

Sweating It Out

fiction
approx 3200 words

They'd told her right at the desk that the steam maker in the sauna had taken so much vandalism they'd stopped repairing it; when she got there yesterday however Donna found that some moron had also twisted off the thermometer's metal pointer. *Really, who'd want to screw up a thermometer?* Donna thought.

Teenagers. Teen-age boys.

But, its stump indicated roughly 110 degrees, or, 100 degrees greater than outside, and the heat felt fine. There were five men around her, no one even trying to make eye contact. That felt fine too. Donna just wanted to be left alone.

Four sat on the upper bench. Sharing the slightly cooler lower with Donna, a white-haired, great old bull, possibly 300 pounds, large conic abdomen, tubular arms, big solid geometric pieces fit together, the chunky strong man of black-and-white. His hands, a giant's.

Donna had seen him yesterday also, then as now in company with the two men above and behind him conversing with each other without the big man's participation. Donna surmised they'd all come to town for some kind of organized labor meeting; yesterday the big man's two companions tossed acronyms and code words back and forth like baseball shortstops: IBEW, local this local that, equity parity see-you NITE, international. They'd seemed to be feeling each other out, strangers to each other tentative in approach; but the propositions they offered each other were sometimes deflected *No I think 8% is just too much*. Something about some kind of graduated fee proposal *I had to pay it; let the new people pay it too*. Even as Donna listened they proceeded to offer each other propositions in negative terms, things they could agree to oppose. The mystery and frustration of hearts and minds they were no longer winning. *People voting against their own self-interest*, the one had shook his head in protest and mystification.

Through it all the big old one sat. Donna took his self-containment as privilege. People came to his great bulk and deposited trust. One of the others or himself mentioned something about stewardship. *Stewards' dinner*. You could imagine him striding upstairs into someone's office unannounced, walking up to a switch and shutting off main power. An authority to resist now antiquated: At the same time another male piece in a puzzle of oppression.

The fifth person was someone else who barely spoke, a person about Donna's size who affected a full lotus position and a bushy mustache. The two things didn't go together, or wouldn't have at some earlier time. Donna realized that he too was defining himself rather than accepting time and circumstance passively.

It was the sixth person who startled everyone. The conventioners were talking less than yesterday, possibly because they'd lived too vigorously the night before, possibly because even

though maintaining complete sobriety — or even bottled joy in moderation — they were no longer as young as they thought and had two full days of novel activity added to two consecutive days visiting a gym, where in fact Donna noticed their exercise was less energetic than the day before. So the sauna was more contemplative. At least they were. In a long silence the sixth asked, from his corner of the top bench, “What do you think’s going to happen when Obama takes away all our guns?”

The big white-haired man shifted. He made a board creak.

Donna looked toward the sixth person, a glance sideways just before she actually turned her head in the opposite direction. He looked like somebody she’d run over on a soccer field.

“Do you really think that’s going to happen?”

Donna turned, in no small part surprised, to look at the speaker: the walrus-mustache on the bench above and behind, eyes open, regarding the gun man, the sixth man. The mustache man, after laying out a few things about the landscape of possibility — politics that is, parties to the argument and their dispositions and their strengths — argued that nothing would likely change regarding gun control. But then he stated frankly he wished it would, just when Donna believed he would continue from his lofty point of view above it all. And then he coolly asked the gun guy to respond, to speak his own thoughts, as though he actually possessed thoughts worth hearing.

Donna didn’t hear the reply and the back-and-forth that ensued so much as the tone of voice, the attitudes of each, their changes in posture, the tells of being, far more telling than their superficial thoughts. What people thought they thought Donna considered of little interest; in Donna’s life strange and dangerous beings had emerged from costumes and acts that declared themselves harmless, or even friendly.

Donna looked at the gun guy directly, now that he was occupied by the mustache guy, while he stirred his slight frame for his responses. He had a face of congruent delicate boyish features, an incongruous hormone-heavy growth of beard. He looked attractive in a way, and his answers came in reasonable tones, but his eyes looked empty.

The lotus-postured person unfolded himself leg by leg, waving one foot at full length into Donna's airspace before refolding, opposite foot on top this time. The right one. All the while he maintained his conversation, unperturbed and agreeable in tone. He might have been talking about something as devoid of emotional charge as the weather.

Yet the mustache man challenged the dark-complexioned gun guy; Donna listened to him rolling out a broad picture point after point, many of which he said he agreed with and even admired (he called hunters "conservationists", a word creaking with history); yet he asserted in several different ways kinds of regulation. He didn't press the gun guy; he didn't scoff; he didn't condescend. The gun guy did not argue skillfully, but didn't shy off as someone would who felt scorned or not valued or not respected. It was highly curious to Donna. Misguided perhaps, but interesting.

Donna felt heat almost attacking, as though breaking through defenses. Donna searched for the clock visible through the glass door, averting eyes from an inquiring glance from the large man, Donna saw that barely ten minutes had passed. Two deep breaths couldn't restore balance. On standing to leave, it turned out the large man had come to his feet too. Donna didn't look to see if this was intentional. Donna walked by him. He followed.

He thanked Donna for holding the door open a second, succeeding Donna into the cool hallway, turquoise painted to chest height, azure above to ceilings of speckled, pressed tiles.

“A little of that sauna goes a long way doesn’t it?” he said to Donna. His behavior indicated nothing but genial sociability. His eyes passed around naturally, not lingering on Donna, not inquiring or prying.

“Mm-m. Just had to catch my breath,” Donna said. The man stepped off toward the water fountain, brushed stainless steel box extruded from the wall’s concrete blocks. Therefore Donna stepped opposite, toward the pool.

Donna passed through the doorway into the pool again. To the left about a foot overhead, a nozzle, over a sign ordering swimmers to shower before immersing. Despite that, few swimmers seemed to use it, but Donna found it custom-suited to her purposes. Donna stepped underneath it and drew cold water again, not the frigid cold of ground but tepid, enough to refresh, enough to cleanse skin. It passed over the chunky tubes of a body, thick torso, arms and legs like a slighter version of the large man himself. The large man’s facial hair, now that Donna thought about it, hardly even showed. Donna increased the water temperature to hot. There would be no need to wash under the swimming suit, in the locker room. This would be good enough.

In the hall, the big man was entering the sauna again. Just as he was about to pull the door closed behind, he glanced over his shoulder, and held the it open again for Donna. Donna had thought to get dressed and leave, but suddenly accepted this invitation. Something inside was diverting enough. If she sweated all over again she could always re-rinse in the pool shower.

Two women had joined the group, one of them taking Donna’s former seat, and one of the two conventioners had vanished. The man with the mustache, now out of his lotus tuck and attempting a full leg-over on the confines of the top bench, was continuing his dialog with the

gun guy, saying that he found the large clips available for automatic fire something no reasonable person would miss. “You don’t use them for hunting after all, do you?” he asked the gun guy.

“I do, I have some of them,” the gun guy responded.

Donna almost detected a reaction from the mustache man.

“But not pistols,” he persisted.

“Yes, I going hunting with them too.” He hesitated a second. “On a side belt you know. In case my rifle jams or something.”

The mustache person paused. Donna noticed that his facial hair was actually sandy blond, whereas the hair on his head was brown. It was an unusual mismatch, but maybe that somehow connected to the mismatch between his Victorian personal appearance and his practice of yoga.

“Well,” he finally said slowly, “I have to tell you, I favor restricting those things. People have been hunting for many years without them. Do you think government shouldn’t make any regulations about things like that?”

Donna had already decided the gun guy had little in the way of intelligence, alone from the way he presented and clung to this need for weapons. Hunting a naked animal with high-powered rifles, telescopic sights, and all that weaponry, that never appealed to Donna, ever, not a little; going out with automatic-fire — two! — if not more! — *idiot!*

But the mustache guy was managing somehow not to do the natural thing, which was laugh out loud and call a jackass a jackass. They went on, the other people letting the two thrust and parry. Or maybe more like Donna, just suffering the unstoppable babble over matters impersonal and unstoppable. Anything but take responsibility for their own selves.

Donna looked down at the hands there at the end of her thick wrists. They stuck out rather than hanging, being connected by thicknesses of sinew. No limp wrists there. None of that girliness even there, no swish or twitter or style or grace. It was always plod plod plod with Donna, plod through the snow and cold and slush, head down like a big beast pulling a loaded cart, watching the ground beware, ice and slipfoot everywhere. Falling didn't hurt so much as the laughter that might come a second later, from people across the street brought to safe salted walks in warm cars.

The gun guy's voice penetrated Donna's reverie, spilling out something she wasn't sure for several sentences she heard right: He was confessing a record of driving under the influence of alcohol, attending a long series of substance counseling and night classes to get his license back. He sat there, unfolding all this in a long minute and becoming completely exposed in a way Donna had never seen in person, something totally unexpected and totally straight, the straight taste of life one starves for end of night from attenuated morning. And at the end of it he concluded, *I don't know, I guess I learned something about myself.*

Not if you still think you need all those guns, Donna thought, but it was strange; Donna saw the thought before thinking it, and again after.

Donna rose and left the sauna again, returned to the swimming pool maybe to take one more time the embrace of water. Swimming sometimes felt like infantile flailing to Donna, yet by some miracle forward motion came, and even in a brief few instants with no stroking at all, pure gliding, accrued from the right flailing, momentum, progress on something earned, through clear clean chemical-safe water. Sometimes Donna felt a combination of the two: Her effort combining with an arrow-like movement through the resistance, liquid sliding around her neck

and chest, a body in grace. Concrete underfoot, tile walls to kick off from. Left to the muck of lake and creek how would civilization ever become its modern self?

Every lane had a swimmer, some of them already had two. Donna chose one taken by a lone woman and jumped in at the shallow end. When the woman stopped and raised her goggle-head above the surface Donna simply extended her two pairs of thumb and forefinger, wagging the Ls back and forth to propose that each should restrict themselves to a half-lane. The alternative signal was making a circle, so one followed the other, but Donna found it difficult to match herself to someone else's speed — mostly she felt too slow, and inconvenienced the other swimmer when they had to pass in mid-length. The people who were slower than Donna were barely competent. The woman simply nodded to Donna's sign, which was commonly used, and shoved off, having interrupted her workout for hardly the space of a breath. Donna followed after a few seconds in the half-lane the woman left for her.

In the water again, Donna found that she had little energy remaining. She had already done a half-mile, after a session on a rowing machine, and felt that her body had absorbed the effect of the hormones, but again what she thought and felt differed from what was true. Having invaded another person's space, Donna somehow felt obliged to go on however. It seemed very likely to Donna the woman experienced more than enough disruptions in her day for no purpose, by people giving her no thought.

Yet after two hundred yards Donna simply had to give up. Standing in the shallow end Donna watched her lane mate going on tirelessly. Inside Donna had nothing. Donna pushed her weight from the water and into the sudden grasp of free air, dumping her bottom on the pool side, feet dangling. Rose, returned to the shower right nearby. Turned the shower faucet again

and took a warm stream over head and neck, lifted face to it, feeling its long sooth over shoulders and chest, down thighs and feet. It was the caress of touch without hands. For a spell Donna had no care. For a spell there was no time.

In the locker room Donna passed the large man again. He was striding toward her stark naked, with a yellow towel over his shoulder, making for the showers on her left. Donna and he exchanged a nod and she went to her locker in a corner. She spun her combination open and took out her own towel, an earthen brown, and sat down with it around her shoulders. By the time she began to employ it she was already virtually dry.

The big man entered the enclave behind her — she knew it was him without even having to glance, by the way the ether displaced — and he began to speak as another person entered:

“Say, hi. That was really something, what you said to that fella in there. ‘Do you really think that’s going to happen.’ That was just the right touch.”

Donna pulled her undershirt on and just as efficiently slipped on her shirt, something flannelly and heavy because of the cold, having long tails that hung halfway down her thighs. She had chosen her visits, especially her uses of the locker room, for slack times, but she knew that very soon this time would come when someone else came along as she was dressing. But here it was and she felt safe in removing her wet swimming trunks and pulling on boxer shorts. She felt better then. She felt a step closer to being at ease in the world.

The two men were still talking. “Imagine, I try to think,” the mustached guy was saying, “what kind of a world made him. What kind of a world made me.”

Donna glanced very briefly over her shoulder. Next to the first man’s bulk the mustache man looked diminished. In fact he wasn’t even as large as Donna estimated, in the sauna. *You*

make yourself, Donna wanted to say. *You make your own world. That's what you're responsible for.*

No one else entered Donna's space until she left. She brushed by the other two, chatting, giving them just a nod as she pulled gloves and knitted wool cap from her heavy coat. At the desk one of the girls wished Donna a nice day, one of those manufactured greetings which on a bad day could drive Donna wild. But Donna lifted a hand in salute and offered a faint smile. *Acting like equals "is." Will equal, eventually. Maybe.*

Two sets of double-paned glass made the foyer; the outer set was blasted white with frost. The air between the two doors felt barely freezing — a fair warning of what lay beyond. She stopped fumbling with the coat zipper, gloves, hat all at the same time. She put her gym bag down, straddling it on the salt-graveled floor, tucked in the other stuff, and zipped up first. *All this time later, still can't do this in order.* A small thing surely, forgetting to tuck the scarf first then zip then get out the other paraphernalia — certainly nothing to scourge oneself for, but one of the many little scourges Donna inflicted on herself throughout the day.

"Ah man," someone said next to Donna, almost startling her. It was the mustache guy. "Here it is: winter."

Evidently he was talking to her. She nodded.

He held out a bare hand. "You've just started coming haven't you? I'm Kurt Turing."

"Don," Donna said. "Don... Tinnitus."

"*Tinnitus?*" His forefinger almost automatically went toward his ear, but he touched his scalp and scratched as though that's what he meant to do all along.

“Yeah, it sounds like that, but it’s not exactly spelled like that,” Don said. He was reproaching himself for that too. It had just come out. But for a flash he’d thought it cute. Like nobody would recognize it. “Well, nice.” Don snatched up his bag and surged for the door. “Here goes.” He shouldered the bag and reached for gloves as cold bit exposed skin. *Why not*, he decided. He was already scheduled to go to the courthouse in a week or two and make official changes. He could just alter the spelling a little bit, Tineatus or something. But it would mean the constant little flak of interference, the unending little noise in your ear.

He paused in striding to look down at his hands, feet somewhere father beyond, down there. His fingers were thin and even and long, the skin soft and pale. Don pulled his gloves on. He saw foresaw success, successfully being himself, being able to see and to be openly without being exposed. Don pulled out the knit cap again but delayed putting it on. He thought of putting himself to a little test. Sure enough by the time he got to his beat-up old car his wet hair had begun to freeze.

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