



Volume 11
Issue 1

Acupuncture

MaryAnne Wilimek

I am going to unblock your energy pathways, he says, and I want to believe him. I'm weary of my chronic pain and I want this to work. I am lying face-up on a padded exam table wearing a cotton clinic gown that is comfortably crisp. He aims a silent heat lamp at my bare feet and asks if it feels okay. *Yes*, I say, *very warm, very nice*. He steps to an iPod dock set on a stainless steel cart. Ethereal notes float into the room and he asks, *Is it too loud?*

No, it's just fine, I say. The warmth and the sound are soothing and he tells me to relax. I close my eyes. I appreciate his kind efforts to soften the sterile edges of this clinical space, and I allow my mind to trail the music as it drifts on solar wind to the outer realms of comets and asteroids.

His voice is gentle as he tells me that life is a golden orb of energy that pulsates with potential. Each person is born with just a limited amount, so we need to be purposeful with its use. *When the energy orb runs out*, he says, *that's it. No more. We die*. To walk, to sit, to simply exist in a mo-

ment of time, diminishes the size of the orb. So I think of the tight-at-the-wheel night I drove back in a panic from Duluth during an ice storm, and I realize I probably jettisoned a week's worth of energy in just a few hours. *Worrying counts too*, he tells me, so I try not to think about how many sessions I'll be able to afford.

Meridians are the body's energy pathways—the rivers of your chi—and your meridians are blocked, out of balance. This is probably causing your pain, he says, and I want to believe him. I sense confidence in his fingertips as he prods my legs for points of pain. A sudden whimper from me triggers an instant prick from him as the hair-thin end of a needle goes in. He explains that he is now twirling the top of the needle to send it in deeper, to find my chi. *Tell me when you can feel it*, he says. Nothing. Nothing. Then I am aware of an unpleasant ache where the needle is twisting. *Right there, I can feel it*, I say. He releases his hold, and his fingers move to another spot and insert another needle. And another, and another, and soon I lose count of the needles he's planted. I focus on breathing, extending my belly and chest with deep inhaleds and drawing them flat with measured exhaleds. Needles in the legs, the feet, the hands, the hips. I am only mildly startled when I feel a needle poke into the center of my scalp.

Are you okay? he asks, and I say, *Yes, fine*. He tells me that he is going to augment the treatment with electrical current. I am lying perfectly still and cannot see what he is doing with his clips and his wires. I think of lightning storms and

Frankenstein's monster. *Tell me when this becomes unpleasant*, he says. Nothing. Nothing. Then a slight tingling in my left leg. Then a crescendo of hot pins and prickles and I say, *I can feel it*. He sets the current at that level and repeats the process with my right leg. Both legs are now buzzing, and he assures me that the sensation will weaken over the next twenty minutes. He steps to the door, dims the overhead lights, and asks, *Will you be okay?*

Yes, I say. I hope so, I think. He steps out of the room and closes the door.

I am motionless, afraid that any movement I make might disturb one of the needles, might accidentally reroute my chi. My ear starts to itch, but I refrain from scratching. I think of my breathing. I think of my warm feet. I wonder what I look like, and imagine a photo taken from above.

He said this would clear my meridians and, in so doing, it would ease my pain. I want to believe him, but I can't help thinking that my meridians will never look like his. I'll bet his meridians are mountain streams rushing fresh and furious with glacial meltwater. Mine are the crust-rusted sewer pipes of downtown Chicago in the heat of July, stagnant with sludge. He said this would strengthen my energy orb and, in so doing, would ease my pain. I want to believe him, but my energy didn't come all wrapped up in a pulsing ball of golden light. I'm quite sure, in fact, that it hasn't been assembled in any one place for quite some time. My energy, I fear, is stored inside of me in a scattering of little tattered sacks, and I can't help

thinking that he might have pricked a few of them open with his needles. Even as I lie here, they might be leaking.

I am not sure how long I have lain quiet with closed eyes. At one point I hear the door open and he says, *How are you doing?* and I say, *I'm fine.* The door closes. More time passes. The music seems louder in the quiet. I think of the twelve moons of Jupiter. At some point I realize I don't feel the buzzing in my legs any longer, and I'm not sure if the machine has shut off or if I've become accustomed to the sensation. My breathing is deep and rhythmic and I realize I'm no longer focused on making it that way.

The door opens; my eyes stay closed. I know that he's moved the heat lamp away from my feet because I instantly notice its absence. *I'm removing the needles,* he says, and if he hadn't told me I would not have known—his touch is barely perceptible. *There,* he says. *Now, take as much time as you need to get up and get dressed. And drink plenty of water for the rest of the day.*

I open my eyes and look at him. *Aren't you going to take the needle out of my head?* I ask.

It's already out, he says. He smiles and leaves the room.

I raise my arms off the table and rotate my hands in front of my face. I wiggle my fingers. I raise my head and shoulders and look down at my legs and feet. I wiggle my toes. Everything seems okay. I sit up, and in spite of the lightheadedness, I swing my legs off the table and stand up. The floor is cold on my lamp-warmed feet. I wait a few mo-

ments until I feel steady, then I run my hands up and down the sides of my arms, legs, and hips. I touch the top of my scalp. No needles.

As I start to get dressed, I sense that I'm moving more slowly than I normally do. I feel utterly calm, and I'm not entirely sure, but it seems like the chronic ache in my legs has subsided. I walk around the exam table several times, trying to ascertain my level of pain. It's not there. At least, I don't think it's there. I pull a small paper cup out of the dispenser by the sink, fill it with water, and drink. Something seems skewed. I fill the cup a second time, look in the mirror, and study myself as I drink. Something seems slanted. It's as if my actions precede my intent—like I'm raising the cup to my lips before I *think* to raise the cup to my lips. Or something like that. I feel so relaxed that I question whether it's safe for me to drive home. I'm moving more slowly, but I'm thinking more clearly. I think. And so far, my pain is diminished. At least, I think it is.

MaryAnne Wilimek
lives in Minnesota.
Her poetry and non-
fiction have been
published in *The*
Gettysburg Review,
Choice Magazine
Listening's anthol-
ogy, *Big Muddy*,
Relief, and else-
where. Email:
mwilimek
@paulbunyan.net