

Beyond Her:

by Paule Sheya Hewlett



Tough Love in H-Town

The first reaction from people on hearing that I live in Houston is shock. “It’s so hot there, “ they gasp. “How do you stand it?” The word most often used is “hellhole,” as in “Man, what do they pay you to live in that hellhole?” Most people then typically describe in exquisite detail a miserable experience they had in my hometown. Their tale generally involves dropping to their knees while trying to walk somewhere mid-day (*so foolish*), or the meltdown of some seemingly solid object that they had left on a car seat.

After 20-something years, I think I’ve heard it all.

What most find hard to believe is that I love it here – but then, I spent my first 21 years in Utah. To some people that explains everything. I mean, Utah is fine, but it’s no place for someone whose feet are *always* cold and who longs for a life outside of flannel shirts and down parkas.

I have a theory that you’re born to be in certain climates, and this is mine. It hardly ever gets too hot for me.

But I realize that, to the uninitiated, the temperatures here might be a little daunting. I recognize that in other climates, people can entertain on the patio without a nearby resusci-

tator, that windows can be opened without melting the butter, that children voluntarily go outside and play. In Houston, we live in denial of these possibilities.

Oh, I know, other places might be hotter – places with names like Death Valley. But we have a little something extra called humidity. And not only does humidity intensify the whole heat experience, it has a charm all its own.

The first effect is on body parts. Hair, in particular, goes through a reality check in Houston. Whatever type of hair you’re born with – whether it’s straight, wavy, or MIA – the best advice is to just go with it. That’s because no curling iron or hair product can help you here, honey.

Those of us who have tried have felt the first “pings” as our forehead moistens and our coif reverts to its natural state. For a two-year period, one daughter strictly forbade us to make her smile – because it made her hair go curly.

Damp skin, too, is a fact of life. “The Look” in Houston is a permanent glow, along with smudged eyeliner. But the simplest movement – and I mean something like flipping a light switch – is enough to start drops of sweat running down your back.

We dress accordingly. Belts, pantyhose and things that go around the neck go into storage with

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turtleneck sweaters. Halter tops and gauzy muumuus are always in style. And the classic accessory? A glass of iced tea with approximately the volume of a small aquarium. We've got our own little ecosystem going here.

And that's perfect, because living in Houston is really like living in a terrarium. It's a place where your sunglasses fog up when you go outside. Where the asphalt gets so hot and sticky in the summertime that your shoes stick. And where ordinary objects, like CDs and Whataburgers literally melt in the noonday sun. I wouldn't try this again, but I swear I've seen a Styrofoam cup self-destruct right on my car hood. It left a tiny mark.

Other things factor into our heat experience. First there are the critters, which are simply everywhere. My friend, who was visiting Houston announced, "You know, your garden is just like mine, except that when I stop to stare at anything . . . it moves."

Then there's the smell. Many are surprised to learn that Houston is truly verdant. It's a place where vines grow over the garbage cans if they're left out too long. In August particularly, there's a jungle atmosphere with its own unique aroma. A friend said that she thinks it's really the smell of chloroform burning. She may be right.

And last but not least, there is the noise. For those of you who have never heard cicadas, imagine a jillion crickets on steroids, hooked up to a Rolling Stones amplifier, swelling to a crescendo about every 30 seconds, all night

long. Now, what's not appealing about that?

Luckily, all of Houston's weather problems can be solved with one antidote: air conditioning. And, as the home to hydrocarbon fuel sources, we love to crank it up! Normal inside temperatures in August hover around 40 degrees, to preserve our looks, keep our tempers in check, and feed our delusions that it really isn't that hot outside after all.

That's the irony of it – you need a sweater to be comfortable in Houston in the summertime. I cannot tell you how many times I have shivered through a movie or a meeting, then relied on the lethal heat in my car to raise my body temperature to normal levels.

Now don't get me wrong. As I said, I'm a big Houston fan – no pun intended. I love the other nine months, and even the summer evenings, which are colorful, breezy and balmy. I embrace the damp, frizzy, ruffled, sticky -ness which brings out a certain warmth, I think, in the people who survive.

But I must admit that even old warhorses like myself are taken aback when returning from a summer vacation. The door to the aircraft opens, the heat rises, and I wonder – just as people returning home in the midst of yet another blinding snowstorm must wonder — man, what *am* I doing in this hellhole?

"Beyond Her" is a free electronic publication produced by Paule Hewlett at irregular intervals.

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