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A Gloom with a View

by Cheryl Laurent

"Out of the frying pan, into the spilt milk is more me." — Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*.

I am a born pessimist. The upside of pessimism is that one can only be pleasantly surprised. If the dogs chew up the sofa, well, that's to be expected. If a space opens up just as I pull into the parking lot, I'm delighted. The downside is that going around pretty certain that things are circling the drain is a heavy mental burden. I am considering putting it down.

If that sounds tentative, it's because I've known too many pseudo-optimists, people who try to lift your spirits by telling you about the downtrodden. Complain about scary potluck food in front of my mother-in-law, and you get to hear about all the sick, hungry, miserable people in the world who'd be delighted with Aunt Louise's lima bean prune casserole. I'm not convinced anyone in this country is that miserable, but I'm willing to play with the thought a minute. Taken to its illogical conclusion, there's always someone worse off than you are, so no one should be able to complain about anything.

A person could explode.

I also find myself wondering about what kind of Pageant from Hell would determine the benchmark, the one person whose circumstances are so awful that he or she alone gets to whine. Who makes the top of the Misfortune 500? But I digress.

I consulted some cheerful friends. It turns out that many of them aren't naturally optimistic. They got tired of dealing with some incredibly draining killjoy of a co-worker and made a deliberate determination to steer their thoughts in another direction. (Note: I consulted no co-workers of my own. I'm a pessimist, not a masochist.) Every day, every situation presents a choice for them to decide to look for the sunny side.

I don't know. It sounds like an awful lot of work.

The only comparison I can make is to physical exercise. I work out nearly every day but have never once answered the question "You know what would be fun today?" with "An hour or so of really strenuous exertion." No. I feel better, I sleep better, I function better afterward. But I do not like it. To paraphrase Dorothy Parker, I love to *have* exercised.

And really, most of the fit people I know are, in their own small ways, unhealthy. Fortyish marathoners have seventyish knees. Can one grind away the cushioning around one's happy place? The perky instructors at my gym can put their ankles behind their ears. Might they have their heads up, uh, something we klutzes of the world are falling on?

I could put my brain on the Optimism Stairmaster, consistently lifting one foot after the other in pursuit of a higher place. I might end up a little healthier for it. Then again, I'd still be getting nowhere.

Like I said, I'm a born pessimist...