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An Exhilaration of the Mind and Body

He was traveling down the bike path in his wheelchair at break-neck speed. His long, muscular arms pumped furiously at the flashing steel rims with a pounding rhythm. Fifteen or so yards behind him, a muscular young man in jogging shorts was straining to catch the speeding wheelchairman. I had a front row seat for the contest, parked in my car on the cobblestone pad surrounding the Arch of Freedom at Valley Forge National Park.

At the bottom of the hill, the runner made a last surge at the speeding chair, but he was unable to catch it. Breathing heavily, he turned off the path. The man and his machine had won.

The spokes of the wheelchair fractured the mid-afternoon sunlight as the piston-like arms of the wheelchairman pumped himself up the incline, first both hands together, then alternating in a kind of jogging two-step. I was moved, fascinated. The night before I had watched Jon Voight depict a veteran back from Vietnam and confined to a wheelchair in "Coming Home," as he proceeded to seduce Jane Fonda. Not bad work for a guy whose legs had been blown to smithereens.

I started the car. Someone should congratulate him, I thought. Somebody ought to say that they saw it and that it was great! I put the car in gear.

The bike path follows the road up the incline and then makes a ninety degree right turn toward the picnic area, following the road until that point. I passed the wheelchairman in this stretch. Sweat was gleaming on his red, freckled face. He had long hair the color of straw, like Voight's, and a full beard to match. He had broad shoulders and a powerful chest. But his arms were **extraordinary**. They were massive, sinewy appendages, the kind of arms that once rowed across oceans; arms attached to an athletic eight-footer. They pumped with grace, and knowledge and power. A smile came to my face and I passed him. For just a brief moment our eyes met. He also was smiling.

I parked my car in the picnic area lot. The wheelchairman was within twenty yards of a right-turn/left-turn combination which took the path away from the road, when I stepped onto the narrow macadam strip, crossed it and started jogging on a diagonal through the picnic tables, knowing that his need to keep to the pathway would force him to hug the perimeter. I ran easily, lightly. I was wearing my "Pumping Iron" T-shirt from Harry's Gym, with the torn hem of one of the narrow sleeves flapping out wildly; sneakers without socks, jeans. I felt a little crazy, lightheaded.

I got to the bend where the path turned away from the picnic area ten yards ahead of him. I could hear him coming but I consciously refrained from turning my head to look. I crossed the track a little ahead of the left-hand turn, crossed it again and headed out into a great, rising field of Indian Grass and wildflowers — Buttercups, Daisies, Wild Iris, Bachelor Buttons — and continued a diagonal direction across the field toward that point where we would meet — me through the Indian Grass and wildflowers, him keeping to the path.

I felt exhilarated. I was experiencing an intense and passionate sense of camaraderie with this stranger in the wheelchair, caught up in a kind of dance which I somehow knew definitely surprised and pleased us both. It was unexpected, spontaneous, carefree. "It" carried us along. We were racing, no doubt about that. But it was a race motivated by the play of mutual respect rather than by a compulsive need to determine a winner and a loser. We are all winners, all losers. Nevertheless, I wondered if I would have the wind to get up the long hill before him.

I did, thinking that the strong should not limp before the lame. I was hanging on a sign which directed you to follow a certain route to General somebody or other's encampment, breathing hard, cursing myself for every cigarette I ever smoked and would smoke, when he came over the crest of the hill not twenty yards away, pumping that machine of his for all it was worth. From a head-on perspective, lumbering up the hill as he was, man and machine seemed to merge into a single entity — the **wheelchairman**. He might have been some antedeluvian creature passing in and out of the dappled shadows cast by the ripe, July trees. A contemporary reminder of our ancient, mysterious, indomitable capacity for adaptation. I may be getting here second, he seemed to be saying, but I'm getting here! And he was. In leaps and bounds, neck muscles gripped and swelling, until finally he whizzed by me and turned a few circles in the gravel. Never stopping.

"You look real good on that thing," I said. He smiled. "Man, you really know how to make it go." He laughed then, and spun back on two wheels. Hi-ho-Silver! I said, "I saw you beat that guy down there. It was great."

He gave me his half-laugh again and said, "I got one more lap to go before I get out of here." We stayed there a moment, panting and grinning.

At the entrance to the woods, as I was departing along my walking path, I turned around. He had started pumping away up the hill. "See ya!" I called.

He spun the chair around without interrupting his pace or losing a beat and said, "Sometimes I even like to go up backwards." Which he had proceeded to do. He was wearing a white T-shirt with two words emblazoned on it in large, red letters: MEAN MACHINE. The wheelchairman. He moved in his own solar system, I thought, recalling Nietzsche's analysis of Heraclitus. He makes me want to find the limit of my own good arms, my own good legs, my own good heart.

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