

# A Guide to the McAlbert YMCA

*McAlbert YMCA, July 5, 2005* - As I'm probably quitting the McAlbert YMCA soon, I'm leaving behind this highly personal guide for whoever stumbles across it. I'm sure you'll find the McAlbert Y as intriguing, as full of surprises, as I did. You enter under the cut-glass marquee out on 54<sup>th</sup> Street (on sunny afternoons, the clear "YMCA" etched into the marquee's smoky glass leaves a bright absence of shadow on the sidewalk), swirl or stagger through the revolving door, and *swish!*, you're Alice through the Looking Glass. What fun!

## 1. Lobby Lockers

After you show your ID at the front desk, a white plastic sign with raised red letters urges you to "leave your valuables in one of the mini-lockers."

No, this is not where you safeguard your precious mini-skirts from the 1960s! This is a bank of small, bronze-colored safe deposit boxes built into the wall just across the lobby. Each locker is about 3 inches wide, 4 inches high and 5 inches deep. Eight rows of lockers top to bottom, eight columns left to right. The front face of every locker is corrugated with vertical ridges, perhaps to make it stronger, at least to make it *appear* stronger. (The ridges certainly feel groovy to your fingers!) The whole thing's a reservoir of solidity before you venture downstairs to the freer, subterranean depths, where you'll find the regular lockers and showers, the weight-lifting room, the cardio center, the swimming pool, the basketball and racquetball courts, the running track, and the aerobics and pilates studios. Which you can pronounce "Pie Ladies" if you're in a goofy mood!

On most days the steps for using a mini-locker proceed blandly. You select a box that has a bright orange key dangling in the door. You open the door; deposit your watch, house

keys and wallet; clank the door shut; turn and remove the key; then head off for your workout, devoid of any identity.

But sometimes it's like a TV game show. Sometimes you open the door and discover something the previous resident left behind: A wad of Kleenex that feels crusty with snot. A cell phone. A thin folder of credit cards. A candy wrapper.

Clink, clank, like so much of life, it's a jolly crapshoot! You've got to play to win, but maybe better to win nothing at all!

## 2. *Romeo at the Fountain*

As most of the gym has piped-in pop music that might annoy you, I suggest you get an iPod and create an individualized soundtrack for your workout.

When I'm doing a one-hour workout on the Upper-Body Rower, a kind of inverted bicycle where you sit on a padded stool and use your arms to rotate the pedals, my favorite music comes from Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet, a ballet.

I start out with, and play over and over for the first 20 minutes, the selection *Romeo at the Fountain*. It's #2 on the playlist. I saw the ballet years ago as a young man, and I barely remember the performers on stage because the music thrilled me so. (In fact, my eyes were more squinched tight than open that night, that kind of severely athletic dancing, both legs able to do so much, so removed from me.) Now, however, when I play the ballet on my iPod, I find the music so evocative, so thrilling, that I can't help but picture dancers cavorting in my mind.

As *Romeo at the Fountain* comes right before *The Street Awakens*, I imagine it's about the hero returning home late at night after carousing with his buddies. He hasn't met Juliet yet. He's by himself in the village square. It's pre-dawn. The shops along the back wall are shuttered shut. The stage is lit in muted blues and greens, and the dust that hangs in the air

seems phosphorescent, a fuzzy blanket. Romeo's in that calm, tuckered-out state that people often find themselves in as they venture home, alone, after a night of hi-jinks and horseplay with their friends. The fountain in question, stage left, spurts listlessly upwards, then splatters down in its broad basin. (I'm sure on a modern stage they can have real fountains.)

Romeo's exhausted but he meanders around on the stage, delaying that final fall into bed. Did I mention he's drunk? His torso is covered by a short, dark green *blouson*, but his legs are encased in silver tights, and in the subdued light they flash open and shut like scissors. Did I mention his thighs? They are ripped in both senses: his legs are muscular, yes, but also his tights have a few holes, a few runs in them. Perhaps he and his friends had a minor scrape with a rival gang, or he brushed his legs against a brick wall during some good-natured roughhousing.

Down in the orchestra pit, the violins are in pizzicato mode, plucking *oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah*, while a sole clarinet soars above and dips below the melody's home note. Oh, that clarinet! Long and thin, one end edging into the musician's mouth, whose tongue keeps licking the wet tip. The whole set up – the relentless fountain, the restless boy, the moistened musical stick – reeks of homoeroticism.

In my mind, Romeo leans back against the lip of the fountain's base, shifts his legs a bit, then finally wanders off stage, scuffing his ballet slippers through the gutter.

End of song!

I press "repeat" on my iPod and resume pedaling my arms!

*Romeo at the Fountain* is hands down a great way to kick-start any workout, especially on the Upper-Body Rower. I play it at least four times: once as I pedal with both arms, once with just my right arm, once again for the left, and once more as I work the machine in reverse. At the end of this, my biceps, shoulders and pecs are warm to the touch. And the front of my t-shirt is getting that first hint of sweat that will eventually blossom into an enormous peony-like blotch. After an hour on this machine, the top, strong half of my body will be drenched.

I play other selections from Romeo and Juliet, too, but blip over the Juliet parts. They're lovely in their way, but too ho-hum for anything aerobic. The men's fight scenes, however, with the clanging bells, the wild violin runs, and the male dancers exchanging all those bitch slaps, work me to a frenzy.

You'll find so, too. Try it!

### 3. The Wood Sprite

If you're stretching on one of the padded blue mats scattered incongruously about the cardio center, you must keep an eye open for the Wood Sprite. She's on staff here. Although she's rather short, her head supports a huge mound of chestnut curls, so massive she may one day topple over! Her tight black stretch pants show knobby knees, and a red YMCA t-shirt is pulled snug over her hips like a tunic. And yes, she's out to nick you and anyone else that irks her in the slightest. She darts about with a twinkle in her eye and minds everybody's business.

The cardio room's a cavernous alcove off the gym's indoor running track, and it serves as the Wood Sprite's magic forest. The closely-spaced StairMasters, treadmills and elliptical trainers are constructed of an amazing assortment of burnished gray poles, many of which rise straight up some six or seven feet like saplings of silver birch. The machines are packed tight as bean sprouts around the room, and each is topped with a small TV screen that often, in its colorful glory, resembles some exotic or tropical fruit. For example, is that a PBS documentary showing a child's face reddened with rosacea, or is it a pomegranate? Is that a Food Network program displaying a bunch of bananas, or a real bunch of bananas? That kind of thing.

The Wood Sprite lurks around this forest and pounces when you least expect it.

The first time she saw me stretching on a mat, she glanced at my leg, seemed to ponder how to proceed, then scrunched her head down and sallied forth.

“Excuse me, sir,” she winked, “You have to wear shoes!”

I had already wiped the mat down with the anti-bacterial towels they dispense all over the gym. You’d think that bare feet on an antiseptically wiped-down mat would be preferable to, say, someone’s street sneakers which had just run through the dog piss, pigeon shit, spittle and tubercular phlegm that coat the city’s sidewalks.

“Why?”

“It’s the rule!”

“I have just one more stretch and then I’ll go.”

She retreated a few feet and watched me out of the corner of her eye while she chatted up a woman loping on a treadmill. I completed my stretch, put on my sneakers and left.

Another time she caught me just as I started stretching. She insisted I put my shoes on right away, which I did. *Rules are rules!* An hour later, when I was still on the mat, she bustled by and said, “Still here! Still here!” wagging her finger in a way that could have meant, “Don’t overdo it, bud!” or “Good for you! Impressive!” (Would she have said this for anybody, or was she just acting out of pity for me?) Then she scurried over to the edge of the running track where she recognized someone jogging by. She slapped her hands rhythmically on her thighs, shouted “Giddy-up!” and whinnied like a horse. The runner, a tall, gaunt guy with strings of saliva sailing off his jaw, never acknowledged her but picked up his pace.

The wonderful thing about the Wood Sprite is that she keeps you on your toes so much (metaphorically, at least, in my case). She stops you from withdrawing too far into yourself, or from feeling that just because you’ve done some yoga stretches and deep breathing for 90

minutes, or just because you've raised your heart rate to 180 bpm on a treadmill, all is right with the world.

#### 4. The Showers

Old timers remember the early days of the McAlbert Y, when the men's shower area, three flights below street level, was dark, dank and stinky. Many of the lockers' metal doors were bent and falling off their hinges, and there was a sauna whose heating apparatus clanged endlessly at high decibels. If you stayed in that sauna too long, and the clanging got too loud, you'd come out like a portrait by Picasso: one eye higher than the other, an earlobe on your jaw, maybe a third elbow.

Now, though, the dressing room and shower area are spiffy and modern, with gleaming white tiles. It's a clean, well-lighted place!

The shower room itself has twelve showerheads: five along one wall, seven on the opposite. A single, rather grand entranceway exists at one end of the wall with the five showers. A lighting fixture shaped like the head of a torpedo juts out from the wall over each showerhead. In the great YMCA tradition, the room is a gang shower, which these days means that almost nobody under the age of 35 will use it. Peak viewing hours are Monday-Thursday from 6:30 – 8:00. That's p.m., not a.m.!

You'd think that when you're the only person taking a shower, the water's force would be at its strongest, but that's not the case. When you're all alone, the water barely trickles out. It's only when a crowd is taking a shower with you, five or more showerheads running simultaneously, that the H<sub>2</sub>O is Happy to Open up, blasting out like a fire hose.

So what do you see in the gang showers of the McAlbert YMCA, here at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? The answer's simple: All kinds of bodies! Shall we run down a few that were there tonight?

I arrived early, around 6:20, carrying my shampoo and this special anti-bacterial soap that gives off a minty-blue fragrance, the only smell in the room. A single man was showering. He was about 38 years old, Caucasian, with short reddish hair and a scrawny body. Nothing special to note except a hairy ass with shaved ass crack, and the fact that he was using the “scary” showerhead that hisses out the water in the sharpest needle spray imaginable. Almost everyone avoids this nozzle (it’s the 3<sup>rd</sup> from the left as you walk in the door – forewarned is forewarned!), so he must have loved the pain. Or was a newcomer. Or oblivious.

I took my usual position, the 2<sup>nd</sup> showerhead on the wall across from the entryway, which I love because when there’s a crowd, the water gushes thick as a horse’s leg and makes a full-throated *splat* on the floor. This location also affords a vista not only up and down the shower room but out the doorway, across the toweling-off area, and along a row of sinks beyond that, allowing me maximum views.

Within a few minutes guys started filtering in, some gorgeous, some hideous, a mixed bag of nuts.

One of the first was Elephant Man, a regular. He’s not deformed like the character in the movie of that name – no, he’s just enormous in almost every way possible. Way over 6 feet tall. Weight approaching or exceeding 300 pounds. (It’d be interesting to find out!) Huge mane of brown hair cascading down his snowy-white back. And a sharp beak of a nose that sticks out of his narrow face like an index finger asserting a point in a heated conversation.

But oh! The layers and layers of rolling fat! I have a female friend, Leslie, who once looked at a similarly enormous man and asked me, “How does he see his dick?” A few days later I stood next to the Elephant Man in the showers and reported back to Leslie that guys that size can’t. When he entered the shower room all I could see was a smudge of brown hair between his legs, and then, when he stood at the shower beside me, I couldn’t see a thing.

To his credit, the Elephant Man plays a mean game of racquetball. I've watched him on the court. He barely moves around, but has a powerful swing to his arm, smashing the ball to smithereens. He's one of the top-ranked players at the Y.

Then began the Parade of All Stars. Spectacular specimens of men in their 30s, 40s, even 50s, almost all gay or looking gay, age and ethnicity not an issue, everyone pretty much at ease with who and what he is. Trim, toned, tony and cool. E.g.:

- A male model (50-something, white), whom you'll see, clothed, if you flip through a few of the major clothing catalogs that target preppies-turned-yuppies. He'll be wearing buttoned-down oxfords and pleated no-iron pants, his brilliant white hair and sleek physique crying out to Baby Boomers, "This is (or could be) you!" His attitude, when he's naked at the McAlbert Y, is delightful – smiling, perky – although he never makes eye contact.
- A pair of weight room bunnies, one Latino, one Caucasian, both rather short, with pecs so pumped their nipples pointed down. Sad to say, their pubic area was completely denuded, which for me is such a disconnect: Above the waist they'd make Superman feel self-conscious, but below the hips they look about 10 years old. Whatever! They pounded with such vigor the liquid soap dispenser fastened to the wall: *ponk! ponk! ponk!*
- A neo-hippie, tall and slim, probably straight, probably a serious runner. He sports about 10% body fat and perfect posture, with Chinese characters tattooed on each of his vertebrae. (I could decode quite a few if he'd let me examine them!) Dishwater blond ponytail and bushy sideburns, and a heavy Prince Albert ring that pierces the opening of his urethra and re-emerges on the underside of his long, slender cock.
- And do not fail to notice Space Age Princess – a dark-skinned African-American guy with shaved head and shiny high cheekbones, who always comes in from the pool



area wearing a saggy, bright-red pair of Speedos (the better to display the goods), and, most astonishingly, high-fashion, sci-fi sunglasses: the sides of the frames as wide as the lenses, everything boxy and right angles. His eyebrows rise up behind these glasses like cool question marks. The Princess always waits for the perfect moment to loosen her bathing suit strings and let the Speedos slither to the floor.

Typically, because everyone has pretty much seen everyone else before, there's not a lot of cruising behavior, and I expect that on most nights, very few assignments (emphasis on the ass) get negotiated in the showers or locker room. The situation in general is not much more pulsating than prime time TV. And in my case, almost everybody glances once and that's it, I'm a fly on the wet wall.

But every once in a while, a demigod, typically a visitor with a sly smile and sex-pack abs, deigns to step down from the firmament and saunter into the showers, and then the preening and posing and jockeying for position really take off, so dramatic! You can practically see the excitement pulsing in the other men's necks, pupils dilating wildly, as the visitor (sly smile, sex-pack abs, perhaps an insouciant goatee, furry-burly legs almost cloven-hooved) positions himself at one of the center showers, unabashedly looking everyone in the eye, turning this way and that, showcasing his ass and private parts, everyone else shifting into high gear, prancing from one foot to the next or *ponk-ponk-ponking* the metal soap dispensers, soaping up their armpits and legs and butt cheeks a 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> time, rub-rub-rub-rub, practically in unison, like that '70s dance song:

*Are you ready or not, it's only up the street  
Everybody dancing, everybody on the beat*

And suddenly, *snap!*, it's like the whole gym is working out in synch, 60 beats per minute on every floor and in every room, the joggers on the treadmills bounding along in synch, the aerobics class following the exact same beat, everyone in the pool stroking and kicking 30 or 60 or 120 beats per minute, the weight lifters curling iron on the same beat, the high school girls jumping rope in the basketball court skipping to the same beat, everyone together for five – ten – fifteen glorious seconds of perfect synchronicity, the whole building

now vibrating as one like some massive tuning fork knocking on Heaven's door, while the men's showers fizz with glee and the sexy visitor smiles right at you, and the steam billows up off the shower room floor, caressing your face and the undersides of your arms *up-up-up* ever so gently, while the vortex over the shower drain makes a loud sucking noise, and it does not, ever, truly, seem to end.

## 5. Dénouement

Upstairs around the corner from the check-in desk and mini-lockers, off in its own out-of-the-way alcove, is a little lounge area that hardly anyone uses. The lounge chairs – huge comfy things with nubbly green fabric – allow you to sink low in the cushions after a strenuous workout, making it almost impossible to get up, an act of mind (*your* mind) over matter (your drowsy, enervated *body*). You'll think the chairs are moss-covered marshmallows. They're interspersed with heavy, disk-like coffee tables that are perfect for putting your feet up.

The lounge has a derelict feel to it, though. One of the chairs is losing its stuffing through a rip; another has some black, gummy splotches on it. Most of the coffee-table disks are scuffed. Dust bunnies abound. A rack of brochures and leaflets, shoved in a corner, needs weeding – many of the leaflets are out of date and flopping over – and the back half of the rack is completely inaccessible. (I can probably leave this mini-guide wedged in there someplace, not to be touched for years.)

I'm sitting in one of the lounge chairs right now, zoning out, on the one hand, but I'm also asking myself, *what to do?*

As I was preparing to leave the showers tonight, a new crowd came in. Young 20-somethings. All en route to the pool, all dressed in baggy swim trunks – and all an anomaly, as there are other showers next to the pool that swimmers usually use. These new guys were

a bit brazen, a bit of a challenge. The normal shower crowd had pretty much petered out by then, just a body builder remained (Hitler mustache at the crotch), a senior citizen, and me.

I always say, half jokingly, "I love what the younger generation is doing!" and so I thought, fine, let's see what's up, let's welcome this new bunch with open arms.

They were an exact half dozen: two black, three white, one indeterminate (really, these classifications are becoming pointless), all energetic. Nice builds. A few had the top buttons of their surfer shorts undone, revealing precisely how much they had or had not shaved. Loud, good-natured voices, perhaps a bit forced. Teeth as white and sparkly as the gleaming wall tiles.

The most striking boy was ebony-skinned, exactly my height (5' 10"), with naturally coral-pink fingernails. In the McAlbert shower room, where almost everyone and everything falls upon a color-free scale ranging from blazing white to the purest black, these lustrous pink lozenges stood out, made a statement, cried, "We're special! Please notice!"

And in contradistinction to those cool strawberry orbs, the young man's eyes kept darting, hot, from one corner to another in their sockets, brown billiard balls bouncing back and forth, seeking escape.

The contrast of the dark skin with the pink nails; the darting eyes; an otherwise Plain Jane profile...for some reason, I was impressed. When his eyes finally landed on mine, I made a slow, careful, calibrated wink.

I lingered in the shower a bit more, then gathered my things and left, leaving these young guys to themselves. My showerhead let out a loud *kerchunk* as I turned it off, causing everyone to glance my way for a split second.

It happened when I was toweling off in the sink area. Looking straight ahead in the long wall of mirror above the sinks, I could see my upper, normal half (nicely stacked, actually; what's that line I read somewhere, *upper body like a home-run hitter, wrists like the Boston*

*Strangler...hah!*), and looking in the mirror's far left I could see the reflection of about half of the showers. And it was there that I saw, in the reflection, one of the youths traipsing about the center of the shower room, copying my gimpy walk, my *up* on the left foot, *down* on the right, *herky-jerky* walk, to the uproarious glee of his comrades, including Ebony Lad with the Pearl-Pink Nails. Then the guy who was mimicking me limped to the back of the showers where I couldn't see him, and did something that made his friends laugh long and loud. The guffaws reverberated off the tiled walls and, I felt, ricocheted up through the gym, through the hollow stairwells and dusty elevator shafts, through the basketball and handball courts, the cardio room, the weight room, the running track, the yoga and pilates studio, past the registration desk and out onto the busy, mucky street.

I stood stock still for a minute, a deer caught in its own reflection, then wrapped the now cold and damp towel around my waist, went out to the locker room, and got dressed. Clambered up the many levels of stairs, plopped down in this lounge chair and thought. Or rather, am thinking.

And I ask myself now: *Well, sure, who am I to deny a cute guy a future memory of someone who's different? And: Who am I to stem the twisting, dwindling trickle of polio awareness in these great, good United States (thank you poliomyelitis virus, or as they elusively used to say, "infantile paralysis")? And: Who am I to question anyone's destiny, including my own, which has been way more unique than any of those sons-of-bitches?*

And I think, *OK, it's actually a sign I should go. I was and am washed up in both senses of the term...*

And, calming down, I think, OK, fine, it's not like I haven't experienced this before, it's not like I haven't fled other places for similar insults, this is nothing new, it's not such a big deal anyway, and it's also not like my doctor, fifteen years younger than me, hasn't been saying, "You need to think about slowing down physically. Your excessive gym workouts may not be

good for you. You haven't evidenced PPS<sup>1</sup> yet but it could happen any day and it may come on more strongly because you've been exerting yourself so much."

And it's not like I'm not growing older, which reconfigures everything, no matter who you are, like my doctor saying, "The slight increase in curvature of your spine may just be normal degeneration," *which I hate, calling me a degenerate, which I've always fought...*

And it's not like I don't trust that the boy with the beautiful nails, and most of his joker friends, and everyone else in this gym, frankly speaking, can't finally come around to including my perspective. Before I die. If they're not there already.

But Christ Almighty, *couldn't they have kept it to themselves?*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Post-Polio Syndrome*, in case you're interested...People who were stricken with polio as children and survived, suddenly find three or four decades later that their body starts failing them once again. This includes progressive muscular atrophy, which eventually robs them of the muscle power to breathe.

