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EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUNSPHERE

Andrew Farkas

The roads in Knoxville never end, the names just change.

It was the Summer of the Phlogistonites. That gang of arsonists who burned up the town. Scared the hell out of everyone. I was waiting at the intersection of Broadway/Henley and Western/Summit Hill looking at the Sunsphere when I first saw her. The Sunsphere is dilapidated. Some of the panels in the golf ball top have fallen out. They might still be on the ground, skidding through the park. She stood in the shade of a lone magnolia tree. Her hair was short and black. Black, the color of her clothes. Even in the intense heat (about 100°), she looked cool. Chilled. As if she had her own refrigeration unit that controlled her bodily and atmospheric temperature. A quick glance at the lights, and then . . . but she was gone.

At the Sunsphere, which I visited everyday, I walked down by the dried-out fountain trying to imagine what it's like when it's filled. I'd never seen it filled. The few stagnant puddles inside somehow made the weather seem even hotter. I wipe away the perspiration with a pocket handkerchief I always carry. In summer, it's never cool enough for me. The sweat seethes forth in continuous rivulets, draining down my head, behind my ears, over my face. Soon the handkerchief is soaked through and I squeegee it off with my hands. A losing battle. I'll end up drenched no matter.

An out-of-body, out-of-time experience: me leaping into the fountain, plunging into the cool, clear water, saved from the sweat and the sun, never again assaulted by either of those caloric forces.

My apartment was no escape. It lacked air conditioning. And I lacked the funds to run air conditioning. So the sun bakes my mind and its faculties boil over. This is a common story for me. There is a way to battle the torrid world, a way to understand it. But somehow, I'm on the outside. Even when the answer appears

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so simple, obvious: get a job that affords air conditioning; move to a place that has it.

I blame the heat. And my sweating.

Often I visit cooled places. But since I don't live in them . . . well, you can only stay somewhere that isn't yours for so long. My territory is the outdoors. I would sweat at my place just as much; might as well go where there's something to look at. The Sunsphere is across from my apartment. So I'm here everyday. Even then.

A ritual I have: when I get to the Sunsphere, I press the button that should summon the elevator.

But it doesn't work. Much as some of the golden panels are missing, much as the green paint on the shaft of the tower is flaking away. Nothing is in there anyhow. No one can get to the top. It's just a derelict reminder of the past. I pressed the button, no matter. I press the button and wait for the elevator to come down and get me, take me to the top where it will be air conditioned and I will understand everything.

While I wait, I look at the dried-up fountain. I might wait forever. Until the sun boils all the sense out of me. My end will be in a stagnant pool of myself.

In a shadow, in the distance, I saw that girl with the black hair, sitting on a bench.

"I just can't take this heat," I told her, sitting down.

"Why don't you go back to your place and sit in the air conditioning?" she said.

"I don't have air conditioning."

"This is the South. Everyone has air conditioning." From up close I could see she wore white lipstick.

"I don't," I said.

She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were probably sympathetic behind her sunglasses.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Sophia White. But my friends call me Stiria."

"Stiria? What's that mean?"

"'Icicle,' in Latin. What's your name?"

"Gene," I said, and shrugged my shoulders like I always do.

"*Eugene?* 'Well born'?"

"Nope. Just *Gene*. 'Born.'"

"Why don't you come back to my place, Gene? I have air conditioning."

"Cool," I said.

"Absolutely," said Stiria.



Then:

It was night. You could feel the fear in the air. The sheets stuck to me in the dense humidity. The temperature didn't drop at all from day to evening. All I could think about was people who didn't perspire. They wore sunglasses. Somehow they tapped into an ethereal icy source unknown to me. It pervaded their entire existence. They would never sweat. No matter how hot it was. I see them and ask what I have to do. But they ignore me. I want to be like them. They're sleek. Suave. Knowing.

They're cool.

I turned on the radio. After the song, "The Heat is On," ends (a DJ's inspired joke), I heard:

It has been over 100° for an entire month now, in a crazy radio voice. I shut it off.

Unhelpful: the fact that during the heat wave there was a group of arsonists at work. The first building to go was an apartment complex on Highland/Bridge. Only a couple blocks from my place. The heat from the sun and from the potential fire invaded my dreams. I would see the cool people with their sunglasses outside of my window. And my building's on fire. Disinterested, they watch. Right in front of me is an escape route: a staircase. But I've forgotten how to walk down stairs.



Stiria and I would watch old reruns in her loft apartment

in the Sterchi Building (a palace compared to my place) on State Street (one of the few roads whose name stays the same). We talked very little. She sat on the couch, still wearing her sunglasses, and I lay with my head in her lap. Neither of us ever got too warm. Maybe because she had the AC turned down to 65° for me. Maybe she was naturally hypothermic. For me, she was perfect.

In the chilled loft, I would slip in and out of consciousness. I am awake long enough to see an old episode of *The Dukes of Hazzard*. One where Beau and Luke are absent, replaced by men who resemble them, but who aren't.

"When I was a kid I felt cheated when Beau and Luke disappeared and these guys took over," I said.

Stiria didn't respond. She petted my head, as if trying to calm my overcooked mind. At the end of the episode, I realized that since I'd been in the South, I'd never met anyone named Beauregard. For some reason that bothered me.



Images of heat from that Summer: a man jogging down Forest Park/Forest Hills. He was a marathon runner. Suddenly he falls over. He ran everyday. He knew what he was doing. But his body temperature was 114° when they found him sprawled on the ground.

A car driving along Kingston/Cumberland/Main dings another. The two drivers get out. Without speaking, they fall into a fist fight. When another driver tries to stop the fist fight, he is beaten almost to death. The police use rubber bullets to stop the two men.

There is sun-poisoning. Heat sickness. Heat delirium. The inflamed, demented, diseased city runs wild. Careens down streets whose names change so often they have no names at all. Afterwards, people say, "It was so hot. So hot." And as atoms are enervated into chaos, people are morphed into demons. The city becomes hell. And the Phlogistonites thrived amongst them,

burning buildings. So many buildings no one ever knew which was next. Everyone positive it would be theirs.

A man on the news says:

You know it's hot. You try not to think about it. You don't bring enough water. You're not wearing sunblock. The water boils out of you in streams you find annoying. You can feel how hot it is. But you don't think about your body temperature. You assume it will always stay the same. You don't think about how you're slowly dehydrating. You don't realize that you're slowly being cooked. And then it happens. Stick a fork in you. You're done.



A video shows Phlogistonite leader Paula Reddenbach (aka Paula the Pyro) speaking to her fire cult.

She screams and stalks about, her fiery red hair a mop soaked in sweat, her whole body soaked in sweat, she is covered with brown freckles, together a million, a billion fires blazing on her skin, firing her torrid purpose and she dances around the fire with the rest of her cult who are also covered in sweat, pressed together, generating more and more heat, the bodies sticking together, everyone chanting to the fire god or about fire or some scorched something that would inflame the world, a world half-naked, writhing, pulsating in the accumulation of bodies made into one with Paula as the shrieking, blazing head.

The tape ended with a close-up of the Pyro. Eyes aflame, a lurid grin on her face. As if she would devour the world with her inner inferno. I could feel the heat through the television.

I looked at Stiria, wondering why. But I didn't ask. Instead, I saw a reflection of a fire from the TV in Stiria's lenses. And I thought about the fact that in Stiria's loft it was always 65° just for me.



A guy pulled up and asked me how to get to Chapman

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Highway.

"You're on it," I said.

He frowned.

"No, no, no. This is Broadway. I want Chapman Highway."

"Right. But if you keep going, through Henley in downtown . . ."

"Turn right on Henley downtown. Got it."

"No. You're already on Chapman Highway. It's this road. It becomes . . ."

"What?!" Sweat poured down his face since the window was open in his car and the AC was venting outside.

"This is Chapman Highway. It's also Henley. It's also Broadway."

"Son, what the hell are you talking about? Are you on drugs? Let me say it slowly. I want to get *to* Chapman Highway. We're currently *on* Broadway. How do I get to Chapman Highway *from here*?"

"From here?" I asked.

"*From here*," he said.

"You can't," I said. And walked off, wiping perspiration off of my forehead, from behind my ears. But the handkerchief was soaked. So I just ended up making myself sweatier.



Night. Sitting up in my room. Not even bothering to sleep. It's so hot. The radio's on. The fear in the city growing thicker. More buildings burned down: the apartments on Highland/Bridge, offices on Cumberland/Kingston/Main (also known as routes 11, 70, and 1), a short but wide schoolhouse where Magnolia branches into Asheville and Rutledge. The DJ says the Phlogistonites could be anywhere. No one was safe. The cops were clueless. At any time we could burst into flames, erupt into madness. It had been over 100° for an eternity. People were already hot, irritated. Now they were paranoid. If the

Phlogistonites weren't captured soon, we would set ourselves ablaze.



A confusion of voices spilled into the hall. Everyone trying to talk at once. And it came from Stiria's apartment. I'd never met any of her friends. I'd never heard about any. Stiria didn't talk much. Whenever I came over, it was just me and her. Nobody called. Nobody stopped by.

When I knocked on the door, the room beyond went silent. I immediately thought of school. A group of kids would be talking. Then I'd show up. They'd go mute. Nothing to say. Weren't talking about anything anyway, why? And there's the door. Closed. As if it was open a moment ago. Only I hadn't seen it in time. So it was slammed shut. Me on the outside.

A moment later, Stiria answered the door, adjusting her sunglasses, running her fingers through her black hair.

"Hello, Gene," she said.

Inside the place was a bit warmer than usual. Probably because of all the bodies. Or something like that. Stiria introduced me to everyone:

"This is Samuel Carrick, George McNutt, John Adair, James White (my cousin), and William Blount."

"Where's all the ladies?" I asked.

"Out scouting," one of them said. Then another shut him up with a punch in the arm.

The group seemed amiable enough. But everyone was awkward since they didn't know me. Shuffling around, staring at the floor. They left soon after I was introduced.

"Tomorrow," they said to Stiria on their way out. She nods and lowered the thermostat to 65°.

"Those your friends?" I said.

"Yeah. I work with them. . . . Oh, I think *The Dukes of Hazzard's* on," she said.

For a second, it looked like it was. But it wasn't *The Dukes*

at all. Instead it was some drawn-out infomercial pretending to be *The Dukes of Hazzard*. The actors only sort of resembled the people they were supposed to be playing. If you knew what to look for, though . . . well, they're not convincing. The guys pretending to be Beau and Luke aren't even the second rate copy cats that filled in on the show for a while.



I was down near campus, where Volunteer becomes 16th, when Hodges Library burst into flames. It used to be a simple, squat, rectangular building. Then they pumped money into it. Made the library this sprawling, postmodern structure that reminded me of the old video game *Q-bert*. Now it's a charred husk. *Q-bert* could've still jumped around on it. Only he'd probably fall through.

The fire was fuel for more fear. Where were the Phlogistonites? Who knows where anyone is in a town like this? Who knows anything? The heat confuses everything; the fire devours all.

Amidst the crowd watching the conflagration, I thought I saw Stiria. Black hair, sunglasses. She was walking away. But as I tried to catch up with her, she walked faster and faster. Until I figured it must not be her. Just some girl who realized that some guy she didn't know was gaining on her. So I stopped and thought of Stiria.

Stiria: her name, so mysterious, relaxes me. Cools me down wherever I am. She keeps me away from the heat, the burning, the scorching, the chaotic inferno, whether I'm with her or not.



More buildings got burned down: the hospital on Broadway/Henley/Chapman (also known as routes 33, 441, 44, and 71), the University Club on Concord/Neyland, a house on Forest Park/Forest Hills, and another place on James Agee, which used

to be 15th, and following the order of the numbered streets, in a way still is. The buildings on the transiently named roads remind me that the University of Tennessee was originally called Blount College, that the Tennessee River somehow runs right through Fort Loudon Lake, so it's a river and a lake at the same time, and then it goes off and splits into two other rivers: the French Broad and the Holston, which makes me think about the flag of the State of Tennessee, which has three stars because at one time the State of Tennessee could have split into three separate states (West, Middle, East), and I'm sure somebody somewhere knows what the names of those states would have been if they ever came to exist. But that somebody isn't me. I don't want to know. I wish that the roads would have one name in one city. So Kingston Pike shouldn't also be Cumberland Avenue and Main Street (along with the various route numbers it also goes by); it should be Kingston Pike and nothing else. When the road leaves Knoxville, it can have another name if the people in that town find it fit to name it something else. Same goes for the river. Cause, really, how does a river become a lake but stay a river, even coming out on the other side to be just a river again for a little while, before splitting into two other rivers?

It doesn't make any sense. Which makes me think of the fact that we didn't always have air conditioning. So the problem for the namers was the same problem I have: too much heat. Too much chaos. Their sense was boiled out of them. Squeezed away with their own hands. Consequently, they forgot what a street was called. Or if it had a name in the first place. And when all the naming was done, they didn't bother to change any of it. The various appellations seemed sensible enough to them. Or something like that.



The police were everywhere outside of the Sterchi. They told me I shouldn't go inside. I asked why. They told me I ought to go on home. Cops always want you to go home.

“Why?”

“It’s just better you don’t go inside, sir. That’s all,” said the police officer. Even in the uniform he didn’t sweat. He wore mirrored sunglasses. I watched myself sweat in his eyes. I didn’t bother with the handkerchief. I went straight to my squeegee hands.

Then I told the police officer that although he’s a police officer, he couldn’t tell me where I could and couldn’t go unless there was a good reason. A detective overheard me talking, and came over. He looked at me like he was my dad. And he has really bad news. And he didn’t know how to give it. Another police officer whispered something to the detective.

“Yeah, that’s him,” said the detective.

To me: “Son, I think it’d be a good idea if you went home. Now I can tell you you can’t go in that building, son, because we got something going on in there we can’t talk about right now, and I’m sure you understand what that means. We’re not trying to be pricks or anything. It’s just in your best interest to go on back to your place and cool off. Please, son?”

“Well, all right,” I said. “But I can’t cool off back at my place.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t have air conditioning.”

“This is the South,” the cop said, distracted by something going on near the front of the Sterchi. “Everyone has air conditioning.”

“Everyone,” I said.

And I left.



The day after, I was back, ready to talk to Stiria about the whole thing. There weren’t any police at the Sterchi that day. Outside, there weren’t any people anywhere. Except for one guy who kept crossing and re-crossing State Street on three different corners. Inside, there were people everywhere, whispering. Like

they had this big secret, and all of them knew about it. Everyone knew about it. But me. Only, it seemed the secret was about me. Whenever the people saw I was approaching, they stopped talking. And looked at me sympathetically, like someone had died.

When I got to Stiria's place, I had a lot on my mind. And it was all about roads changing names and rivers and lakes and cities driven insane by heat and paranoid by arsonists, and even about cops and what they think is in your best interest and how they always seem to want you to go home. The cops' paradise: everyone everywhere staying in their houses or apartments, never leaving. Which makes sense, now that I think about it. Less chance for crime, for chaos, for fires, if everyone stays at home.

The door was wide open. I walked through and it's like 120° inside. The heat knocked the wind out of me. Sliding against a wall, I found myself on the floor. Luckily the loft had carpet. But that's all it had. Everything was gone. Even the TV.

Right away, I figured Stiria'd been robbed. That's why the police were outside the day before. Only I didn't know how you could get robbed of everything you own living on the eighth floor of a loft apartment building. Especially a nice one like that. Then I thought maybe she was kidnapped and her family's already shown up and taken her stuff. Really, that didn't make any sense either. When I could finally move, I ambled out into the hall and asked the first person what happened.

"Didn't you hear?" the guy said. My eyes were full of sweat, so I didn't see him too well.

"What?" I said.

"They caught the Phlogistonites. Turns out they were not only arsonists, but they were also masters of disguise and forgery. They stole a lot of identities. Used all kinds of names. Last bunch of names they stole were from the old Presbyterian graveyard."

But I didn't care about the names, so I interrupted him.

"Where's Stiria?"

Pause.

“Sophia White? The woman who used to live here?”

Finally, I got the sweat out of my eyes, although I still couldn't see too well. The guy looked like he felt sorry for me. It was just sweat in my eyes.

“She's gone, man. She's gone.”

Later on, I found out that Paula and her band were arrested yesterday at the Sterchi. She was going to set it on fire, I guess. Or she ended up there after running from the cops. Which is why the cops were there when I arrived. The only thing I could think of was that Stiria had gotten so frightened by Paula that she took off right away. Headed for someplace where she could feel safe. Or something like that.



Walking through Market Square. To Stiria's. Before she disappeared. There's a party. One of those CityFest shindigs where cover bands play and business people drink alcohol out of plastic cups. And dance. And don't sweat even though it's like a thousand degrees out. But they're working on Market Square. They've got it all torn up. So there are fences everywhere. And I'm on the outside of the fence. And all the dancing, drinking business folks are inside. I can't find a way to get around the fence. There isn't a gate. I have no idea how they got in there. So I stood on the outside and watched. Wondering how to get inside.

At Stiria's I told her I either wanted to get in or I wanted to escape.

“Which one?”

“I wish I knew.”

“I want to escape,” she said. “I want to go far, far away where it isn't too hot or too cold.”

“Why don't you?”

But she didn't answer. She put her arm around me. She was warm that day. Amazingly warm. She turned on the TV. It was my favorite show. When I think about her now, that's the day

I remember. . . .

And now, I like to think Stiria slid across the hood of her car when she escaped the Sterchi. Just like Beau and Luke. The *real* Beau and Luke.



Of course none of what follows actually happened:

The button glows red when I press it. I hear a whirring from inside. The fountain is still dried out, except for a few puddles. The park is littered with scratched, golden panels from the golf ball top. I am covered in sweat. Let it roll down my face. But the elevator is on its way.

There is a ding and the doors open. When I get inside, I see that it was all an optical illusion. Although the elevator appears to be opaque, it's actually all glass. So I can see the entire city as I ascend. I can see all the people and the buildings and the University of Tennessee (Blount College) and all of the variously named and route numbered streets.

On the way up: I like to think that I was made in God's own image. That God is just as awkward, and ridiculous, and sweaty as me, that He has so many names because He's too timid to tell anyone they're wrong, that His real name is . . .

When I get to the top, I find myself in an all-white room made of cinderblocks. I don't understand how the inside of the Sunsphere can be made of cinderblocks, but it is. There is no air conditioning. In the room there is a man sitting in a chair. He looks like a burned out, confused, sweaty version of Colonel Sanders. The author of my story. For fun, I will call him Beauregard.

He offers me some fried chicken.

I ask how come the inside of the Sunsphere isn't gold. It becomes gold. Even in the heat, I'm cheered up a little by this.

Then we look at the world through the golden glass. Me and Beauregard. Neither one of us knows what to do in this world. Neither one of us knows how to make sense of it. Our sense has

been boiled away in the heat. Squeezed away by our own hands. But for a brief moment, me and Beauregard make a connection. Because just as I am about to ask, Beauregard makes it come true. And suddenly, from the Sunsphere, that broken down remnant of the past, we're able to look past the city of Knoxville, we're able to look past all of it, and we're able to see the place where the roads run logically and the streets' names never change.