

Man in Chair with Book

by Peter Cherches

It's a good thing I have a sense of humor about this sort of thing, he thought, a minute or two into it. This sort of thing? After he thought it, he wondered, is this like anything I have faced before?

Immediately, he remembered the heart palpitations. That was about twenty years ago, he remembered. It had started on the subway, on his return trip from work, he was working at Viking at the time, and it had continued for more than a day, and then it stopped, and that was it, he never again had a problem with heart palpitations, it was the first time and the last time.

Is this something like that? he wondered. Is this thing something like a panic attack? he wondered. He had never been plagued by panic attacks. I don't think it was a panic attack back then, twenty years ago, he thought. He had thought it then and he thought it now. He had no cause for panic this time. He hadn't that time either, as far as he could tell. Yet, of course, he had heard that panic attacks don't necessarily stem from logical causes. Yes, but certainly there is a panicky disposition, he thought, and I don't have one of those. Certainly, were I to panic now, there would be a logical explanation. I should be perfectly within my rights to panic now, of course. I would panic *because* of what happened, he thought, but I can't imagine that it had happened *because* I had panicked in the first place, he thought. In fact, he thought, who could imagine conditions less conducive to panic. A perfectly relaxing afternoon, spent in a chair, by a window, with a Penguin Classics edition of Montaigne's *Essays*.

What had happened, a few minutes before, was that he, all of a sudden, froze. Sitting in the chair, by the window, reading a Penguin Classics paperback edition of selected essays of Montaigne, at page 196, he just froze, unable to move a muscle. That was his realization, however many seconds or fractions of a second it is after such an occurrence that one realizes such a thing. "I can't move a muscle" was exactly how he had phrased this realization to himself.

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And, I'm worried, he thought. He had quickly realized that he was breathing. Then, in a sense, I *can* move a muscle, he thought. I assume, he thought, that breathing, to some degree at least, requires the cooperation of muscles. Of course, I'm not an expert, but this has to be a good sign.

That was when he thought, it's a good thing I have a sense of humor about this sort of thing, and remembered the heart palpitations. It was also when he discovered that he could not scream for help, that he could not vocalize.

This is the kind of thing that makes you think, it might be nice to have a wife, he thought. When you can't move a muscle a wife could be a comforting thing. He hadn't had a wife for twenty-three years. Elisa had left him in the seventies, after ten years of marriage. That was how he had always conceptualized it, that she had left him, not that they had split up. His absolute refusal to consider thinking about having children had been the cause. She left, got married again, had children, two, one of each. Kristen, the younger one, Elisa had told him recently, they had never lost touch, was applying to Smith, Berkeley, and Northwestern. He and Elisa had married when they were both graduate students, he in English, she in Theatre, at Northwestern.

It was an abstract wife that he thought of now, somebody who might rescue him. You don't think about these things when everything's going well, he thought, but if I had a wife now she'd probably be here with me and do whatever had to be done. Or, if for some reason she wasn't here she'd come back soon enough and find me before it's too late. Even if she were away or something she'd probably call to see how I was, and when I didn't answer she'd get worried and come back, hopefully quick enough to find me before it's too late.

He was single twenty years ago, but Marilyn had come to the E.R. to wait with him while his heart did its Gene Krupa impersonation. Marilyn's daughter must be almost college age too, he thought, as he remembered Marilyn and the E.R.

I thought fifty-eight was young, he thought. This kind of thing makes you think it might be old. I always thought sixty was old. Does anybody believe in middle age? I don't think so, he thought. I think you always think you're young, until some point, when all of a sudden you think you're old. Everybody in America thinks they're middle class, it doesn't matter whether they're rich or poor, but nobody thinks they're middle aged.

I'm breathing just fine, he thought. Well, maybe a little shortness of breath, he thought, but that's got to be natural at a time like this. There's bound to be some anxiety when you can't, for all intents and purposes, move a muscle. And he thought, I have to pee.

If I had known this was going to happen I wouldn't have had that second cup of coffee, he thought. He thought, if I could laugh I would have to laugh, because how can you think something like if I had known this was going to happen I wouldn't have had that second cup of coffee and not laugh. And then he thought again, I have to pee, and he realized he still had bladder control. Breathing and bladder control, he thought, score two for the home team.

Relax or struggle, he wondered, what's the best approach? To struggle, to try to force my arms to move, or my legs, might lead somewhere, he thought. Sure, I've *tried* to move all along, but perhaps I haven't given it my all. Then he thought of Gandhi and India. Passive resistance. Maybe relaxing is the better approach. Maybe this whole thing is the result of tension, he considered. Struggling might make it worse, he thought, though he couldn't think of what worse might be. Relaxation could be the key, he thought. So he tried to relax.

Exactly how to relax, he wasn't sure. Was he thinking of a physical thing or a mental thing? he wondered. He couldn't, as far as he could tell, relax his muscles, he seemed to have no control over his muscles, except for his bladder, which he assumed was something like a muscle if not technically one, and he didn't want to relax his bladder, not yet, at least. He seemed to have no control over his breathing, he couldn't figure out how to breathe more slowly, or more deeply. Perhaps it was a matter of attitude, he

thought. So he tried to adopt a relaxed attitude. But he had no idea how to do that. I may not be a panicky type, he thought, but I don't think I've ever had a relaxed attitude. What would that be like? Would it be a meditation kind of thing, a total clearing of the mind? He couldn't imagine what that would be like. He had never meditated. His mind had never been clear.

And then he noticed something else: that his eyes could focus, and they could move. That must involve muscles too, he thought. His head was immobile, and his eyes were focused on the paragraph he had been reading when it happened, and he read it again.

I have always an idea in my mind, a certain confused picture, which shows me, as in a dream, a better form than I have used; but I cannot grasp it and develop it. And even this idea is only on a middling plane. From this I conclude that the works of those rich and great minds of ancient days are very far beyond the utmost stretch of my hopes and imagination. Their writings not only satisfy me to the full, but astound me and strike me with wonder. I appreciate their beauty; I see, if not the whole, at least so much that I cannot possibly aspire to equal it. Whatever I undertake, I owe a sacrifice to the Graces, as Plutarch says of someone, to obtain their favour,

*si quid enim placet,
si quid dulce hominum sensibus influit,
debentur lepidis omnia Gratiis.†*

He had frozen at that quote from the Latin. Now he noticed that his eyes could drop to the bottom of the page, to read the translation: "'For, if anything pleases, if anything sweetly influences the mortal senses, all is due to the charming Graces.' Source unknown." Source unknown, he thought, how fitting.

What's the source of what has happened to me? he wondered. Is there an explanation? He had asked the cardiologist at the hospital the same thing, twenty years ago, when the palpitations stopped. What's the explanation?

"Have you ever had any trouble like this before?" the doctor had asked.

"Not that I can think of," he told the doctor.

"Well, if it doesn't happen again you have nothing to worry about," the doctor told him. And then he said to the doctor, "Yes, but why did it happen?" And the doctor replied, "These things happen." The answer reminded him of a Henny Youngman joke, the one where the guy says, "Doctor, Doctor, I get a terrible pain every time I lift my arm," and the doctor replies, "So don't lift your arm!"

These things happen, he thought, paralyzed in his chair. I guess that's as good an answer as any. It doesn't pay to obsess about causes, he told himself. The important thing is to solve the problem. And for some reason that realization made him think of Lincoln and slavery.

Good, good, good, good, good. So what to do, what to do? He was feeling the pressure in his bladder, really had to pee, he could let go, just pee, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. It was a dignity thing. Better to suffer, as long as I can hold it in, he thought. Who knows, maybe I'll snap out of it, any minute now, he thought. Then I can walk to the toilet and have a good long pee. It was a blissful fantasy.

I love this chair, my reading chair, he thought. I don't want to piss all over my reading chair. I spent months, going from store to store, test driving reading chairs, twenty-one years ago, he thought, I met Marilyn at the Workbench, where I almost bought a chair, but it wasn't quite right, and then I found this one at a shop near Union Square, I can't remember the name. It's the perfect reading chair, the perfect contours, for extended reading.

He thought: I must look like a Duane Hanson sculpture. This stock still, slightly paunchy, grayish, balding, somewhat intellectual-looking fifty-eight-year-old freelance copyeditor, failed novelist (but that's ancient history), wearing a plaid flannel shirt, jeans, and thick white socks, no shoes, frozen in a chair, by a window, in a West Village apartment, on a Friday afternoon, reading

the essays of Montaigne. It could be worse, he thought, at least I'm reading Montaigne.

He had almost picked up Lamb. He wanted to re-read the essay about Lamb's retirement from his desk job. How Lamb had, for years, daydreamed about the day he would retire on pension from his office job and have all the free time in the world. And then, when he finally retires, he can't figure out what to do with all that free time. He likes Lamb, and, he thought, it might have been all right to be paralyzed while reading that particular essay, but what if, he thought, just when my muscles froze, I had turned to one of those pieces where he makes one of his anti-Semitic slurs? Do we really want to add insult to injury?

Or it could have been the newspaper. News gets stale very quickly.

The pressure in the bladder was building up. It's one of the few things I can still control, he thought, I'm not ready to give in.

His eyes were able to scan the entire two-page spread. Above the translation of the quote from source unknown was another footnote, another translation from the Latin: "'When I re-read them, I am ashamed of having written them, because I see so many things that I, as their author, think should be bundled away.' Ovid, *Ex Ponto*, I, V, 15." The essay he was reading was titled, "On Presumption."

He decided to skip around. Unable to turn the page, there was hardly any incentive to read in a linear fashion. He read the last paragraph on page 197.

"Now my language has no ease or grace; it is rough and contemptuous, free and irregular in its arrangement; and my inclination, if not my judgement, likes it so. But I am well aware that sometimes I let myself go too far, and that by trying to avoid art and affectation, I fall into them on the other side:"

How appropriate: paralyzed with a two-page spread, and the last paragraph ends with a colon.

He thought of "judgement." The spelling, in this British translation of Montaigne, reminded him of an incident in high

school. On a spelling test he had spelled judgement with an "e" after the "g." The teacher, Mr. Hillyer, had marked him wrong. He couldn't believe that judgment was spelled without an "e" after the "g," and after class he went to the school library to look up judgement. What he found was that although judgment is the preferred American spelling, judgement with the extra "e" was listed as an acceptable alternate spelling. He showed this to the teacher, but Mr. Hillyer wouldn't accept it. "That's a British spelling," the teacher said. "It's not acceptable." But I replied, he thought, "It's in an American dictionary, so it must be acceptable." And when Mr. Hillyer wouldn't budge I threatened to take it up with the principal. Hillyer finally gave in. I'm sure he considered me a wise-guy Jew, he thought.

Am I worrying enough, he wondered, coming out of the judgement memory, or am I worrying too much? He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep from peeing. It *would* be one less thing to worry about if he got it over with, he thought. And isn't there some danger of, what do they call it, uremic poisoning? he wondered. He had held it in longer than this before, but, of course, he was never paralyzed those other times. What would be better, he wondered, to pee, or not to pee? Holding it in proves I still have some kind of control, he told himself. Letting it relax would probably be a great relief, except that I'd be all wet, and smelly, and the chair would get all wet and smelly. Not yet, he thought.

Freelancing is another problem, he thought. If you have an office job, and you don't show up, and you don't call, they get worried, and they try to call you, and if they don't get you, maybe they get worried enough to send somebody to your home to see if you're all right. Assuming it happens on a work day. If I had an office job I would have been there when it happened, he thought, assuming it would have happened at the same time, in a different place, assuming it would have happened at all if I weren't sitting here by the window reading Montaigne, he thought. It's starting to get dark, he thought.

The job he was doing now, a freelance job for Knopf, was a pleasure. It was a first novel, by a young woman from Tennessee, that was really a scream. A picaresque about these two women who leave their husbands and go on a meandering jaunt through the south and midwest, stopping at every juke joint along the way, and having wild adventures of various sorts. The voice was fresh and quirky. He was supposed to deliver the manuscript on Monday. That might be a problem, he thought.

What would it have been like if he and Elisa had stayed together and had children? he wondered. Maybe one of them would be here now, Elisa or one of our children, and I wouldn't be paralyzed in a chair with a paperback edition of Montaigne trying not to pee and wondering am I going to die in this chair. I'd probably be in a hospital, or in an ambulance on my way to one. What would those twenty-three years have been like? he wondered.

He looked at the book again: "It needs at least as much accomplishment to develop an empty theme as to sustain a weighty one."

Ah, Montaigne, he thought, I can't imagine a writer I'd rather be paralyzed with. Virginia Woolf had kvelled about Montaigne, he thought, but as he thought it he thought, somehow kvell and Virginia Woolf don't seem to go together. And one can hardly think of Emerson kvelling. But Montaigne was one of his Representative Men. Montaigne, the skeptic.

"Paralyzed" was the word, he had realized, that best described his state. I am paralyzed, he thought. I am paralyzed, I can't move a muscle, except for the fact that I can breathe, I can move my eyes, and I have bladder control. And the bladder control is a mixed blessing.

He was beginning to believe that he could die, in the chair by the window.

He tried to concentrate on moving. He came up with a game plan. Probably better to start small, he thought, to focus everything on a finger, for instance. Which finger? he wondered. He began to think of each finger, one by one, and remember how it

moved. He decided on the index finger of his left hand. It seemed like the one that moved most naturally, the pointing finger. Being left-handed, the left index finger seemed the logical choice to him. He had to try it. He concentrated on moving his left index finger. He tried to will his left index finger to move. He thought, left index finger, left index finger, left index finger—MOVE! But it didn't move.

The bladder thing was both a trial and a consolation. He felt himself becoming dizzy, and he thought this might be related to holding in his urine. The possibility of uremic poisoning was starting to concern him, and he began to seriously consider giving in and pissing himself. Soon, maybe, but not yet, he thought.

Montaigne: "I do not know how to please or to delight, or to amuse; the best story in the world becomes dry and withers in my hands."

He had, until this point, considered it a temporary thing. Some kind of psychosomatic reaction that he would snap out of, or, through the help of medical science, would be cured of. He had also entertained the possibility of death. But now another possibility suggested itself: perhaps I am paralyzed for life, he thought. I am frightened, he thought.

"When I attempt some popular or lighter theme, it is to follow my own inclination—since I do not care for a formal and gloomy wisdom, as the world does—and to enliven myself, not my style, which is better suited to a grave and serious theme; always supposing that I can give the name of style to a formless and irregular utterance, a popular jargon that runs on without definitions, without divisions, without conclusions, and is as vague as that of Amafanius and Rabirius." Montaigne.

Just then something happened. As a tear dropped from the corner of his left eye, he became aware that he could cry.

Breathing, bladder control, eye movement, and now crying, he thought. All is not lost.

Am I crying from the realization that I am paralyzed, or from the agony of the bladder, or both? he wondered. And he also wondered, does it really matter?

He began to wonder what life would be like, paralyzed. I suppose I'll need feeding tubes, and catheters, and constant care, he thought. He wondered whether he had bowel control. He wasn't sure, but he suspected he might not.

As glad as one can be under such circumstances, he was glad he didn't have a family. He would not have wanted to be a burden to a wife and children. A vegetable. I wasn't cut out to be a vegetable, he thought. And he also thought: Elisa's kids are quite wonderful; I'm very happy for her.

Ah, Montaigne, Montaigne, what would Montaigne have to say at a time like this? he wondered. His eyes scanned the pages and came upon this sentence: "And yet we must tune the string to every kind of note; and the sharpest is the one that is most rarely touched."

Several minutes later, the phone rang. On the fourth ring the answering machine picked it up. He waited. After about twenty seconds of silence he heard a beep, then the message.

"Carl? It's Tony. I'm assuming dinner is still on for tomorrow night. Unless I hear from you otherwise, I'll be at your place at about seven, I think that's what we said. Don't you buy wine. I'll bring the wine. I don't know what you're making, but if I don't hear from you I'm bringing white. Uh, OK, see you then. Ciao."

He had forgotten that he had invited Tony to dinner. Now he knew that somebody was coming, though it would be more than twenty-four hours before Tony arrived. Tony was on the money with the wine. He had planned to make fish: broiled salmon with garlic butter, sautéed yellow squash, couscous, and a mozzarella and sun dried tomatoes salad. Please, don't think about food, he thought. When he didn't answer the door, Tony would not go away, he was sure (he hoped he was right). Tony would get some help, and they would break down the door. Probably the best he could hope for was that they would find him in a pool of urine, paralyzed, exhausted, or more likely passed out, dehydrated, looking awful, clutching a Penguin Classics paperback edition of Montaigne's essays, open to

pages 196 and 197. His choice of reading matter, he was sure, would prove no embarrassment.

†All quotations from Michel de Montaigne, Essays, translated by J.M. Cohen (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1958), pp. 196-7.

