

August 20, 2007

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Pore Me

By SHALOM AUSLANDER

THE main thing is not to rush. If my pace accelerates past “Leisurely Stroll,” I’m done for. So I give myself time. I allow 30 minutes for a 10-minute walk. I head out at 5 o’clock for a 7 o’clock meeting 10 blocks away. Men hurry past. Women tut as they shoulder by. “It’s called a sidewalk,” mutters an old lady with a cane.

“Easy,” I tell myself, “It’s not a race.” I meander. I saunter. I mosey. And just when the day is ending and I think I’ve made it — one day without being covered in sweat, one day without coming home drenched — they switch my train from Track 6 to Track 11.

“Anyone sitting here?” I ask the unluckiest passenger on the train, pointing to the empty seat beside her. She looks at my shirt — at the dark patches under my arm, at the other one forming on my chest, at the streams of salt water sheeting down my forehead and stinging my eyes — and she smiles kindly.

“Yes,” she says. “Yes, there is.”

I sweat. I am a sweater. I sweat in T-shirts, I sweat in shorts, I sweat in the shower. It is not a certain dampness. It is not a masculine bit of moist. Sweat spurts out the top of my head like I’m a lawn sprinkler. I sit down on the curb at lunchtime and a little girl leaps over my head.

When I was young, the first thing my teachers told me about hell was that it was hot; after that, the punishments seemed redundant. “Yes, yes, hung by my tongue, eyes gouged out, boiled alive. How hot is hot, exactly? How about fans, do they have any fans?”

Summertime, when the living’s theoretically easy, is three long months of hell. The cold is easy — there’s no limit to the clothing you can put on. You can layer yourself so thick that your arms stick out and you can’t bend your legs at the knees. But heat — once you’re naked, there’s nowhere left to go.

So I plan ahead. By Memorial Day, I am usually rummaging the stores, preparing for the looming meltdown, hoping for salvation in linen pants and moisture-wicking shirts. I keep hoping that some sort of full-body sweatband will be the must-have this season, but the shop windows fill, as they always do, with easily-stained white shirts, off-white shirts, tan shirts. I stand in the men’s department and seethe.

In this season of blue skies and white beaches, I wear black. Black holds more heat than white but it shows damp patches less, the universe’s twisted sartorial/thermodynamic joke. I dress like an undertaker on Casual Friday: black T-shirt, black khakis and a pocket full of paper towels that will not suffice when the levee of my hairline eventually breaks.

As the solstice approaches, my mood darkens like the collar of a red button-down. I stare at the men on the subway in three-piece suits, each one dry as a bone. Something's going on. Someone's not telling me something.

I try to figure it out. Is it something I'm eating? Something I'm drinking? Am I drinking too much — or not enough? I drop caffeine. I eat less salt. I eat more salt. Last summer I thought it was my weight. I lost 10 pounds and seemed to sweat twice as much as I did before. Maybe if I gain 20 pounds I'll stop sweating completely? Maybe if I gain 100 I'll just drop dead, giving my washing machine a much-needed break?

The globe turns. The globe warms. July arrives. I look to science: Aisle 4, Anti-Perspirants. I'm a rabid anti-perspirant. I want the perspirants rounded up. I want them killed. I find Dry. I find Extra Dry. I find Cool Wave. I find Extra Dry Cool Wave Extreme.

I end up choosing one from the bottom shelf — that's where they keep the good stuff: hair gel that sets like concrete, Advil 6000 for Fast Relief of Sudden Dismemberment and a roll-on deodorant so strong you're supposed to put it on at night so it has time to alter your gene structure. I put it on that night, and sweated twice as much out of the top of my head the following day as I had the day before.

August. Misery now. I spend my time trying to figure out a way to earn a living without leaving the pool. I watch reports of global warming with evil glee: Soon you will know how I feel. Soon you will all know.

I try to take my mind off the thousands of small leaks my body has sprung by sitting still in the dark and watching movies; for me, "March of the Penguins" was an 85-minute, sub-zero happy ending. I replay the storm scenes. Look at all that ice! Look at all that snow!

And then, finally, Aug. 1 turns to Aug. 10, and Aug. 10 turns to Aug. 20, and I realize that the march of this urban penguin will soon be over. Soon it will be September and then fall and with fall will come a return to normality, a return to dryness, maybe even a white shirt now and again.

And one day, as the ice forms on the Hudson and the snow whips across Broadway, I'll be sitting on the train and a woman will appear, a woman in earmuffs and mittens, a woman covered in so many layers that her arms stick out and she can't bend her legs at the knee.

"Anyone sitting there?" she will ask, trying to point to the empty seat beside me.

"Yes," I will smile kindly. "Yes, there is."

Shalom Auslander is the author of the forthcoming "Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir."

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)