

## **A Body in Motion**

By Virginia Chang

I didn't get the chance to see Marcus in the rehab facility before it shut to visitors and he died of COVID-19. But now here I was speeding down the highway with his urn in the passenger seat.

I was driving from my home in New York City to Maryland where Marcus' sister lived. It could have been a somber drive, but with the radio playing pop tunes and the sky a brilliant blue, I felt light instead and filled with purpose. This car ride would bring closure to Marcus' life—returning him to his family of birth—and it would also bring closure to our friendship. So, in these last hours, I chatted to Marcus—or should I say, I chatted to the urn—telling him all the things I didn't get to before he died.

“Covid has shut down all the gyms. You'd be so proud of me—I've started running! But I miss the community of working out with people. I miss *you*.”

“The Tennessee Vols football had a winning record this year! Your urn matches their colors!”

“I'm sorry that you died alone.”

This one-sided conversation reminded me of the first car ride I had with Marcus five years prior—the one that began our friendship. On that day in June, I was driving Marcus to the hospital. Marcus was also quiet then, instead staring out at the traffic, twisting the drawstrings of his hoodie. I was filled with dread.

I hardly knew Marcus before that first car ride together to the hospital. We were casual acquaintances from the gym, where Marcus was a fitness trainer. What impressed me and kept me going to Marcus' fitness classes was his level of engagement. He connected with everyone, from the hard-nosed college athletes training for intercollegiate competition to the gray-haired retirees just concerned about their balance. No matter whether there were three or fifteen people in class, triathletes or newcomers, he met you at your level and encouraged you to be your best.

What you wear at the gym is nearly as important as how you look, and Marcus stood out on both counts. He was a toned, strong, Black man with a shaved head, his baldness only accentuating his lean lines and cut musculature. He had an air of coolness reminiscent of Michael Jordan, strutting around the gym in his neon outfits and sneakers. He wore every color without abandon, from caution-tape yellow to traffic cone orange, to Polynesian water blue and opalescent white, and had a matching sneaker for every outfit. The number of Nike athletic shoes Marcus had must have rivaled the number of Jimmy Choo shoes of a SoHo socialite.

He was the epitome of health and fitness, but Marcus started getting sick back in the early spring. He wasn't his usual energetic and peppy self during class. He didn't go through the reps with us, and when we lacked the motivation to push through, his deep, waggish voice didn't urge or cajole us. We knew something was very wrong when Marcus missed class. There we were, a dozen middle-aged men and women and a handful of stressed college students, standing around in our Spandex or baggy tees and sneakers. We agitated to move and stay on schedule because of our limited time, either on a lunch break or in between classes. We muddled through a few sit ups, squats, and lunges on our own, but the workout lacked intensity. When I next saw Marcus, he looked ill, ashen and gaunt. While he said, "I'm fine," he clearly wasn't. I insisted on taking him to the hospital.

And that was how I found myself in the car with Marcus the first time. I drove him to his apartment in Brooklyn to pick up a few essentials and then back over the Manhattan Bridge to the Mt. Sinai emergency room. We didn't know it at the time, but that car ride would be Marcus' last time viewing the city he loved. A few weeks later, Marcus would have a seizure and become paralyzed from the neck down.

For a person as active and energetic as Marcus, paralysis was his worst nightmare. Marcus was a man in motion. He jittered, he bounced, he strode, *he vibrated*. To see him immobile and helpless was to see a man caught in cement. He would claw, flail, and fight against the invisible ties binding his muscles, but the struggle was all in his mind. He did not move an inch. He would lie there in the hospital bed, arranged like an articulated doll whose arms and legs had been placed just so. It didn't seem natural, it wasn't natural.

Marcus' whole world shrunk to the size of his room, first in the hospital and later in the rehabilitation facility. His daily doses of cheer came from the nurses and aides who tended to him, dressed in their flamingo and palm tree scrubs. Marcus relied on them for everything, even the simplest things. All of his bodily functions became everybody's business. He would go hungry if no one was there to feed him. He couldn't pick up his phone and text someone if he was lonely. It was a cold-turkey withdrawal from social media. He couldn't even change the channel on the TV, forced to endure endless reruns of *Family Feud* and blaring cycles of daily news.

I don't know how Marcus got through every day. During one visit, he told me that he would do run-throughs of fitness classes in his mind. Call out each exercise, count down the reps. He would imagine his legs and arms going through the motions, the muscles contracting and releasing, his heart pumping, his pulse increasing. He would even get out of breath—he felt *alive*. The exhilaration was short-lived, soon fading after he opened his eyes and reality as a quadriplegic set in. He could kill an hour's time with one workout class. How many classes did Marcus perform to keep his sanity?

Marcus had the eternal optimism that one day his body would wake up. He viewed this paralysis as a temporary "setback." Initially, there was hope for a quick recovery with multiple sessions a week of physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. However, because of his crappy basic health insurance, therapy sessions dwindled instead of increasing as

Marcus failed to show improvement. To address his ongoing medical needs, I raised money for Marcus' care through the gym community. The outpouring of financial support reflected Marcus' standing in the community and several thousand dollars were donated by us gym rats.

“Let's hire a private physical therapist to come in and do intensive hands-on treatment. Your body needs more stimulation ‘to wake up,’ not less,” I tried to persuade Marcus. But he had a different idea.

“I need this money to jumpstart me when I walk outta this place.” His speech was slurred and soft because of the paralysis in the tongue and neck, but there was heat and impatience to his words.

Marcus was convinced that his body just needed time and was still healing. One day, a twitch would begin his path to recovery. He had already designed a rehab plan in his mind. When I pulled a groin muscle playing tennis, Marcus designed a workout routine for me to keep in shape and not further injure myself. I had had just one muscle to worry about, Marcus had every muscle in his body to contend with. Nonetheless, he had figured out what he needed to do to restore his body to optimal form and function—he just needed that twitch.

So we waited. His mother, his sister, extended family, friends, and the gym community came to him, sitting bedside, catching up, joking and laughing, and bringing hope. But soon, people moved on with their lives, and only the most devoted remained present, including his mother. The social isolation was hard. I myself visited every week, taking the 6 and 7 subway trains out to Flushing. Riding out through the bright, graffitied neighborhoods of Queens, I would look forward to seeing my friend Marcus, sharing news, and reading and responding to text messages for him. Being his lifeline to the outside world. By contrast, on the subway ride home, I would be despondent and full of sadness. How is it my friend was stuck unable to see a specialist, while the Christopher Reeves' of this world have all the privileges of class, money, and race? I would reflect on the injustices of society as the 7 train descended into the dark tunnels beneath Manhattan.

And so we waited more.

Seeing Marcus' mother's name flash on my cellphone, I knew he was gone. “Marcus passed away this morning.” Her voice cracked, raw and full of anguish. When New York City went into Covid lockdown, she was forced to leave the nursing home and her vulnerable son, paralyzed and helpless. He had no choices, and COVID-19 was brought to him in his private room. Yes, Marcus had a comorbidity, but COVID-19 robbed him of the chance to heal and recover. COVID-19 stole hope away.

In times of a pandemic, how to bring honor and celebrate the son, brother, friend and community leader that was Marcus? Death rituals as far back as our Neanderthal predecessors describe burying or burning bodies with possessions or representations of material things for the deceased to take on their journey to the next world. In times of coronavirus, we sent as much as was permitted with Marcus. His casket was a riot of colors—matching his personality in life—covered with flowers, photographs and odes of love and laughter. Yet, my heart broke

to see the three letters from Marcus' nieces and nephew, written to an uncle who would not see them grow up. I stood witness in lieu of Marcus' family, who couldn't travel to New York City because of COVID-19. We sent all our love with Marcus into the flames.

My friendship with Marcus began with that first fateful car ride to the hospital five years prior, but the second car ride was with Marcus' urn. It was bright orange and surprisingly heavy. His entire physical body reduced to five pounds of grey, coarse ash — the same weight of the hand dumbbells I used in his class so many times. In the car, I secured the urn next to me with the passenger seat belt. As we sped south on the New Jersey Turnpike, we were two bodies in motion. Our friendship — like this journey — had a beginning and was now coming to an end.

As I approached his sister's home, I wondered: How was I to deliver Marcus? Was I just like the Domino's Pizza guy, driving up in my car and announcing, "Here's your delivery!"? Or could I be the bearer of the urn? I wanted to feel part of a sacred rite of passage, like the Relay of the Olympic Torch that gets passed hand-to-hand. Was there a way to bring sacredness and respect to my final farewell?

I arrived at Angela's house. The scent of freshly mown grass combined with the stillness of the family neighborhood sharpened my senses. I inhaled. Angela came out through the garage. We gazed at each other, unmasked and silent. We had exchanged countless words of sorrow in the past two weeks. Finally, here was a face to the voice. As she took two steps towards me, we both lifted masks: hers, an orange and green geometric African print, and mine, a pink Hawaiian hibiscus print. With our faces half-hidden, it was easy to make small talk like two neighbors shooting the breeze. But I had a mission and Marcus was waiting. And so, like an actor in a Greek theater, I put on the Melpomene mask of tragedy and serious subjects and made my proposal. She said no, she hesitated... then, yes.

Silently, with so much fear, trust, and faith in our eyes, we approached and held hands. How long had it been since I had touched a stranger? Her hands were dry, strong, and smooth. They were large, enfolding mine. I could feel these hands had strength; these hands had labored. They were hands that had raised a family and lifted them up. We weren't just holding hands, we were holding each other up. Our hands grasped each other with the force of clinging to a life raft, expressing the words we were not allowed to speak. With hands and hearts connected, it seemed a lifetime of stories and emotions coursed between us. Through Marcus, Angela and I had been brought to this moment. For me, a final farewell; for Angela, a welcoming back home. As my eyes moved from our hands to her face, Angela was crying.

Then, we both reached for the disinfectant wipes.

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