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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Ode to a pool

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 The Colonial Pool has been a crucial part of my world —
3 and the world of many others — for decades. It closed abruptly
4 last week and maybe ended for good a world that I loved.

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 I'M A WATER BABY, a lap swimmer, an Aquarius-born,
7 brought up on the New York beaches, a person who swam
8 happily in vast oceans named Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, and
9 Mediterranean and then washed up in ocean-less Vermont.

10 Which is why this is an elegy for a pool. A particular
11 pool. A pool on Putney Road. A pool that has been a crucial part

12 of my world — and the world of many others — for decades. A
13 pool that closed abruptly last week and maybe ended for good a
14 world that I loved.

15 I came to Vermont from Panama in 1987. Panama, come
16 to think about it, has two oceans, only 50 miles apart. My studio
17 apartment there had a lovely view of the Pacific; my studio
18 apartment in downtown Brattleboro did not. I was, so to speak,
19 beached.

20 And then I found the Colonial Pool. Tucked behind a
21 motel of the same name, it offered a heated indoor pool with
22 three lap lanes, a dingy changing room covered in behavioral
23 warning signs, a shower room, and a large wooden outdoor hot
24 tub that could, in a literal pinch, seat six.

25 The pool was built by the wife of the hotel owner. She
26 loved the water as I did; she started a swim school there. She also
27 loved signs. Lots of signs — warning signs filled nearly every wall
28 and door. *Take a shower before entering the pool. Do not run.*
29 *Do not dive. No lifeguard on duty.* It was like being allowed to
30 use the pool of your ill-tempered aunt.

31 The signs did not deter me. I became a member and paid
32 for the privilege almost continuously, a year at a time, for the next
33 30 years.

34 When you became a member you were given a sign-in
35 number. To tell you how long I've been swimming at the
36 Colonial, when it closed last week the newest member numbers
37 were six digits; mine was 236.

38 * * *

39 I LOVED that pool.

40 I loved how sensual the pool was. It covered almost all
41 the sense bases except taste, as chlorine is never delicious.

42 I loved the feeling of clean warm water rushing over me,
43 caressing my body as I pulled through it.

44 I loved the sound the water makes, bubbling, spilling,
45 gurgling, and splashing in my ears.

46 I loved the dancing patterns of the lights on top of the
47 water and deep into it.

48 I loved the joy of moving through water at speed,
49 propelled by the strength of my own arms and legs.

50 I loved being surrounded by the color turquoise — pool
51 liners are almost always turquoise. The color makes me feel safe
52 and joyous.

53 I loved that swimming gratifies the obsessive part of me
54 which takes comfort in counting meaningless things, like the
55 number of the laps it takes to make half a mile. It is 18 laps out
56 and back, by the way. I've always done 20 — two for the pot.
57 Once a year, on my birthday, I'd do a mile just to prove I can.

58 I loved the meditation of swimming, the shutting down of
59 my conscious mind, the thoughts and messages that surfaced
60 after the first two or three laps, messages that told me what I
61 really cared about. (The first two or three laps are always
62 dedicated to what I'm making for dinner.)

63 I loved the sense of accomplishment I had when I
64 finished. And I especially loved the hot tub afterward, now
65 indoors, which I gave myself as a reward.

66 * * *

67 I WILL ALWAYS love the solitariness of swimming. As a
68 woman whose high school did not have teams that would pick
69 her, I love that swimming does not require other people.

70 But at the Colonial I was also part of a community, of
71 other men and women who swam. Hot tub conversations were
72 especially memorable.

73 In the locker room, we women talked as we showered
74 and dressed. Real talk, because we were naked and wet. We
75 were vulnerable. We were showing our scars. There was no way
76 to hide our lumps and our bulges. The only decoration we had to
77 hide behind was the color of our toenails. Our conversations
78 were often short, but they were naked, as in truthful. Naked, as in
79 honest.

80 I've made friendships at the pool that have lasted more
81 than 20 years. I made friendships there that changed my life.

82 When I meet members outside of the pool, maybe at a
83 party or downtown on the street, we often joke, "I didn't
84 recognize you with your clothes on."

85 This community has taken care of one another in
86 unexpected ways.

87 Once, when I fainted in the shower room — I forget why
88 now — three women I didn't know very well made a bed for me
89 on the floor out of towels, called 911, managed to extract from
90 me the correct combination for my lock (after several wrong
91 tries), forced clothing onto my limp wet body, put my kit bag and
92 pocketbook on the gurney, and then called my husband to meet
93 me in the emergency room.

94 I don't think they ever understood my deep gratitude —
95 being Vermonters, they probably thought anybody would have
96 done the same thing.

97 When someone in the pool community got sick, a card
98 appeared on the check-in desk for us all to sign. When a
99 community member died, we sometimes held a memorial
100 service.

101 When I met 85-year-old Ruthie Clark, for example, she
102 had stopped doing morning water aerobics but came anyway for
103 the companionship. After she was taken to the hospital, the
104 doctors gave her a choice: amputate her leg, or die the same day.

105 She spent the day writing farewell letters to her loved
106 ones, including a love letter to the people at the pool, thanking
107 us for our friendship and camaraderie.

108 For her memorial, we bought a rocking chair for the pool
109 lobby and put a plaque on the back with a picture of her friendly,
110 smiling face. I wonder what happened to that rocking chair.

111 * * *

112 WHEN THE COLONIAL was sold again, the new owners,
113 bless them, put in a second lap pool. No more circling. Very little
114 sharing.

115 The first pool, the original one, kept its salted water at 82
116 degrees, warm enough for physical therapy, for older people, for
117 water aerobics, and for children learning how to swim. The
118 newer pool had four lanes, was a bit colder, and served the lap
119 swimming community perfectly.

120 The hard-working, long-time manager of the pool was
121 trained by the original owner, so the walls were still full of
122 warning signs. My favorite was the one on the steam room door:
123 “Large pieces of ceiling are falling. The steam room will be
124 closed until it is repaired. Hopefully, this will be soon.”

125 But everything came to a crashing end last week. The
126 newest owner couldn’t handle the finances, even though the
127 pool, with 490 members, was profitable. The motel was housing
128 homeless people on expensive state vouchers as well as hosting
129 guests passing through town. And a few new Americans had just
130 opened an Afghan restaurant in the front. They didn’t deserve
131 what happened. None of us did.

132 In March, the owner couldn’t pay the bill and Green
133 Mountain Power shut off the electricity. The pool chilled. There
134 was no hot water for showers. They closed the pool.

135 But the owner eventually found the money, the power
136 went back on, and we pretended things were going smoothly
137 again. (Although we were told there was no money to fix the hot
138 water heater, so the showers were never hot.)

139 Then this month’s bill came, and I guess once again he
140 didn’t have the money. He shut the Colonial Motel and Spa down
141 cold on Wednesday. Our yearly contracts were broken, with no
142 chance for reimbursement.

143 The staff was stiffed a week’s pay and told to apply for
144 unemployment.

145 The massage therapist who worked in the back office had
146 to pack up all her gear.

147 The homeless people, who had formed their own
148 community, were moved to other motels.

149 And my community, the swimming community? We're
150 sending desperate emails back and forth, trying to find a way to
151 swim.

152 The Colonial's are the only indoor lap pools in town. The
153 next closest ones are in Greenfield, Massachusetts, Keene, New
154 Hampshire, and Springfield, Vermont.

155 In my opinion, the town of Brattleboro should buy and
156 run the pools. They fill an obvious need, they're an important
157 resource, they're right on Putney Road, and there's a community
158 of swimmers anxious to jump back into the water without having
159 to drive 40 minutes each way to do it.

160 Or maybe the members could organize, raise money,
161 and buy the pools as a cooperative? Or the Brattleboro
162 Development Credit Corp. could jump in and help the owner
163 resurrect his business?

164 This was a beloved and thriving business in the heart of
165 Brattleboro's shopping district. It should not be allowed to
166 disappear.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

167 **JOYCE MARCEL** is a reporter and columnist for *The*
168 *Commons*, where she regularly covers politics, homelessness,
169 economic development issues, and the arts.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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171

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###END VIDEO###

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