

*I wrote two stories about a woman whom I met in the sauna at the Berkeley Y. The first one, "Hot Sauna Memories" was written in 1983 and published in The Evangelion, the Pacific School of Religion's Student Journal, of which I was editor for the 1983-84 school year. The second story, "My Enemy Has Died" was written in 1995 and self-published in 2000 in A Star Still Rising: Celebrating 50 Years, a chapbook celebrating my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday which I handed out as party favors. I have combined both stories here for publication in my library.*

"Hot Sauna Memories"  
by May Cotton © 1983, 2025

The woman gracefully maneuvers her bulk of jeaned obesity through the crowd, concealing her pain. Gluttony is its own reward. Watching, I remember.

It is Friday at the Y, my down day, for this is the day that my usual friends vanish and I spend my minutes alone in the sauna. Alone in the sauna . . .

The heat permeates my soul in the silence; sweat runs into my eyes, drips from my elbows, nose, fingertips resting on my knees. Down my body it runs, to drip on the cedar boards of the shelf upon which I sit. I compose myself to meditate for an eternal moment of silence alone. I drift easily through the back of my head, my senses permeating the heat which permeates me. Such ecstatic agony.

A sound slips into my silent serenity and I raise one eyelid. I am no longer alone. The lithe shape bending to pick of the cedar bucket of cold water sends my spirit crashing back to reality. I watch as she fills the wooden ladle and with a deft motion sends cold cascading droplets against the walls. As the water hisses and steams, something ill and twisted stirs within me. She has failed to ask if I object to water on the walls, a grievous breach of sauna etiquette.

She turns and seems to notice me for the first time. "Want some water in your corner?" she asks. Her coarse voice grates on me. It does not fit her long, lean frame, her slender waist flaring easily into sleek, slim hips, her breasts round and firm as ripe fruit—like mine will never be. Her short black hair is plastered like limp rags about her remarkably plain face.

"No," I say softly, "I prefer it dry."

"I like the steam," she replies as she scrambles up on the bench to sit across from me.

Belatedly I realize she has spoken and look up to see her devouring me with her eyes.

"I didn't hear what you said," I lie as I free my ears from the towel I've wrapped about my head. My friend Celine tells me that it is necessary to protect one's brain from the heat, the

skull being only 1/8 inch thick. I trust Celine.

“Oh? Do you plug your ears?” She sounds offended.

“I was meditating,” I respond. I watch as she leans back against the steaming wall, jerks away suddenly, then settles back again, laughing away the burning pain. Her laugh is loud and raucous, reminding me of the jay who lives in the tree outside my kitchen window.

She turns now and smiles at me. I find her eyes less devouring this time, her body less lean. Her belly hangs loose, limp from lack of exercise, I assume. I sense I am about to become the benefactor of her infinite wisdom.

“I want a piece of my favorite bread,” she beams, “but I’m on a diet.” When I fail to acknowledge the momentary silence that follows, she rushes right on. “I want to lose two more pounds. I’m on a downswing now, so if I don’t eat the bread, I’ll lose one pound by Sunday.”

I contemplate her calculations, turning over in my mind the need to lose a mere two pounds. She is describing the bread to me, but I am lost in my own thoughts, weighing my own situation against hers.

“Each slice has 500 calories,” I hear. I think suddenly of my own bread, caringly made every two weeks by my own hands, rich with love and honey and unbleached flour.

“I wonder how many calories my bread has,” I ponder aloud.

“You eat too much of it,” she says accusingly. Suddenly I am all ears. “It hangs all over you. We were talking about that yesterday.”

Yesterday? No, two days ago. The memory hits me suddenly and painfully. I remember her now, sitting on the upper shelf, legs crossed. Megan was dripping on me from beside this guileless creature; Celine faced me on the lower shelf. Celine was sharing a recipe for brown rice. I laughed. “We’ve been eating a lot of rice lately,” I said.

Suddenly, this woman, whom I couldn’t recall ever having seen before, demanded to know why.

“It’s all we have in the house, and I have no money to buy anything else right now,” I told her. I am not ashamed of our poverty; I will discuss it freely with anyone who cares to listen. But this one cared not to listen. Instead she admonished me for not eating properly, and railed at me, “Just look at how the fat hangs on you!”

I was chagrined. How dare she rip open my life-long wound, especially in the presence of my friends?

In my anger at recalling the conversation of “yesterday,” I fail to hear what she is telling me. The pain seethes within and torments me. “It’s getting too hot up here,” I say deliberately as I step down and settle myself on the shelf below, my back to this hateful creature.

We eye each other evilly throughout the remainder of the morning, in the showers, the pool, the sauna once more. I, in my anger at her callous insensitivity, fail to contemplate the need to forgive. Instead I carry the anger, nourishing it with the sight of every obese body I see until the following Tuesday when I see my friends again.

“Can you believe she said such things to me?” I demand of Celine, whose 78 years manifest far more wisdom than my mere 32 can imagine. I do not tell Celine about the extra three pounds my anger has gifted me with since Friday.

“She is a pathetic creature,” Celine responds, full of concern and sympathy for this woman she perceives as being so riddled with self-hatred that she must push it off onto everyone she encounters.

Dear Celine. Jewish survivor of that German hell you could discuss with no one, except to say that you had lost everything—parents, husband, child—all but the clothes on your back. I mourned the loss of our sauna mornings for many months, even though they told me you had died dancing.

But I want you to know, Celine, that yesterday I asked that woman her name.

“My Enemy Has Died”  
by May Cotton © 1995, 2025

My enemy has died, and I don’t know how to feel. For the better part of 15 years, I’ve invested myself in this negative relationship. She terrorized me for the first 10, after shattering my self-esteem with her unkind words. Then I took my revenge, turned the tables on my hatred, trickled it away until all that was left was my awareness of her as an enemy.

It started in the sauna at the Berkeley Y, with her cruel comment about my weight as I sat there naked across from her perfect form. I am 20 pounds heavier today, but on that day the words cut me to the core. “Look how the weight hangs on you,” she said.

Bitch. How I wanted to confront her, slap her, crush her nasty mouth with my rage. But I could not. I do not confront easily, not then, not now. And so I carried the rage about with me, carefully avoiding her, casting evil thoughts in her direction, talking about her with the others she had hurt.

Gradually I gained an explanation from the gossip: she was supposedly a psychologist

who tried to shake people up enough that they would go to her for therapy. We all laughed about what an absurd idea it was. “I would never go to someone like that for therapy,” I said. “Therapy is for healing, not for being hurt.” The others agreed with me, shaking their heads about what a strange person she was.

Some said that she was just plain crazy. Others thought her small minded or mean spirited. But we all cheered when her membership was revoked for verbally assaulting too many women. I wrote a story about her, revealing how she’d hurt me, how desperately I was trying to heal, and published it in the school literary magazine. I stated my intentions of trying to forgive her, but the healing did not come. The gossip continued, and I hung the story on the locker room bulletin board for everyone to read.

One day when I had not seen her for so many years I’d nearly forgotten her, she was back. By then I had been bringing another woman regularly, a woman whose disability prevented her from going to the gym alone, a woman who, it turned out, was friends with my enemy.

Suddenly my enemy had a name, Karyn, and she seemed less antagonistic than she had in previous years. Perhaps the loss of her membership had caused her to rethink the cruel things that came out of her mouth. Or maybe it was the several trips she had taken to South America where she was researching the book she was writing about women and war. She talked to me like an old friend, and I was cordial, for my disabled friend’s sake, but I did not encourage her.

I thought the rage had cooled enough to die, but seeing her again fanned it anew. It grew until the day came when I took my revenge. That was the day she lounged in the pool wearing a suit so old that the white front was completely see-through. I was disgusted by having to look at her perfect nipples and pubic hair, and I felt sorry for the poor fellow swimming in her lane. He was clearly embarrassed by the erection she was giving him and he stayed in the pool to cool down long after she finally got out.

After Karyn went home, I saw that hideous swimming suit hanging on the padlock on her basket. Oh lucky day! My sewing kit was in my backpack and no one else was around. Out came the sharp little embroidery scissors, and in a matter of moments the sheer front of the offending suit was in my hands. With a Magic Marker I wrote the word “INDECENT EXPOSURE” on the piece I’d stolen, and then stuffed it into her basket behind the remains of her swimsuit.

Ah, the feeling of relief, the glory of sabotage, the freedom of taking my revenge. I felt so powerful, certain that I’d hurt her far more than she had ever dreamed of hurting me. Of course, I never knew. The incident was never mentioned; the gossip never told me what her

reaction had been. I suspect she was too ashamed to tell anyone.

But with the ravaged swimsuit my rage died, and not long after, when I overheard her whimpering in the sauna that someone had called her a bitch, I turned calmly to her and said, “You are a bitch, Karyn. You are thoughtless and unkind and say terrible, cruel things to people.”

How did I know that, she demanded to know.

“Because you did it once to me, and it took me many years to get over it,” I told her.

She raged and raged at me, demanding to know what she’d said that I took so wrong, but I calmly explained to her that I would not give her the pleasure of hurting me again with those same words. It was Karyn who went away hurt that day. And that was the last time I saw her.

Has she taken her revenge on me by getting herself killed in a car wreck and leaving me without an enemy? My enemy has died, and I am lost without someone to despise.

*I never knew Karyn’s last name, only that it was pronounced Ka-rín. It was my disabled friend who told me that Karyn had been a Memorial Day traffic fatality, a Bay Area statistic. I don’t think she ever finished her book on South American women and war, but I will never know, since I don’t know her last name, and my disabled friend has since died.*