

Night Trip

By Michael Fredrick Geisser

Why did I wake in the middle of the night? This is always the first question. I crack my eyes and feel as if I'm onstage: the lead actor in a tragicomedy, where the backdrop is a ten-year fight against motor neuron disease that has robbed me of full use of my legs. They can move, but only with great effort yielding limited results.

I'm awake due to the restlessness of my sixty-five-year-old body that has seen too little exercise over the past ten years. Or I need to piss. In either case, I need to move, and that's the problem. Each change of position or location is a complicated, exhausting trudge. Unlike the snail-slow system I've developed to get into the driver's seat of my Audi sedan, and the laughable time it takes me to make a lunch of Grape-Nuts and yogurt, when I move about using my walker there's an added concern besides extended time: the knowledge that I might fall over and get hurt or killed.

I fall frequently. After each tumble—on average once a month, sometimes twice in one day—I examine the scene after I've recovered my senses or returned from the hospital. Often, I'm amazed at how close I was to being snuffed out. Ever since I fell backwards in the bathroom and hit my head on the edge of the vanity last month, the sight in my left eye has been poor, but I was lucky: I missed impaling my head on a sharp cabinet handle by less than an inch. When I fell in the parking lot of the gym last year I broke my hip, and missed, by only a foot or two, falling under the wheels of a large FedEx truck that was rumbling by. And when I fell at a neighbor's Super Bowl party and split my forehead open on the baseboard trim around a newel post, I barely missed the sharp corner. And bruises—I've had too many to remember.

Every time I stand and begin to move with my walker, I repeat my mantra: Don't make a mistake, don't lose control, don't turn too fast or lose focus. Reaching for a screwdriver in my workshop can be catastrophic. If I don't place my feet just so, or extend my body slowly away from the walker, I court disaster.

It's 3:38 AM. I'm glad it's night. The quiet allows me to think without distraction. Lying in bed puts no stress on my body. And the darkness shields me from seeing the expansive world that I can no longer easily explore.

I close my eyes and begin to think. Perhaps I can wait to piss. My friend Stanley won't be pissing any more. His death from liver cancer yesterday rocked me. God, I'll miss our annual scorpion bowl. His heart was as big as a moose. Loved by all. Did he drink too much when he was young? Probably. Did he listen when his wife railed about his bad habits? Sometimes. But he was funny, humane, and trustworthy—good man.

My father has been calling me a *good man* since my mother died two years ago. After I showed him how to increase his interest yield on his bank accounts, he said, "You're a good man, Michael." And when I helped him receive a death benefit from Social Security, I heard

those words again. He counts on me, which I love. I can feel it in my gut. I'm surprised at how much his saying those few, simple words means to me. *Good man.*

And when he says, "I love you, Mike." Wow, a phrase I waited over sixty years to hear. Did he ever say those three words to my mother, now gone, his wife of sixty-six years? I saw the words written in numerous wedding anniversary cards he gave her over their life together. He wrote them, but did he ever say them to her?

I look at the clock again; two minutes have passed. It's four hours since I last pissed. I can't wait much longer to relieve myself.

What if I use the plastic urine bottle for the first time? It would save me a dangerous trip. I can't. Another brick in the edifice of my self-esteem would fall. Will I make it to bathroom without waking my wife, Anna, who is sleeping soundly on her side of our bed? How would she react if I fell and died on the way to the bathroom? Would I hear her screaming over me? Would she assure me that help is on the way? Would she be better off if I were gone? Maybe she'd find a healthy man to swing her back onto the dance floor, pick her up and carry her into the bedroom.

Taking a leak was once so simple. I only needed to find a toilet, or a spot behind a tree or a car, unzip, and go. More than once as a young man I wrote my initials in the winter snow with the yellow flow, steam rising. Or rushed to finish peeing behind a summer tree because someone was waiting for me in a golf cart, itching to get to the next tee.

I throw the covers off my naked body. Wearing clothes in bed makes it almost impossible to slide against the sheets, and sliding is the only way I can get to a comfortable spot, pulled there by my iron-like arms.

The gym has saved me from being a gelatinous, weak cripple. Spin bike for an hour twice a week. Weight machines for another hour after spinning. But my muscles are no longer challenged by heavy bags of groceries, tossing chubby toddlers over my shoulder, or changing a tire. Navigating stairs, getting dressed, and staying upright while I move with my walker are now my biggest trials.

My feet are tightly twisted up in the duvet. It takes me a minute of shifting my feet and tugging the covers with my hands to wrestle them free. I then rest on top of the covers to catch my breath. I want to hurry. The air in the room is cold. But I couldn't move faster than a glacier if the house were on fire. I try to be quiet. I don't want Anna to wake and see my struggle, although she's witnessed it many times. She needs her sleep. Works like a slave to run our errands, AND cook our meals, AND maintain our household—all while tending to my every need.

I look at the clock. I've been awake for five minutes. I need to piss.

A garbage can clanks against the sidewalk in the wind. Reminds me of the suspect sound under my car when I accelerate. Don't want to bring it to an Audi dealership. They aren't that good at repairs, and cost a fortune. My fortune is dwindling. I wonder what the next hot sector in the stock market will be? Biotech?

I want to burrow back under the covers, but I suck in my breath, flex my core and heave my legs to the edge of the mattress, using the stainless-steel grab bar that is attached to the wall by my side of the bed. Another heave brings my 185-pound body to a sitting position, rigid legs sticking straight out. The effort is a strain and I make all manner of groans while struggling to keep my buttocks from sliding off the bed. After adjusting the position of my body to a perfect distance from the headboard, I stop to catch my breath.

I glance at the clock. I've been awake for seven minutes. Seven minutes gone. I wonder how many minutes—hours—I've spent looking at the time? Have I used up *days* of irreplaceable time? I feel I'm wasting what's left of my life. My brain and body plead—Move! I balk at the effort until I can't justify sitting on the edge of the bed any longer.

I will my legs into a bent position, one small move at a time, until they find the floor. Don't want to fall off the bed. Finally, my toes are touching. Strange how the moon illuminates the maple flooring. It looks like it's covered in fog. I remember running at full speed in the fog. San Francisco at night. I was fifty-years-old. Racing the sixteen-year-old daughter of good friends up a hill on Montgomery Street. She was a high school track star. I beat her. God, it felt good. What I would give to run like that again.

I shift my weight back and forth, each time forcing my legs to move another inch under me so they won't slide away when I reach for my walker. Damn it; they've moved out. Start again.

I lean back onto the bed, breathing like a train going up a steep grade. I look over my shoulder to see if our terrier, Kosmo, is on the bed at Anna's feet. He isn't. I scan his places, and spot him in his crate, snoring in short bursts. Good. He isn't in the path of my forty-foot round trip.

I reach out to grab the handle of my walker. I miss and bump the frame, cursing under my breath as the walker rolls away, furious with myself for forgetting to apply the parking brake when I went to bed. I look around for something to help me reach the walker, find a long shoehorn under my night table. It's just long enough to help me pull the walker back into position. I wonder how much damage the walker is doing to our floor. Maple is so hard; it would take years for me to wear a track into the wood. Will I live long enough to see the damage?

My feet are in a good spot. Will the plantar fasciitis in my right foot cause my leg to collapse when I put weight on it? It has before. My legs push against the floor and I slowly rise. I arch my back and straighten to full height. I smile, remembering how tall and straight I used to be. Suddenly, my body wobbles. I freeze. Put all of my weight on my feet and stay as tall as possible. Funny how hard it is to stay tall and let my legs do the work.

I wish I could stay here, high and mighty, but I must bend forward or risk falling backward. No pains to tell me that a leg might fail. Watch the weight shift. Careful. Too much to the left! My body goes rigid until I stabilize. I take another step. I feel my balance shift again and the left front wheel of the walker lifts off the floor as I tip. Shit! I recover my balance without falling.

When my legs finally become totally rigid, will I still be able to travel with Anna to far away places? Last year was Cambodia. It was touch-and-go at times. Uneven pavements—or none. Temples with poorly constructed stairs and no railings. Will I feel fulfilled without travel, or will I sulk like half a person, tethered to the house? I look down to check the floor for obstacles and see my penis swinging as I labor forward.

My penis was once the focus of my life. I lived to fuck. Didn't fall in love, though. Until Anna. Too busy chasing. Catherine. Janet. Cynthia. What did I get from them besides good sex? Do I even know what that is? It crushes me that I'm so clumsy when Anna and I want to have sex. Now, I pay more attention to avoiding falling off the bed than pleasing her.

And where is God in all this? He or she, whom I have denied exists? If I die, will God be waiting at the gate to chastise me and send me to eternal damnation? Is he testing me with

ailments? A modern day Job? Get real. There are so many humans with problems worse than mine, much worse. There's a world of Jobs out there.

The laws of physics explain it all, how the most basic particles combine following the inviolable laws of the universe. Building more and more complex structures. Then the crack of lightning or some other trigger and voilà—life. Throw in a few hundred million years and you have Homo sapiens running amok. A miracle? Hardly. A holy species? More thieves and highwaymen than saints—Hobbes had it right: we're attracted to our immediate advantage—like magnets of different poles. The laws of physics.

If I'm wrong, will God forgive me because I've put so much effort into the issue, regardless of the answer I arrive at? Will God let me get to my goal, the toilet?

The walker's front wheels bump over the threshold to the bathroom. My trip to piss is almost over.

As I turn toward the toilet, the walker tilts. Crisis! Turn *into* the tilt. Like you do in a car: *into* the skid. Safe. Barely. Keep upright. Calm down.

Was that God telling me that he's in charge, or was it luck that just saved me, or experience with falls? Or my hours at the gym? Need to focus. Keep feet apart, splayed, as the physical therapist taught me. God helps those who help themselves.

I turn the walker toward the vanity cabinet. The front wheels hit it. After I stabilize, I begin to shuffle my feet in a small arc that turns me around so I can sit on the toilet. One-inch steps. Tortoises make a bigger stride. Have I forgotten anything that will lead to a fall? Now—raise my left foot off the tile to move into position. Won't lift. Damn! Slide them both into place in front of the toilet. I grab the handicap railing with my left hand, and reset my reach as far forward on the bar as possible. Begin to lower myself onto the toilet, struggle to avoid a crash landing.

I'm on the seat! I lean back onto the backrest and stare at the moonlight that is coming through the cut glass window, while I try to relax my lower body.

After making sure that I've discharged all the urine that's possible, I extend my left arm and grab the handicap railing as far forward as possible and pull myself to standing. After I grip the walker handles, I make another laborious turn until I'm facing the bedroom and began to shuffle. The beehive clock in the living room strikes four times. Not bad, the trip here has only taken twenty-two minutes. Now, the remainder of the journey begins. Why do we have a nightlight that shines green? What about red? Red light has no glare . . .

Michael Fredrick Geisser writes in Warren, Rhode Island, in the Touisset that overlooks the Kickemuit River. He lives there with his wife, Anna, and their wonder Westy, Kosmo. Geisser writes non-fiction, fiction, and personal essays. His work has been published in Sliver of Stone, Monkeybicycle, the Journal of Microliterature, Flash Fiction Magazine, the Grub Street Daily, and the book, Befriending Death: Over 100 Essays on Living and Dying.

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