

A Guest in My Brain Stem

I am at my desk when it strikes, the telephone slipping through my tingling fingers to fall against the office floor. "Shit," I say aloud as I look up to the blurry clock reading 2:15.

"What's wrong?" my cube-mate asks.

My hands reach up to cover my face. "I need to go home. I have a migraine coming on."

Basilar-type migraine, a doctor once scrawled in my medical file, explaining the headaches accompanied by vertigo, ringing in the ears and difficulty speaking that makes me slur like a drunk. My grandmother had them, my father had them, and now I am on the Line 15 bus, chewing the inside of my lip with eyes closed each time the recorded voice announces our stops along NW 23rd, having them as well. Migraines are still a mystery to the medical establishment, with warring factions identifying a variety of possible causes. However, right now it doesn't matter if something is wrong in my brain stem, or in my occipital lobe, or in my moral fiber—but *something is wrong*. A deep rift has formed between the way my body is supposed to work according to the pages of textbooks and the way it is trying to work now, and I just need to get home.

I feel a cold hand slide onto mine. My eyes open, and through the shimmering vision of my migraine aura I see Racquel. "Hey, sweetie!" she exclaims cheerfully. "How's it going?"



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

Migraneurs, as we are so fancily called, were once considered to be of a certain personality type—clean, precise, high-strung, the WASP-y kind who arrive at their doctor appointments with neatly typed lists of the dates and times their brains rebelled against them.

"In general, good," I tell her, and it's true. Things are positively *smashing* right now: My work is challenging and interesting, my boyfriend is handsome and supportive, my inner and creative lives are interfacing very nicely with the banal life of taxes and commutes. There are small annoyances, a dull sense of dread off in my peripheral vision, general yet manageable anxieties; however, through some terrible arithmetic the annoyances and dread and anxiety have added up in my brain stem, choking a vein. "It never comes when I am in real trouble," Joan Didion wrote of her migraines. "It comes instead when I am fighting not an open but a

guerrilla war with my own life, during weeks of small household confusions, lost laundry, unhappy help, canceled appointments, on days when the telephone rings too much and I get no work done and the wind is coming up. On days like that my friend comes uninvited."

The bus' robotic voice announces that we are now on the east side of the river, my temples pounding along with the cadence of the recorded speech. "I have quite the migraine coming on," I tell Racquel, squinting.

"Oh no!" she says, concern softening her eyes. "I had a bad headache yesterday, too."

I don't bother to correct her. A migraine includes a headache, of course; however, it's more of a full-body crisis, a presence that overtakes the brain and the gut, that leaves the limbs full of pins and needles. The difference between a migraine—an episode of a neurological disease, a thunderstorm deep within the skull—and a tension headache, the sort that actually responds to Advil and allows you to stay at your desk for the day rather than curl beneath it, is immense.

"Eleventh Avenue," the robotic voice announces as I pull the yellow cord, freed from

the necessity of explanation as I jump off the bus into blinding sunlight.

Migraneurs, as we are so fancily called, were once considered to be of a certain personality type—clean, precise, high-strung, the WASP-y kind who arrive at their doctor appointments with neatly typed lists of the dates and times their brains rebelled against them. The key turns in my door and I walk in, stepping over piles of books and clothing with eyes half closed, falling into an unmade bed, knowing that I do not have the "migraine personality." I pull the pillow over my eyes and ears, hearing the rhythmic sound of my breath and watching the colors of the migraine aura shimmer.

I wake up—10:15. The day is gone, the streetlight outside shining through my closed blinds, and I sit upright full of an odd mix of exhaustion and relief. "Love is a universal migraine / A bright stain on the vision / Blotting out reason," wrote Robert Graves, and he's correct. *Migraneurs*, like blackout drinkers, are given brief respite from reason, running home with faulty motor function to hide in their rooms, falling unconscious with sick stomachs and dreadful guests in their brains. My guest is gone for now, and reason—the world of office telephones and bus schedules, friends and lovers, family history and the guerilla war I wage with my life—is back. I sigh heavily in my dark room, and smile. JO

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— Portland Monthly, March, 2011

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