A CLOUDY DISPOSITION

I was in a hotel room in Kentucky when I learned my hometown was one of the cloudiest places in the United States.

It was early June 2022. My boyfriend and I were in the process of moving from North Carolina to Missouri, we just finished an exhausting 12-hour drive and had only four hours to get through the next day. My dad was helping us with the driving. We all sat in the hotel room, drained, and trying to order some much-needed dinner. I had the TV on the Weather Channel, as they started discussing their cloudy city statistics from a study done with Polaris, a leader in powersports manufacturing.

The words “#1: YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO” immediately caught my attention.

“Oh, hey!” I said, pointing to the screen to get my dad’s attention. “One of the cloudiest cities? Really?”

My dad was born and raised in Youngstown. He lived there for over 50 years before leaving the state. “Yeah,” he said. “Didn’t you ever realize that when you were little?”

I lived in the Youngstown area for 18 years; from the day I was born until the day I left for college. As a kid, I was not really thinking about the weather, unless it was a storm. Storms terrified me, it fueled my tornado anxiety. Due to my fears, I was quick to learn the difference between a watch and a warning and found little comfort in my grandmother telling me and my siblings, “It’s just God bowling with the saints and Mary’s flickering the lights on and off!” I could understand the resemblance to bowling, but lightning as lights? Why would Mary incessantly be turning on and off a switch?

I remember my grandma saying this as we all huddled on the ramps at Eastwood Field, a downpour surrounding us just moments after the Scrappers baseball game was delayed. This was a core memory for me and for years after, I was very anxious about going to baseball games because I swear in my 7-year-old mind any time we went to a game, it always stormed, and we’d always end up in the stadium, always listening to God bowling.

The only weather on my radar was storms. But the standard, run-of-the-mill clouds? Never even noticed them.

But after hearing my dad say it in that hotel room, it suddenly made sense. I don’t know how I didn’t notice all the sun when I was living in North Carolina.

This news made even more sense after we finished our move to St. Louis and we experienced our first Missouri summer, where rain was sparse and the 10-day forecast was nothing but sun, 90 degrees, and excessive heat warnings. My boyfriend played baseball for a men’s league in the summer and I’m happy to say I went to 20+ games with no storms in sight.

There were also no clouds. While the Youngstowners used umbrellas to shield off the rain and storms, I was using an umbrella to keep the St. Louis sun at bay. I was constantly roasting, and clouds would have been very welcome—that or a pool.

Back in my Youngstown childhood, we had a pool in the yard. Dad obsessed over that pool and if me and my siblings weren’t in it, we would hear about it.

“If no one’s going to use that pool, I’m going to take it out!”

“I’m so glad I spent all that money to put in a pool so my kids could just stare at it!”

“GET IN THE POOL!”

My siblings might have different opinions, but for me, the water was always too cold. We didn’t have a heated pool, so we relied on the non-existent sun to heat it up.

What we did have was a thermometer tied to the ladder and when we were exiled to the pool each day, the first thing we’d do was check it to determine if we deemed ourselves capable of tolerating the water.

68? Not a chance.

70? Meh. Maybe if we ran around a lot first or lie in the sun (oh wait).

72? This was generally the earliest green light we’d take.

74? Hell yes.

76? Even better.

78? A rarity, but a welcomed rarity.

There were times we’d have mom’s family over for summer events and everyone would immediately hop in the pool. If the temperature was good, we’d be in there too. If not, we felt sort of “off the hook” because hey, there’s people in there, you can’t get mad at us, mom and dad!

My mom was also born and raised in Youngstown, so her family surrounded us growing up. The most notable gatherings were always my older sister’s birthday, falling two days before the 4th of July, so it was the perfect way to knock out two events in one Hudak family gathering. But of course, a summer birthday means you’re spending it in the pool. I was secretly glad my birthday was in the gloom of February. At least I could be inside a warm house instead of in a cold pool.

While mom’s family was close by, dads was even closer. We all lived within a few streets of each other. They too enjoyed my sister’s birthday in the pool. But most of the swimming done with them was at Nana and Papa’s house. When you have 17 grandkids, why wouldn’t you have a pool? Nana and Papa’s house was a short walk for us, a short drive for others, and for some relatives, a quick walk through their backyards.

We were at Nana and Papa’s almost every Sunday of the year. At times, there’d be close to 30 of us in the green-carpeted basement, the heat blowing off the industrial sized ovens my grandparents made regular use of. But there we’d gather each week, sitting around one long table (with the grandkids at a circular “kid’s table”), sharing pounds of pasta, meatballs, and salad.

In the fall and winter, we’d frequent the various small rooms of their house, watching TV, talking, or playing with the various games and toys Nana had in the back closet. Everyone would start creeping outside when the weather warmed up in May. I remember the white plastic chairs with the letter “B” painted in red on the backs, arranged among the brown vinyl-strapped lawn chairs, frequented by aunts, uncles, and other relatives. They lounged, smoked cigars, and talked about things I didn’t understand. Us grandkids took to roaming the vast backyard, wandering through Papa’s work garage or the back shed, or playing games like kick the can.

In the summer, Nana and Papa would open the pool and we moved our after-dinner activities there. I always thought their pool was amazing because it was longer than ours, but I hesitated upon getting into it—the water was always a shade of a new color and frigid. Our pool-less cousins ate it up. They didn’t care if the water was a sickly green or if the pool was 99% shaded by the trees of Mill Creek Park.

I probably sound spoiled—wasn’t I thankful to have a pool, something many families didn’t have? Looking back now, I wish I had been more grateful. What I wouldn’t give to have a pool now.

When I lived in North Carolina, our apartment complex had a brand-new saltwater pool that I’d arrive to daily at 10am and leave after a few spiked Arnold Palmers and a couple chapters of a book. I relished in my summers. Now, I sit in a baby pool on the driveway in the blazing midwestern heat. It’s not the same.

I wonder if me and my siblings would have been different if we had grown up in Missouri with a pool. Maybe, since it’s all sun and heat, we would have made use of it daily. But maybe we’d still be our picky selves.

All I want now is a pool, clouds or not. I’d give anything to go back to those carefree summers of childhood, to experience one last 4th of July celebration. They were some of my strongest “cloudy Youngstown” memories.

It was always at Nana and Papa’s, accompanied by aunts, uncles, cousins, and dozens of distant relatives I have no recollection of. There were rows of whole chickens turning over a large fire, Rosemary Clooney singing “Mambo Italiano”, the lingering smell of cigar smoke, the constant clanging of ringers, a cloudy pool, a cloudy sky, and all of us in sweatshirts.

My family has pictures and home videos of us keeping warm on Independence Day, and while Papa might have complained about the weather year after year, and while I might not have noticed it, it is the cloudiness I now love and accept. I’d give many sunny days to relive those 4th of Julys, hazed over in cigars, cooking chickens, family laughing, and the clouds above.

The years have passed. The pool at Papa’s has long since been taken out, and now some aunts and uncles have their own pools for their grandchildren to enjoy. Some of us have left Youngstown, heading for Illinois, Virginia, North Carolina, Missouri, and Texas. No matter where we might be, we all share the clouds. We all have days where we are reminded of home.

In China, clouds are viewed as luck, since they produce rainfall, which replenishes the earth. Overlapping clouds are said to represent eternal happiness, while clouds of varying colors are indicative of an abundance of blessings.

Some of my favorite days are in the fall and winter when the sky is gray and blanketed by clouds. There’s a calmness in these days that I cannot find when the sun is out. I’m taken back home.

How lucky I was to spend those days swimming, the eternal happiness of being together, the countless blessings the clouds, and the city, gave me.