one in his past life. Now he is just athletic, or tries to be. Perhaps he tries to get back his youth, when he was the Star on campus, the gorgeous rugby star. "Football is for wimps. Who needs to wear all that gear to play sports. Rugby is the sport for men" he would say. When he moved to New Orleans, one of the first things he had to investigate was which Gym to join. She followed him around trying to seem interested in his enthusiasm. Thus when he joined the Y, somehow she got a free membership out of the deal. They tried to go everyday and when he was suddenly called of to work, she went alone, did laps in the luke warm pool and thought of him, while sitting in the sauna.

Physical activities always tend to relive mental stress and misery. The worst anyone can do in the winter is to become lethargic. Even with the temperatures dropping back to the ice age, she forces herself to get into her frozen truck and drive down to the gym. She would rather die in a car accident than to be found, having turned into a brain-dead popsicle in the house.

Even in comparison, the summer was definitely no picnic. There was a lot of chaos and stress, both in her life as well as in their relationship. Thoughts of getting so physically fit that she could run home the 1500 miles often crossed her mind. Perhaps even meet a wonderful companion on the journey. But she never left, at least not when she had scheduled to depart. Somehow by accident something stood in the way of leaving. She also knew that once she left this time, this would be the end of the relationship. She was not ready to go yet, even with all the misery they seemed to cause one another.

Night should have been the release from the heat. They no longer touched when they slept. In the colder climates, they often slept, touching. She would often imbed the crown of her head to fit snugly in his right arm pit, her left arm blanketing his chest, the right arm disappearing from the numbness of weight. Yet her seemingly amputated limb never bothered her, as long as the warmth was generated. Other times they slept directionally, both facing the wall fitted like spoons. Now, though, lying under the rapidly spinning ceiling fan, they laid not like organized silverware, but rather disorganized and apart. If any two fleshy surfaces touched, it immediately became wet with the condensed heat of the night.

From across the vast wrinkle of sheets, which separated their sleep, she would listen to his breathing, in and out, in and out, until the familiar inhales and exhales would become regular. He was dreaming. She always knew when he entered that third stage of sleep. He dreamt of monsters, violent and terrible, He observed these beings in his sleep, instead of reliving the day as she did in her dreams. His fingers would twitch, his mouth crinkle, he dreamt of his future. She only dreamt of the present, it was hard to break away from it. The future seemed empty and non-existent.

She had just graduated from University and there was no more schooling she could occupy herself with. Not unless she changed her major, her passion, her lifestyle. She felt like a prisoner who had just been released from the penitentiary after fifty years. The freedom was overwhelming. The reason for her journey to New Orleans originally was to give him a ride and to stay as long as it took to find some answers. She wanted to make some decisions about what she should do next. Silly as it may have seemed, she was waiting for an epiphany, some sign or a revelation to come to her. Moses had gone up into the hills and had returned with some vague rules of life, she thought New Orleans would be her equivalent.

On the balmy evenings when she had gone to the gym alone, she rode his bike toward Lee's Circle. She rode through the Quarter, toward the statue of General Lee who stood steadfast and gallant on a 50 foot column in the center of his Circle. She swore he would subtly move and scratch his balls, if you watched him long enough to catch him. Why not, it was possible, an updated bronze statue, turned kinetic public sculpture.

She rode through the Quarter, passing the lights, the music spilling out from the various bars. She peered in occasionally to witness some of the drunkards having the time. She wondered if they lived here. Perhaps they were natives, but this town marked all of them as tourists. She felt just as they appeared, even if she did live here, she would only be visiting and never feel at home here. As she rode, colorful strings of Mardi Gras beads littered her path, resembling the spaghetti-like worms which appeared on the streets after the daily showers. She rode on, swerving around them, making nonsensical patterns of her course. She hoped for some strange occurrence, a word written in the beads telling her where to go, when and how to leave. Colorful dragonflies also swarmed in her route, their bellies full of mosquitoes. She preferred to think their freedom contained some of her being, as she clumsily rode on scratching the many bites and scabs on her legs.

The signs never appeared and after she couldn't take the heat any longer, she made herself leave, without any answers.

A towel clad heavy set woman passes the sauna door. She looks at her reflection in the glass door and sucks her pooch of a belly closer to her ribs. "Please don't come in" a whisper evaporates inside. She

hopes to herself that the woman will not enter her meditative space. A sigh of relief cuts through the warm, as the woman heads toward the showers. The Y is a good place to get away from the University. When she was in school, the University gym was her torture and savior. It was always awkward to see students of other faculty naked outside of their academic realm. Here in the Downtown Y, away from the campus, she can become just another naked unconscious by-stander.

Graduating and the freedom which follows is difficult on anyone who has been in school nonstop since the age of three. Chaos and trouble appeared one after another, as if these were the signs telling her to go back to school. Her father was a lifer in school. Leading a safe life. Well, others say this is no life and you have to get out and stay out for a while to really experience life. Yet life has been a purgatory for her lately, existing half-assed between hell and comfort.

Her first major setback besides getting stranded in New Orleans, was the flood. The Great Flood of '93 in the Midwest, was the tragedy which took her mentor away. Her professor who had taught her everything she admitted to be proud of, was killed in a "flood related accident" He died in his studio, trying to save his work from the quick rising waters. He tried to overcome nature and she was much too great for him. Appropriately, he ended his life and career at the location he became a God, in his studio. All artists know that when they die, their studio is where the tragic fall will happen. They work their beings to the bone, getting close to death every time, hoping that the end result will resemble the intensity of death.

An old school acquaintance had called her the night before she was to leave New Orleans. The phone's ring broke the silence of the night and awoke her from her thoughts about the previous month. She turned toward the clock which glared a red 2:56 and she knew that either some one had just given birth or that someone had just passed away; life or death. The freaked out sobbing voice coming from the receiver told her it was the later.

The mentor seemed immortal to everyone he had touched. How can an immortal being die? News like this is something that is not accepted readily, like the death of any other great and immortal being. She finally understood the disbelief people have of the deaths of celebrities like Elvis and Jim Morrison. Their markers may be set firm on the mounds of dirt, but this becomes just a mark of temporary absence. As if the epitaphs should read "Temporary closed for renovation" or "Gone on Vacation", like the signs which hang in front of the drawn blinds of shop doors.

The memorial service was scheduled to be held the following Tuesday. There was no doubt, to anyone who heard of the news, that attendance at the service was a mandatory event. She had not been personally close with this mentor. Most of the relationship was based on fear of, respect for and contempt at this man. she was never an assistant to him like many of her other peers. Now being out of school and

away from his opinions, she had realized exactly what he meant by them. Only it seemed too late to say Thank you.

The odometer reading on her truck increased quickly that summer as she drove along the Mississippi River upstream toward Kansas City. It was a typical afternoon in New Orleans when she packed up her things to leave. The daily monsoon-like rains had just begun. A few droplets of humidity had just started to turn into a tremendous storm. The spears of rain made its first moves to penetrate the house and she stood in a puddle in the front parlor looking past the porch to the road ahead. The mosquitoes had finally retreated from where they came. The rain was a good disguise for the tears coming from all directions. She stepped out into the violence and ran for the shelter of her small truck. The Mississippi had begun to rise to the highway viaducts even before she got on the roads. The lightning fought with the radio stations and won, creating static to become backup for her crying. She looked back over her shoulder and waved but the windows had become fogged so badly she did not see him wave back. The salty stream coming from her sobs would just mix and add to the standing water in Missouri.

She realized her place in the irrigation cycle just then. An hour had passed in the sauna, her sweat had escaped one venue and was making itself back into the system. Soon spring will come to melt the ice and snow, washing away the previous year.