

YOUNG MAN, THERE'S A PLACE YOU CAN GO!

My best friend, the Trump supporter, gave me a three-month gift membership to the Metuchen YMCA some years ago, and I've been returning ever since.

I like the slightly marginal community I find there: the restless, the retired, the injured, the displaced, the shy, the manifestly not-shy, the body-builders, and the germ-killers with their spray bottles of sanitizer and folded paper towels. A few years ago when I was teaching for a living, I remember escaping from school to steal a half-hour lunch, and seeing, standing at the deli, the bank, or the post office, the silver-streaked crowd who Clearly Had Nothing to Do. At that time I perceived myself as having entirely too much to do—and so I simmered in resentment as I stood in the interminable post office line, checking my watch, as the old guy in his long-sleeved flannel shirt (in June) insisted on examining *all* the commemorative stamps. (“Haven’t you got anything with *birds* on them?”) I remember thinking there should be two lines here: People Who Are Prepared and Have Their Money Ready and another for People Who Want a Price Quote on All 17 Ways They Can Return Their Moccasins to L.L. Bean.

Now I find *myself* wearing the flannel shirt and the sneakers and the prescription sunglasses, driving to the Y every afternoon—in no hurry at all. And I’m actually starting to make peace with that old codger.

When I walk into the Y lobby today, there sits a rescue manikin with wildly disjointed knees. It’s dressed as a lifeguard in a red tee-shirt, a red floatation

noodle on his lap, pink sunglasses, and flip-flops. On the manikin's shirt is a Y nametag reading Stacy. *Remember to swim with supervision!* reads the cardboard talk-bubble sticking out of his head.

On the second floor is a wall of plaques listing people who have donated serious money, and, in addition to the magician *David Copperfield*, I find the name of my former landlord *Donald T. Akey*—the surgeon who sold me his house when he retired. I can still see doctor Akey, sitting in the kitchen on a Saturday morning, chain-smoking, drinking a mug of coffee (milk, no sugar.) Lynn was usually cornering him: “Doctor, I’ve got this sore on the inside of my arm—do you think it’s anything to worry about?” Don is long gone now; so is his wife Holly. His drafty old house still stands, still filled with his dining room set; his doctor’s desk; his yellow filing cabinet, and, to Lynn’s dismay, my towering piles of books and papers.

I usually do 30 minutes on the NuStep (a bicycle with oscillating arms). I never read or listen to music because there is so much worth observing. A shiny banner on the upper wall asks: *Do You Have Questions About Using A Piece of Equipment?* and, for the thousandth time, I notice that the “A” is capitalized and “of” is not. An English teacher till the end. Below the sign, directly in front of me, is a line of 14 treadmills, and above them hang nine television sets. The three TVs I can clearly see are broadcasting WCBS, Fox News, and CNN. On CNN, Sarah Huckabee Sanders looks deeply uncomfortable as she struggles to answer some question. The CNN crawl reads: WH: TRUMP “EVENTUALLY LEARNED” HE REPAID STORMY’S HUSH MONEY. The Fox crawl reads: HOUSE REPUBLICANS NOMINATE TRUMP FOR NOBEL PRIZE. And, of

course, WCBS is running another drug commercial: “Do not take Cymbalta if you are allergic to Cymbalta.” Three screens, three worlds.

I like being part of this odd, independent community—toiling, stretching, bending, as the sunlight streams through the windows, silhouetting the banners (Responsibility, Honesty) that hang from the lattice of pipes above our heads.

On Mondays and Wednesdays, Jorge, a personal trainer, leads a small-group class in a type of tai chi called qi dong (pronounced chee-gong.) For 45 minutes we practice these slow-motion, dance-like arcs in a white studio surrounded by black upright punching bags. I disappear weekly into this ancient Asian art, and while the rest of the building labors on treadmills, we “turn heaven and earth.” We “strike and block.” We “duel the dragons” and “tip the water bowl.” The pinky leads the way; the thumb takes over. It’s all one motion, and it’s genuinely beautiful. A dance without music. And for a few seconds each week I actually feel as if I were some tiny gear in the clockwork of the universe—which is a pretty remarkable thing to feel—especially when you’re a guy who’s wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt in June.