

**From *The Washington Post Sunday Magazine***

By Stephen McCauley

I was living that summer in a small apartment on the top floor of a brick building, directly under a flat rubber roof. By mid-afternoon on the hottest days, the furniture would start to sweat, and even the walls—once white, now an aged, defeated yellow—would look limp. The living room windows opened onto a busy Cambridge street five stories below, and the one narrow window in the bedroom faced an airshaft where an exhaust fan from a bakery clattered around the clock. Traffic fumes on one side, the sweet, oppressive smell of muffins on the other.

The apartment was a sublet, and I was living in it, instead of the house I'd recently bought with a lover, because I needed "time to think." Because I had to "make some decisions." Because I wanted to "finish my novel."

In other words, I was having an affair.

The heat arrived freakishly early that year, and by mid-June, before the official start of summer, records were being shattered almost daily. For a long while, I resisted buying an air conditioner. In Boston, heat of this sort usually lasted five days, a week at the most. Ordinarily, the wind shifted in late afternoon, even during the hottest spells, and blew in cooling ocean breezes that made sleep possible. An expensive window unit seemed a frivolous luxury. On top of that, I'd inherited from my mother a belief that air conditioners, like electric blankets--their winter counterparts--rearrange your molecular structure while you sleep and cause cancer. It was such an irrational, unsophisticated fear, I tried to pass it off as a political objection with strong moral overtones. Something

about ozone depletion and power grids and strength of character. I've forgotten the specifics.

This year, however, the heat wasn't going away, and there were no cooling breezes to stir the evening air. The heat had become The Man Who Came to Dinner. It sat around my small, stifling sublet apartment, sucking up the oxygen and demanding all of my attention. Here I am, it seemed to be saying at all hours. Listen to me. Bring me another pack of cigarettes. More crème brulee.

With such distractions, who could finish a novel? Make decisions? Who could think?

By the time I decided to break down and explore the air conditioner option, every store I visited had sold out its seasonal allotment. The last plane had departed. The exits had been locked. I began to have trouble falling asleep, and when I did, I frequently woke up in a sweaty panic, imagining that I couldn't breathe. The apartment building had no elevator, and there was a skylight of reinforced glass at the top of the staircase. Scalding sunlight cooked the air in the stairwell throughout the day. As I climbed up, usually carrying bottles of water and pints of ice cream, the heat became heavier and more suffocating with each flight. It was like ascending into a bright, muffin-scented hell.

A friend and I had started taking an exercise class in a church basement earlier that year, and out of a dull sense of obligation, we continued to go, even as the temperature soared and fewer and fewer students showed up. The friend was a social worker, a small, beautiful woman with black eyes and hair, half Guatemalan, half

Scottish, who loved to scold me about my mistakes. I rationalized that this was what she longed to do with her unruly clients but was professionally obliged not to do, and so I never took it personally.

One Tuesday in mid-July, she arrived at my apartment, flushed and irritable.

“What’s going *on* with you?” she said, tossing herself into a chair. “You’re making a mess of everything.”

“I know, I know,” I said.

I believed then that as long as you acknowledged you were behaving irresponsibly, you weren’t.

“You don’t even have an air conditioner,” she scolded.

“I know,” I said. “I tried to buy one, but they’re all sold out.”

“You’ve always got an excuse, don’t you?”

My friend was fond of my lover, and fonder still of the idea of the two of us as a couple, and fondest of all of the idea of couples in general. This was a luxury she could afford because, despite her looks and intelligence, she’d never been part of one.

On the way to class that night, I criticized her driving and she criticized my life, separate but parallel conversations. She was a cautious, meticulous person who reserved all of her aggression for driving. She ran stoplights and leaned on her horn and swore loudly. It made riding with her a harrowing experience, but you always got where you were going on time.

“You’re supposed to stop at stop signs,” I said. “That’s why they say STOP.”

“I can’t breath in that ridiculous apartment,” she said. “You might not be happy in your house, but at least there’s cross ventilation.”

“We just passed a cop.”

The recently purchased house was bright and roomy, full of windows and fresh air, but I'd found it stifling, even in winter. My lover and I had been unhappy and trying to break up for years; but we were both slow moving and indecisive men, and, despite grinding discontent, neither one of us was willing to do the other the favor of simply ending it. We'd bought the house in the hopes that if we liked it, we might start liking each other more. It hadn't worked out that way.

Within a few weeks of moving in, I started an affair with a married neighbor. I thought of this person as Plan B. Plan B was racked with guilt, which made for a lot of furtive, passionate encounters followed by boring, circular conversations. It had never been a particularly cheerful adventure. My role was to reassure Plan B that he was a Good Person, and then encourage him to act in ways that suggested otherwise. It was one thing to have a distressing long-term relationship that required endless work, but a distressing, labor-intensive affair made no sense. I was appalled by my own behavior, primarily because it was making me unhappy. And so, in early May, I'd instituted Plan C: the fifth-floor walk-up sublet.

The weather took its weird, blistering turn almost immediately.

The heat had permeated the dank church basement weeks early, and there wasn't even a fan to cool things off. To compensate for the temperature and to try to stanch the flow of deserters, the teacher made the class less strenuous every week. Aerobics gave way to calisthenics. Calisthenics to yoga. Yoga to stretching. Fewer people came. One week, the teacher, a muscular blonde woman with dark circles under her eyes, announced

that we'd be doing "active relaxation." This involved lying on the floor and imagining you were moving.

That hot July Tuesday, my friend and I were the only students in the class.

"I'm sorry," the teacher said, "but I can't afford to do this anymore. Renting the room costs more than I'm making. It's just too hot. I'll start again in September."

"You could have told us," my friend said. "Anyway, this weather pattern won't last until September."

The teacher was packing up her tape player and exercise mats, but upon hearing this, she stopped. "This isn't a heat wave," she said. "This is greenhouse effect. Welcome to the future."

My friend and I had signed up for the exercise class primarily so that we could go out for dinner afterwards, and now that the class had been canceled, we could eat earlier and avoid the 8 o'clock crush. To celebrate, we went to an overpriced restaurant atop an office building with terrible food but floor to ceiling windows with views of the city and the harbor. The late-afternoon sunlight was streaming in the windows, and down below, the glass-and-steel buildings seemed to be melting in the glamorous shimmer of heat. Soon after we were seated, we noticed that the room was uncomfortably warm. The maitre d' was flushed and cranky. There were no other diners.

"The air conditioning system is overloaded," the waiter explained. "We've called the repair service. The sun heats the air and it can't escape. It's like a greenhouse in here, and obviously, you can't open the windows. Complimentary cocktail?"

The theory of global warming wasn't new to me, but that day was the first time I heard the term greenhouse effect. More than a decade earlier, I'd met a scientist from

Harvard who was doing research on climate change. He was a friend of a friend, and at a party one night, he'd explained the problem: gasses trap overheated air in the Earth's atmosphere, causing weather patterns to shift, ice caps to melt, and the jet stream to veer far off its predictable course. In time, winters would become uncomfortably warm and summers would be intolerable. Small islands would sink, verdant countries would dry up, and vicious winds would lay waste to everything else. He recounted all this after dinner, while the rest of the guests knocked back more wine and passed around joints. That evening, through a haze of dying brain cells, it had been an unnerving theory, but entertaining, too, in a far-fetched horror-movie sort of way. Everyone had nodded with dismay and then started to joke about the advantages: No more snow emergency parking bans; no winter hats to flatten your hair; deeper suntans.

As my friend and I fled the rooftop restaurant, it all seemed a little too real and immediate. Polar ice caps were one thing, but you knew it was bad when exercise classes were canceled and restaurants were giving out free drinks.

I began studying the weather page of the *New York Times* the way gamblers study racing sheets. The reservoir level, already low after a dry winter, was sinking with each sun scorched, droughty day. The average temperatures were running above seasonal norms by double digits. The winter, it turned out, had been warmer than average. Ditto, the spring. And it wasn't only Boston and New York. It was Paris, Dubai, Bombay, Buenos Aires. The whole planet was stewing in a broth of CO<sub>2</sub>.

By the end of July, it was too hot to go to the beach, to walk to a movie theater, to even pretend to be finishing a novel. All I could do was pore over almanacs and precipitation charts, searching for some statistical reason to be optimistic. None was

forthcoming. The greenhouse metaphor was too vivid and frightening to shake. I watched the weather reports on television three and four times a day, stunned by the bland way the meteorologists described imminent doom: “Another warm one.” “No rain to worry about in the forecast.” I called the stations to protest, but was invariably transferred to an answering machine.

Plan B was married to a medical student in the second year of her residency. He complained bitterly about his wife’s terrible schedule, all the while taking full advantage of it. He’d show up at my sublet at odd hours with props that could provide excuses for his absence, should his wife unexpectedly return home before he did: a tennis racket, jogging shoes, their Welsh corgi. This made him seem slightly ridiculous, but added a welcome note of comic absurdity to the morally indefensible situation.

I’d met Plan B’s wife--before Plan B was Plan B--and had found her the more interesting and attractive half of the couple. Now I also found her, the cuckolded one, the more sympathetic. I’d done my best to plead her case, right from the start. “You owe it to her to break this off,” I’d counseled him. “It’s wrong.”

“Don’t say that. I’m not a bad person.”

“Of course not. You’re a Good Person who’s behaving badly.”

Unlike me, he was reassured by denying his mistakes, not by acknowledging them. I was happy to admit I was a bad person, but secretly felt I was in a better position than he was, ethically speaking, because my lover and I were equally unhappy in our relationship, and because I had reason to believe my lover had a Plan B of his own. As moral high ground, it was pretty soggy, but it was something.

As the summer wearied on and my obsession with the weather increased, I felt even more claustrophobic and uncomfortable whenever Plan B showed up at midnight carrying a soccer ball or yanking on the dog's leash. One night in August, I'd had enough. I buzzed him into the building and met him on the hellish staircase. "I can't let you in there," I told him. "There's just not enough air in the apartment for both of us."

We went for a walk instead. The banks of the Charles River were crowded with people who'd left their apartments in search of a breeze. Families were camped out on air mattresses, lovers curled up in lawn chairs. The air was sticky and cloying, but the sky and the grass and the sight of the city lights across the open water made it feel more tolerable. Still, the whole scene of riverside encampment reeked of natural disaster to me.

"Greenhouse effect," I said. "This is what I've been talking about, but you don't believe me. Welcome to the future." Hot gasses, I went on. Claustrophobia. Suffocation. Seasons out of alignment. The jet stream off its course. The atmosphere out of balance, the planet out of control.

Plan B had expressed growing annoyance with my weather obsession, but he contemplated my outburst for a while, rolling a soccer ball between two hands. Finally, he said, "Now I see what you're talking about. And you're right; that's exactly how I've been feeling about *my* life, too. Everything's out of alignment, out of control."

We walked on in silence for a few more minutes. I'd become vain about seeing to the heart of Plan B's self-deceptions and defenses, and I resented the fact that he'd perhaps realized something about my own defenses that I'd missed. "In that case," I said, "see you around sometime?"



“Sure,” he said.

“What about your toothbrush?”

“You can throw it out.”

The heat broke at the very end of August. There was nothing spectacular or violent about its departure. There was no thunder and lightening, no rain, not even any dark clouds. It was a typically unbearable morning with temperatures in the high nineties and killing humidity. The sky was a jaundiced yellow. I went into a grocery store to buy some water, and when I came out, the humidity had evaporated, the temperature had dropped twenty degrees, and there were puffy clouds hovering in a calm blue sky. A high pressure system had stepped aside and made room for a blast of cooling Canadian air. Just like that.

I went home and put on a long-sleeved shirt.

By that time, I'd lost interest in seasonal norms and reservoir levels. The Harvard professor had been prescient with his prophecies of doom all those years ago; it was just that the grim changes were coming more quickly than expected. It wasn't a comforting thought, but I couldn't put the seasons back into alignment, anyway. Throwing out Plan B's toothbrush had been a first step in bringing a little alignment into my own life, a manageable alternative, cranking open the windows in the emotional greenhouse I'd made out of my personal life.

In the middle of September, my social worker friend and I went back to the exercise class in the church basement. My friend was still upset at the teacher for abruptly canceling the class in July, but she'd gained weight over the summer and so was

willing to forgive her. She'd started to forgive me, too, especially when I told her that my lover wanted to sell our house and move to San Diego; his Plan B had turned out to be a more viable plan than my own.

The class was once again crowded. The teacher apologized for the discomforts of the room earlier that summer and explained that there was talk the church might install central air conditioning. She turned on one of her tapes, and the rigorous exercises began. Outside, the light was fading and there was a hint of fall in the cool air. The awful heat of the previous months, and my own anxiety over it, was a vague memory, like a toothache that one day just stopped hurting. Or so it seemed at that moment.

###