

Burntside

By Mike Finley

From the outside, the chimney atop the old camp sauna glows red from the fires within. In the moonlight, a sheet of snow covers the lake and dusts the surrounding trees. But there is no snow anywhere near the sauna cabin.

Inside, a furnaceful of men who accept the fire yet are not burned. Like Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednego, they sit, they sweat, they slap, they melt. They die a little and are reborn.

He did not want to go to the lake this weekend. Money is tight. Deadlines are murder. The world is a mess. He feels stressed out, and needs time to whimper. Even his dog, whom he betrayed to the kennel with a kiss, became insecure around him, licking and licking and licking.

The prospect of driving up to Burntside Lake seemed only to add to his woes.

But neither was he strong enough to put his foot down and say No, I will not go north, I will not go through the ice, I will not restore my aching spirit, now leave me alone! Instead, he went up grudgingly, daring bleak wilderness to grant him repose.

Sometimes he thinks of a prayer from an old poem: Lord, send my roots rain.

But instead of rain he gets steam. His friend Ethelred invited him to the camp sauna just before midnight. Three rows of benches accommodate naked 16 men. As late arrivals they become straphangers, standing naked in the flickering shadows. The furnace casts some light, but the air is so hot you can't study faces without frying your eyeballs. Best to draw your lids low, and cast your countenance downward.

Two local men are talking about acetylene equipment. Another group mutters about the physics of saunas. A youth is sitting on the lowest bench, his head buried in his hands, as if he has confessed to some mortal crime. Really, he cannot cook with his elders.

A legacy man – been coming since 1958 -- says that the sauna house was built in 1913 by a team of Finns shipped over from Finland. The furnace cracks and needs replacement every year or so, so hot is the crucible.

Every ten minutes or so a clothed man enters, taps the temperature gauge and calls out the conditions: 193 degrees, 204 degrees, finally 210 degrees. It is too hot in here now to live.

With a tilt of the head Ethelred and he agree they have had enough and bolt out the door, skittering like men in chains down the ice-crabbed runway to the cracking waters of Burntside Lake.

Astonishingly, the thing he most dreaded -- the heated cup shattering as it is dipped in cold -- becomes the thing most welcome. It is like going from salamanders one moment, flashing red among the embers, to sea lions the next, racing under the blue. From Purgatory and atonement, to being at one with God in Paradise.

It is all a man ever is, from the clamber to birth to the experience of love, from death in battle to taking one's seat in the hall of the gods.

The moment of reincarnation must be like this, when the soul sloughs off one tattered jacket and slips silky into the next one. It is not brains thinking now, it is every cell from every organ, the elbow and intestines are finally getting their say, each fenced-in yard scoured and refitted, a trillion bags of oxygen bursting in the body.

And as he stands looking north, though dusted tall pines trees block the view to the arctic lights, he feels the colors flashing inside him, rose and silver, turquoise and white, man rising though ice and fire.

Of course it's temporary. Life does not stop being life. The cycle continues, up, down. Bright lights will give way to dull blues. A man steps in front of a mirror and sags. Reality, or what passes for reality, will return.

But for the moment, he who was so recently beaten is beautiful.