

Finalist, Fiction

Thought Clouds
By Eric Witchey

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Right hand, right leg, and left eye paralyzed—his mouth paid no attention to the thoughts he tried to bring to words. He'd been reduced to a child's tactics to express himself, and people generally responded to him as if he were a child.

Stroke. Thrombosis. Maybe 50% recovery, but verbal centers of the brain shot to hell. He went over his condition in his mind. Quivering lips reminded him he was still sending signals from brain to mouth, but somehow they got garbled and confused on the way.

Breathe, he told himself. Don't dwell on the disease, deformity, infirmity, dysfunction, dys-fucking-function and foolishness all around him.

Breathe. Sit. Feel the sun on your skin.

Don't talk to yourself in second person.

Breathe. Find center. Find the sun on skin.

Better. One breathe.

What the hell did doctors know about the frustration of—

Breathe, dammit. Find center. Release anger. Find the breath.

There.

In. Out.

Hear my heartbeat in my chest and ears. I'm alive. It's enough.

Bullshit! Enough for some svelte, twenty-something Yoga bitch in a leotard at the front of a room full of envious women and drooling forty-something divorced men, but it wasn't nearly enough for William January Grandel.

"Mr. Grandel."

He opened one of his eyes. The other one was likely already open. It might have been closed. It didn't matter all. That one didn't work.

"Mr. Grandel, you're carrying tension in your shoulders. Let go."

She was up there in front. The yoga class was only him and ten others. Sunday morning. The drooling forty-somethings were mostly missing.

"I can only feel one shoulder," he said. He felt his tongue and mouth move, but what he heard was, "Eek-oh-lee-dershoel-kah."

"Breathe," she said. "Let the little thoughts bubble up and disperse. They are all fluffy, white clouds on the blue sky of your mind. See them. Appreciate them for what they are -- moments of awareness, and let them skitter away, fade into mist that has no substance. let them go."

What did she know about fucking clouds? Her parents weren't even born when he was flying a Mustang in Europe. That was who God Damn William January Grandel was. Right Stuff riding behind a Merlin and a super charger.

She stood up. "In and out." She stretched her long, lean legs out and covered the checkered linoleum in a few strides. She walked behind him, moving carefully around his half, half-lotus sprawl, one of his legs out straight in a meaningless crooked angle and the other tucked dutifully in to his crotch.

She went behind him. Long, strong fingers massaged his shoulders. The scent of peaches and raspberries surrounded him.

"Thanks," he said. He heard, "Gaaraks."

"Grandpa," she whispered, "Try to relax. Just let it all go. Feel my hands."

Her mother had had long fingers too. She didn't get them from him. Her mother had been strong and self-willed, but she'd never gone in for this woo-woo, new age bullshit.

"We'll do it together, now, Grandpa."

Glenna, his wife, hadn't had hands like that. She'd been lean and willowy, but her hands were working hands, maybe because she'd had to work since she was six. Farms, bales, milk, coal for the furnace -- real work, not--

Breathe with me, grandpa." She massaged.

That was something. A blessing. Someone touching him gently, kindly, like he was a person and not a broken tool.

He inhaled. He exhaled. His heart pounded in his ears.

Her warm breath on his neck helped him find the timing, match her. Her hands matched his breathes.

"When I was little," she said, "You told me a story."

Breathe. Breathe.

"I was going to bed."

In. Out. Slow. Thought clouds.

"You were in the cockpit alone for the first time. Scared as a new hen in an old rooster's yard."

He felt half his mouth twist and grin. He remembered. Hard metal on his ass. His chute uncomfortable as hell behind him. The stick between his legs.

"The Merlin screamed," she said, "and a man couldn't hear his own thoughts. The only thing a man can hear when the Mustang is howling is the mind of God." Her hands worked his shoulders. Her breath warmed his neck.

"Inhale," you said. "That's the best you can do. Inhale and pray your training was good, cause once the brakes are loose, that beast was going to start bucking."

He'd told her that -- that and so much more. She remembered. He breathed.

He pulled the throttle back, and he felt the airframe twist a little under him. Prop torque wanted to lift that Mustang right off the ground and flip it on its back. If he made the sky, she'd be hell to beat in a turn.

"There were only two things to remember," she said.

Rudder and throttle, he finished for her in his mind.

The brakes. Let off the brakes. Let her roll out. Keep the rudder hard left, as much as you can stand, or she'll run off the tarmac and flip.

Set her up straight on the roll.

Throttle to the click, not into the red line, but up to it.

Ride her. Tail rises. Pull back. Rudder. Stay on the rudder. Bring her in line. And she's up.

She's up, and the blue sky is an ocean to swim in, an ocean full of sharks, but his to play in for now. Tiny clouds skitter overhead and touch the mind of God, and God is the breath of a super-charged Merlin, and William January Grandel is the mind of the Mustang.

"There," she said. "That's your center, the place you belong. Be there, Grandpa. Be there, and enjoy the moment. You only get one breath. That's what you said. Be with the one breath you get."

She released his shoulders.

He banked right, throttled back, and started a long, slow climb.

"Thanks," he said.

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