

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 24 (1956)
Heft: 6

Artikel: How spring began on a winter afternoon
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-569719>

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How Spring began on a Winter Afternoon

Episode from an unfinished novel by Luther Allen

From then on Larry was the figure in the foreground of John's life and Peter occupied the background. Day followed day and one day was very like another. But each day brought John strong stimuli from his two friends. The tension of his living mounted for his outlets were too few. Finally, one Sunday this accumulated half-conscious excitement granulated into a state of irritable depression.

He spent the early part of the afternoon writing perfunctory letters home. He purposely avoided Larry, for once desiring calm rather than the excitement of his presence. Yet calm he had not. When he had bored himself beyond endurance he wandered into Lom's room where a bull session was going on. John tried to force an interest in the talk, but the thoughts the boys put forth were so fragmentary and nonsequential, so vaguely phrased and cliché-ridden that his irritation grew as he listened. He was just far enough ahead of his classmates to see his own stupidity, as he called it, mirrored in them. He refused to be drawn into the discussion, refused in so chilly a manner that he was immediately accused of feeling superior,

«Sorry to give that impression, gents. Fact is, I feel jumpy as hell today, that's all.» He got up to leave the room.

«You haven't been getting enough exercise,» Lom sid.

«I know it. That's propably it.» In his unimaginative simplicity Lom had struck the nail on the head, John thought. He managed to give his friend a good-natured smile as he left. He decided to go to the gym and work until he was exhausted.

On his way across the campus he met Dan Collins wandering aimlessly, «lonelier than the poet's cloud», John thought.

«Where are you going?» Dan asked.

«Gym.» — Dan fell in beside him and they walked along together.

The gym was empty when they arrived there and their steps echoed loudly in the high hall. Dan got a basketball and amused himself shooting goals while John went downstairs to the locker room to change.

When he came up John jogged and sprinted around the gallery track until he had run off his lethargy. He did not enjoy this. He had gotten a little short-winded and all over his body the muscles seemed to resist action. They had settled into a sort of slump and seemed to hate being roused from it. After several laps he was exhausted but he kept on for another, so that when he finally came down to the gym floor again he was, although dizzy-tired, feeling very much aglow. He put on a sweat-shirt and sat down to rest. There was little heat in the gym.

Dan was playing on the apparatus. As he sat there panting John watched the boy. There was a sort of false twilight coming in through the windows high up in the walls. Dan made a lot of noise, or rather, every noise he made, the creaking of the horizontal bars under his swinging weight, the clanking of the rings, the thud of his feet as he dropped to the mat, reverberated through the great hollow building. Dan had taken off

his shirt, perhaps in emulation of John who had been wearing only boxing trunks until he stopped to rest. He was rather a good-looking kid, tawny and full-formed, animalistic, John thought. His skin was matte, opaque but unblemished. John was glad now that Dan had come with him. The gym was a gloomy place when empty. It was too bad that Dan had no friends.

John did not rest for long. He soon began to be cold. He called to Dan as he wriggled into his gloves and Dan came and laced them for him and John went to work on the punching bag. He kept at it quite a while. He had forgotten his depression and was feeling whole and satisfied with life again. He tired, passed the fatigue point and kept going, not thinking or feeling anything, simply acting and reacting, letting the rhythms of the work and his own reflexes carry him along.

Dan hung around and watched him. He had put on John's sweat-shirt. He noticed that the smell of it was not that of a boy but of a man. John looked good in the dim light. He was covered with a film of sweat. Dan watched the swift, soft-gleaming slither of the big muscles of John's back and shoulders which preceded the pleasing thud of leather against leather. He watched the quick, agile sideward motion of his trunk when John dodged to avoid the rebound of the bag. He saw the pectorals tighten into quivering prominence, their drive reinforced by the verticle muscles of the abdomen, as John's fists again and again and again lunged quickly at their target. But in reality Dan only half-saw all this, he felt it mostly, for John moved swiftly, stepping, weaving, dancing as he thrust. John was unconscious of his presence.

Finally Dan began to shiver a bit and went below for a shower with a curious expression in his eyes.

John followed him not long afterwards. When he opened the door he found the shower-room filled with warm steam and through the western windows the direct rays of the setting sun penetrated the mist and turned the atmosphere into a ruddy cloud. The opening and closing of the door made the cloud stir and swirl lazily about. There was something unearthly in the effect. Except for the splash of the running water there was no sound to be heard. John could not recall that he had ever known the shower-room to be so still. He felt that he was in a place where he had never been before. He went to his locker and removed his shoes and socks, his trunks and jock-strap. Except that the floor was cold it was delicious being naked in the warm mist, the clean abundant blood coursing warmly through every part of him. He no longer despised his youth. Being young and well and naked was a lordly thing. He moved across the room, stretching his tired arms as he went.

«Hey!» said Dan. «I warmed it up for you.»

«Good boy! You sure did.» John could hardly see Dan for steam and water. «God! I feel wonderful!» — «So do I.»

There were no partitions between the showers and John turned on the one next to Dan. Neither of them said anything for a while for it was difficult to talk above the noise of the water in their ears. By and by John called out, «Got any soap?»

«No. But I'll get you some.» Dan emerged from the shower and scuttled across the room. John heard him banging locker doors. Soon he came over to John with a bar of soap in his hand.

«Whose is it?» John asked.

«I don't know.»

John grinned. «Thanks.»

Dan didn't move away. He stood there looking at John without saying anything. Through the streaming water John saw him blurred, a swarthy orange in the evening light, the hair of his head very black.

«I can't seem to get this shower hot enough.» John's head and shoulders emerged from the shaft of water. «They ought to put in new ones. Something's always wrong with these.»

«Use mine,» Dan said. «It's the best one.»

«O. k. Anything you say,» John answered amiably. He left his shower and stepped over to the other one.

«Anything?» Dan asked. With his fingers he combed back his black hair nervously.

John didn't answer. Once more he looked Dan up and down. «Voluptuous,» thought John. «Voluptuous . . .» There was a dark tumult in Dan's eyes. The boys stood there looking at each other, bravely letting each other see their most secret truth.

«Christ, you are built!» Dan said uneasily, in a husky whisper.

«You're pretty cute yourself,» John tried to sound casual.

Then it happened as smoothly as if many times rehearsed. John took a step backward into the hot shower Dan had left running. In three swift paces the boy was there, against him, taking him in a slippery embrace. Immediately, savagely, automatically John's heavy arms closed around him, forcing him to gasp. As Dan's lips parted John bent upon them. They welcomed him. The water streamed down over them.

Then a peculiar thing happened. John was suddenly overcome by an attack of vertigo and drew away from Dan abruptly. He almost blacked out, felt he could not breathe and for a moment thought that his knees were going to give way. He reached for the cold water lever.

Dan moved out of the way, astonished but obedient.

«Look out, Dan.»

The first shock of the cold water revived John, but all the same he stood under it for quite some time, his body tense now in resistance to it. When he turned the shower off and emerged he was smiling again.

«What's wrong?» Dan sounded both solicitous and offended.

«Nothing, Danny Boy. Nothing!»

«Don't you like it? Don't you want to?»

«Sure I do. You know I do. But not now.»

«Why not?»

«Damned if I know. You can wait, can't you?» They walked towards the lockers together.

«Sure I can wait. But when?»

«Soon.» John laughed happily. There'd be no more problemizing. He was going to send his scruples packing and take the full store of pleasure from this good little beast. «Oh, very soon!» John chortled.