

Saunagus

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Perspiration rained down my face, burning my eyes as though bathed in acid. The saltiness reminded me of tumbling through ocean waves when I was a kid. Internal pressures forced my mouth open while my stomach retched. Starving for oxygen, I inhaled a bushel of oppressive superheated air. My lungs rejected the intake. I coughed and grimaced when bile seared my throat and rose into my nasal passages. I leaned back to stabilize and closed my eyes. My hands found the smooth wooden seat. Involuntary spasms followed as my palms and fingertips blistered.

The shock stopped my heart. I felt the cold water before my mind registered what was happening. I opened my eyes wide, gasped, and took in another lungful of air while I reacted to the frigid water drenching my near-naked body. I roared at the top of my lungs invoking the name of our Lord and begging for a quick death. I shuddered and collapsed in on myself as the icy fresh water replaced the sweat that soaked the towel cushioning my bony rear end. My mouth gaped open seeking oxygen. I inhaled an even larger mass of still-superheated air. The cooling water evaporated in the heat, and I felt myself loosen up. I wiped the refreshing liquid from my face, reveled in the rapid change of skin temperature, and opened my still-stinging eyes to see a shadowy figure with a pail retreat through the open door. I looked up and reflected on what the hell I was doing in that wooden-planked room.



A *saunagus* (sauna goose) is a Nordic term describing a particular type of sauna treatment performed in Denmark. My Danish wife Jasmine and I were staying at a prestigious *kurhotel* that offered numerous opportunities to improve one's health. *Saunagus* boldly purports to detox your body, boost your blood circulation, revitalize your immune system, and give you a gigantic energy kick. It is mist therapy with a water/essential oils mixture ladled on hot stones.

I'd been in saunas in the U.S. before, and at times, some participants poured water on the heated stones. Gently dripping small amounts of water from a ladle on stones causes a sizzling sound, steam to form, and the humidity to rise a bit. The effect was to make the room seem hotter, but I survived this before. So, what could hurt by adding some natural oils to some steam?

The answer is Leo, our *saunagus* dominatrix from Finland. Petite and soft-spoken, how could we know she would throw a bucket of ice-cold water on our hot pink bodies? She seemed like such a nice girl. Perhaps our Danish hosts outsource anything that might upset the guests? Leo wore a black dress-like gym outfit seemingly totally inappropriate for the setting. Must be the uniform for *gusmeisters*.

And, of course, Leo was nice. She came back into the sauna *sans* bucket, bearing a glass bowl filled with a dark golden liquid. She smiled, asking if we found the cold water refreshing. We lied. "Yes Leo." After nearly killing us, yes, it was refreshing. I guess that's only half a lie.

Leo passed around the basin after demonstrating how to scoop the thick golden liquid and rub it all over our exposed skin. Pure, raw monofloral honey made from organically-raised bees, she explained. Imported from New Zealand – and I thought they only raised sheep. I cheated and put my finger in my mouth. Delicious. I rubbed honey all over, including into my thinning hair. I kept my eyes closed lest rivulets of the nectar upset the delicate balance of fluids guarding my corneas. As our bodies responded to the heat, sweet whiffs from the honey stimulated our olfactory receptors. Jasmine rubbed it soothingly all over my back. I smiled even while my skin temperature rose, and I remembered it was Jasmine’s idea to experience a *saunagus*. I’m a Navy carrier pilot after all. We rise to any challenge.

Leo smirked as she explained the maximum temperature in the sauna would reach ninety degrees Celsius. My brain melted when I tried to make the conversion to Fahrenheit.

The door opened and closed letting in some cool outside air. It took a minute for me to realize she departed. In the romantic candlelight, I looked around at the dozen or so fellow scantily-clad travelers on this journey of discovery. Leo was Finnish, everyone else other than me was Danish, and Leo delivered her explanations in English. Nordic people are very polite. They smile a lot.

The cool air signaled Leo’s return with what appeared to be branches from a bush in her hands. “Bend over,” the *Marquisa de Sade* commanded. Whack – Leo brought the branches down on my neighbor’s back. Whack, whack, whack. She hit him three times in rapid succession. He thanked her. He thanked her? For beating him with a switch? I wondered if I might make a discreet exit without embarrassing myself or my Danish wife.

“Your turn. Aspen branches.” *I hope they’re organic.*

I offered my back with thoughts of the cat ‘o nine tails flaying raw an errant seaman’s back in the good old days of rocks and shoals – U.S. Navy discipline from the age of sail, before civilization set in. Whack. It didn’t hurt. Whack, whack, whack. The room now smelled of the outdoors. Like walking through the crisp aroma of a Nordic forest. I thanked Leo (*why did I do that?*) – and silently thought of telling Jasmine what I thought of her idea when we were alone later.



After beating everyone, Leo let in more cool air when she departed, but it didn’t take long before sweat poured from our bodies again. And I sat on the lowest level – the coolest part of the sauna. I learned to tilt my head just so and watch the perspiration and honey drip from the same spot at the end of my nose to form a sweet puddle on the wooden plank between my feet. Drip. Drip, Drip. I dared not move my feet lest the soles burn on the wood. Perhaps this would be the time to go into a meditation and zone out for a while.

The monkey brain refused to quiet, and thoughts raced through my head. Why in God’s name did I agree to Jasmine’s suggestion? Shouldn’t I have taken it as an omen when I signed a four-page disclaimer absolving the *kurhotel* of any responsibilities? And filled out an equally long checklist of all known ailments?

The door opened, and Leo the Lioness came in with multiple buckets. She offered them to all of us after demonstrating what to do with it. Place the bucket of cold water above your head and dump the contents. Ice cubes spilled out with the liquid, clinking as they landed on the hardwood floor, shrinking as they melted. I don't think this time my heart stopped. Maybe I got used to it or perhaps it's different if you do it yourself. I wiped the cool liquid from my body and swim trunks and rubbed it on my head. Leo left the sauna – pails, hips, and gym dress swinging as she departed in search of some new torment.

Returning with a small wooden bowl filled with white crystals, she explained “Icelandic sea salt” while she demonstrated how to rub the mineral on our skin. “Rub harder – you need to clean out those pores.” My skin turned a rosy pink under the crystalline scrub. Leo ducked out, this time returning with a wooden pail and ladle. The heat rose after she closed the door.

Leo took her time to explain how our pores were now open; our bodies ready to receive a healing treatment of oil-infused steam. I wondered which oils she planned to use, but at this point she lapsed into Danish. Is she explaining the next torture? In Danish because she is afraid it might send me bolting for the exit? I like the perfumes from essential oils. We use an atomizer in our house and favor star anise to mask the odors from four cat boxes.

She added oils into the bucket and ladled drips on the hot stones of the sauna. The effect? Delightful. Pleasant fragrances tickled our noses and induced a calm usually only present during meditation. I jostled my body to ensure every pore received this gift so it might do its magic. I vaguely sensed the cool air as Leo left the sauna. My perspiration increased, washing off the sea salt, forming white crystalline puddles on the planked floorboards.

I closed my eyes and imagined floating in a sensory deprivation tank. Detached from reality with heavenly scents healing my lungs. Even forgot about “thanking” Jasmine later. Balanced between the air and the sea with every pore absorbing life-giving energies. Pure bliss.

A chill interrupted this dream. Leo appeared in the doorway. I swear she wore a fascist armband and jackboots. “Show me your backs” she ordered. *Sieg Heil!* I slunk forward and was rewarded by four whacks on my shoulders. This time they hurt. Before I could figure out if she had switched from aspen branches to a rose bush, she yelled something Danish, and we all hustled out of the sauna. Outside Jasmine and my fellow travelers told me to put on a robe and flip-flops. We were going to jump into the sea. *I'm a Navy pilot, not a SEAL.*



Technically the *Øresund* is not the open ocean. It is the waters between Denmark and Sweden. You can see the opposite shore from the beach. I've never swum in the *Øresund* but have observed nude bathers near my mother-in-law's apartment as they immersed and then quickly erupted from the water a little bit bluer than when they started.

Our little band of heated and beaten health seekers walked through the spa to the far corner exit. I saw the knowing grins and smirks on other clients – they knew our fate. I noted Leo was absent. Had she gone off to release the sharks for our swim? A frigid icy gale howled while we went along

an asphalt walkway to the road crossing, waited until the rural rush of small cars and cyclists subsided, then went down a seaside sand path to a wooden jetty.

By the time I reached the pier, I could no longer feel my limbs or nose. I watched in horror as all the Danes took off their robes, exposing their lily-white legs and ruddy backs to what had to be the coldest gale I ever felt, counting when I attended Arctic survival training in the Navy. Each Dane, including my Viking wife Jasmine, went down the ladder at the end of the jetty and into the water. I grimaced when they all ducked their heads under the surface. *Egad!* I was not going under the cold water. I wrapped my robe tighter around my body.

The Danes all beckoned me into the *Øresund*, and I realized if I did not join them, there would be a lot of embarrassment later with the family. I'm a fearless pilot, right? So, without further hesitation, I threw my robe on the railing, put my flip-flops on the deck, and climbed down the ladder. Slowly. Actually, I only slowed when the water level reached my swim trunks. I thought of the 1994 *Seinfeld* television episode "The Hamptons" where the character George Costanza tries to explain to Jerry Seinfeld's girlfriend about penile shrinkage.

As the ice-cold *Øresund* hit my chest, I released my hold on the ladder, casting adrift into the open ocean. I again broke the Third Commandment and, presuming hell would at least take off the chill, wished for an early death. There is no comparison to any other cold I ever experienced in my entire life. I know my heart stopped for at least a minute. My conscious brain refused to function – eyes couldn't focus. I heard nothing. Mr. Freeze's (*Batman & Robin*, 1997) cold gun couldn't have been more effective. My jaw started chattering on its own. I did my best to keep my tongue from sliding between teeth tapping a staccato rhythm. I regained some semblance of time and place. Then I remembered one more thing. I ducked my head under the water.

A mid-May *Øresund* bath was just what I needed to wash out any residual raw monofloral New Zealand honey and Icelandic sea salt crystals from my hair. And as an added side benefit, I was now ready to be packed away for trans-Atlantic shipment in sub-zero steerage class.

I rose from the depths of the sea reborn and in a frantic search for the ladder. "No, you must go up the other ladder" Jasmine yelled from about ten feet away. I shuffled my feet along the stony bottom, spitting out *Øresund* water. I was the last of our group to climb the ladder back into the cold wind that tased my body into further surrender. *Thank you, Jasmine. You owe me big time.*

I have no recollection of walking back along the beach, crossing the street, and then back up the path to the *kurhotel*. As we got to the spa entry, one of the men tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You're bleeding." I looked down; indeed, narrow red rivulets flowed from my left heel. "You must have stepped on something." Or one of Leo's sharks took a bite out of my Achilles' heel.

Frankly at that point I realized my body was shaking so violently I needed immediate warmth. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, right? Heat first, stop the bleeding second. And who the hell cares what is third. Just give me heat. I went into the spa in search of someplace warm. Someplace, of course, was the sauna and Leo.



Leo, sans the storm trooper regalia, welcomed us like long-lost brethren. “Come inside,” she waved us into the sauna. I dropped my robe and kicked off my flip-flops somewhere outside the entrance and ran into the wooden paneled room. The hot sauna enveloped me, and I lay down not caring if I offended one of the Danes by taking their seat. *Heat, warmth, I need to be thawed.* What is that saying, “Be careful what you wish for.” I closed my eyes and lost all connection with time and place as I focused on becoming human again. It was too good to last.

I heard the snap before feeling its effect. Incredibly superheated hot air cascaded on my raw, broken body. A flamethrower couldn’t be worse. I bolted upright only to see Leo standing in the middle of the sauna, black gym skirt undulating from side to side, whipping a white towel through the air. Snap. More freakishly hellish air swirled around the room onto a dozen health seekers. “Arghhh,” I howled.

My anguish had no impact on the Finnish, devil queen. She laughed as she switched the towel from a rotary engine of death to a blanket-like torture device. Snap, she dislodged hot air from the top of the sauna and brought it down on our bodies. Snap. More flames engulfed my body and entered every pore wide open for invasion. Snap. I bent over thinking, at least, my face would be spared. Snap. The effect of the heat was worse than the day I made the mistake of rubbing oil on my skin thinking I rubbed on sunscreen, and then baking on a beach in Corfu one very sunny afternoon. Snap. My fellow travelers grunted as each new wave brought down thousands of needle-points on our raw, exposed skin. How much more of this shock therapy was I going to have to endure?

The snapping and waves of heat stopped, and a cool breeze signaled the fiendish vixen had departed. Another cool breeze was followed by pails of frigid water shocking our bodies into total submission. I lay there unable to move. Unable to think. Without any hope of this ever ending. More ice cubes melted on the wooden plank floor.

A cooing Leo returned with the wooden bucket and ladle. She dripped essential oils and water on the heated stones while chanting something in Druid or ancient Uralic. She probably had pinned a fetish doll of me to the inside of her black gym dress. Transformation again to a peaceful place. Utter collapse – I again lay down to await whatever she had in mind next. Surely the end or death must come soon.

The room again heated to its maximum and Leo poured the rest of the bucket of water on the stones. With loud sizzles, scalding hot steam filled the room. My pores were wide open, so my skin rejected the sudden onslaught. My exposed skin burned. I jumped up – my eyes singed from the steam cloud now swirling around the ceiling of the wooden sauna chamber. I could take no more. *Escape.* I bolted from the sauna and to my surprise saw the entire entourage follow me out into the cool spa area. Everyone laughed, clapped each other on the back, and shook my hand. I made it out alive. Salvation at last. Or so I thought.



Leo had one more trick up her sleeveless gym dress. I had never even heard of nettle tea and had no idea what it could do to me. But it sounded sharp and I figured it would hurt. I couldn't fathom why anyone would want to put pointy things into their mouth. My group resumed talking Danish, so I took my first cup without the benefit of peer counseling. Savory, like how I imagine old wet hay tasted. I kept picturing needle-like things sliding down my gullet only to puncture my stomach. I searched in vain for sugar.

There are websites devoted to the healing properties of nettle tea. Must be an acquired taste. Like raw herring. The Danes love both. And of course, the national drink *aquavit* – which I *do* appreciate and needed now more than ever. I smiled a lot and raised my cup in cheers en route to find a potted plant to dispose of the tea.

I lay down on a recliner, closed my eyes, and reflected on the experience. I lived through the *saunagus*. I did feel revitalized. Nothing like a dip in the cold sea to invigorate. And clearly, I had received a huge energy kick – although at this moment I lay completely spent from the experience. No doubt my blood circulated at a more rapid pace than ever before – I assumed this was only temporary, and my blood pressure medicine would take effect next dose. I took it for granted I was toxin free – I wondered if the sauna cleaner has to wear a hazmat suit. And I'm sure my immune system hummed along at 150% as I pictured miniature nettles skewering all the bad cells in my body. I would see someone at the front desk in a few minutes about the cut on my heel – my “red badge of courage.” I had survived *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

What the hell, my experience with *saunagus* would make a great short story. I got up, went over and kissed Jasmine, then signed up to do it again the following day. Apparently, shrinkage includes the brain.

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