

MARGEURITE PIGEON

THE WOMAN ON THE MOVE (AFTER KAFKA)

THE WOMAN ON THE MOVE believes in motion passionately and hears God in all moving things. The lowliest housefly's buzz. A horn's blare. Still, she never intended to end up moving all the time. She started out like many others, moving around the way you do. Her father's job took them from city to city, neighbourhood to neighbourhood. In each place, the woman on the move—then just a girl—played probably more than average the game of running wherever she went, of hovering with ants in her pants, as her father put it. But such frequent relocations and rambunctiousness were just slight exaggerations of the normal.

It was one specific day that set her on the path towards her adult obsession. Her father had taken her to the mall where they came across a statue performer dressed in silver body paint, touted as being able to hold her posture all day without adjusting even a muscle. The girl was awestruck then gradually repulsed by the pleasure this woman provoked in the crowd just by being static. She tugged on her father's sleeve, demanding to leave for the toy store, the pet store—anywhere but there.

But her father was enchanted. He crouched beside his daughter and held her tightly in a gesture of love. To the child, with that terrible silver woman in sight, his embrace felt like prison. He was oblivious. He smiled as the performer maintained strict right angles at the elbows and a hard-as-metal gaze. She reminded him, he told his daughter, of his own grandmother, who had retired to a farm at eighty and would sit on her porch, motionless, watching the days begin and end. He had loved his grandmother, who'd seemed more plant than human, like a delicate tree he could climb.

At some point, the girl managed to free herself. She fled into the mall, running up the escalator then around the food court where she happened to look up into the glassed-in ceiling and notice the sun's rays breaking apart

among the peaked windows. For an instant the girl leaned against a plastic table, letting warmth play over her face, over her t-shirt and sneakers. Then she knew as surely as her heart beat that she would never be still again.

There were hurdles along the way. The girl surmounted them. She sought legal emancipation from her parents and won it. Her passion grew. At eighteen, she got serious, rigging up a system of pulleys that would raise each limb in succession so she could move during her sleep. She travelled continuously, using the night hours to double her geographic coverage. She thanked God (who, for her, from that day at the mall onward, was more sun than human) for giving her life at a time when constant motion was possible. Taking the money her parents had saved for her post-secondary education, she acquired a satellite phone with world-wide reception and a palm-sized computer. With these she made arrangements as she went for planes, trains, mules, boogie boards—whatever the situation demanded. While travelling from Point A to Point B she paced. If for some reason she could not, she would swing her legs or even, in dire circumstances, twiddle her thumbs.

Soon, it became apparent that to pursue movement at this level, she needed help. While jogging in place in the square outside St. Paul's in Rome, the woman on the move had an inspiration: she dialed the number for her cousin and offered her a job. The cousin, an executive who travelled a lot, seemed like the perfect candidate, but she was reluctant. She had a fiancé, had been thinking of settling down. The woman on the move wouldn't hear another word, insisted on an answer. She disparaged her cousin for being prematurely old, told her she was missing her chance to truly experience the world. The cousin, affected by this argument, accepted and was put in charge of sponsorship, public appearances, accommodations, and transportation. She asked her fiancé for an indefinite time-out and told herself there'd be plenty of time to settle down when she was dead.

The woman on the move began appearing on television. News cameras showed up wherever she did. Always, they found her dressed in one of seven trademark jumpsuits—one for every day of the week, each a single bold colour from head to toe. She owned nothing more, having abandoned skirts and heels, pants and blouses as symbols of the tethered life. Besides, she despised bulk, and saw her ultra-lean form as a living challenge to immobility, something to be flaunted. Sponsors, from athletic shoe companies to airlines, seeing that she had a hand in promoting an aspect of modern life in which they also held a stake, competed for every scrap of space on the zip-up one-pieces.

The woman on the move chuckled at all this attention, found it humorous to watch encumbered cameramen jog after her. The journalists all asked the same questions: Why move so much? What would be enough? Didn't she ever want a husband? Kids? The woman on the move answered their questions patiently, often repeating her mantra that "stillness is decay; to move is to improve."

Crowds, too, came to hear her speak. She charged no fee. Instead, she insisted that for the length of her presentations the audience move too. Those who could not due to age or disability were provided with wheelchairs, walkers, strollers—every aid to bring them up to speed. Those who still couldn't manage it or refused to were asked, politely, to leave. "On the move" imitators started popping up. Now there were malls where people were hired to wear jumpsuits and move constantly. The woman on the move felt a deep satisfaction at the thought of the statue performer she'd seen as a child forced to wash away her false metal, zip up, and get going.

At a certain point, and while her cousin-manager tried to dissuade her, she decided to delve deeper into movement. She was no longer satisfied with passive motion during the night. She had guards who watched her constantly, hired by the sponsors to verify that she never stopped moving. She asked these guards to wake her every half-hour so that she could spend the other half doing something productive. This vastly increased her popularity, with people everywhere amazed at her unprecedented sacrifice to locomotion.

Their fascination, though, increasingly saddened the woman on the move. Some nights she might be outside doing sit-ups and find herself staring at the waxing or waning moon, wishing people could understand: she had no choice but to be the woman she'd become. She couldn't seem to communicate that there was no limit to her ability to move, that it was as easeful as the draw of her own breath or the earth's orbit of the sun. And she knew that she was the forbearer of a much greater era, one when people would be rid of the chains of permanence.

As time went on, perhaps due to a lack of REM sleep, the woman on the move became more detached, yet thinner, skin and sinew in the jumpsuits. The press regularly noted her resemblance to an aging pop star nearly twice her age. She cut back on her talks to preserve her strength, though people came just to watch her walk through airports or swim admittedly narrower and narrower canals. They wanted to see the person who spent all her time on the go, shuffling, waving, hair-tossing, even bowing her life away, and

they didn't mind that she was so pale or that she spoke in a diminished voice and said next to nothing.

The woman on the move also withdrew from the people closest to her. Her guards often changed, after all. Some had families and couldn't stay on the road indefinitely. Her relationship with her cousin became strained after the cousin secretly took back up with her ex-fiancé and spent hours giggling into the satellite phone.

One day, the woman on the move was walking backwards on one of the raised plains at Machu Picchu followed by a group of South American journalists, occasionally whispering a word through a translator, when an emergency call arrived. "Princess," said a distant, crackly voice. It was her father. He had been experiencing bouts of senility and was confined to a bed at a care facility. The woman on the move had not once visited him there. His voice sounded ghostly, reaching her from across the continent. "It's my time, Princess." The woman on the move was shaken. She abruptly wrapped up her public appearance. The journalists looked confused, but most smiled in admiration. They understood: she had places to be; you couldn't hold someone like her back.

Her cousin reminded her that they were scheduled to fly to Antarctica that night, where the woman on the move was to address some scientists while crossing an ice field. The woman on the move paced along the edge of the plain, the thin oxygen of the Andes causing strange thoughts to enter in her mind. She saw herself once more at that mall so many years before. But now, it was from the perspective of the statue performer that the scene unfolded, and her eyes literally stung from the memory of the silver paint that had covered the woman's face. She felt her breathing slow and a disturbing sense of calm spread through her limbs, chilling the space between her skin and her jumpsuit. A moment later, she snapped herself out of it. She advised her cousin to cancel Antarctica and order an oxygen tank to the hotel room in Lima. She would reacclimatize before the next plane out.

On the flight north, the woman on the move did yoga and tai chi, refused food. She considered her decision. She had long resented her father for not accepting her way of life. She suspected that he'd absorbed the idea propagated by her critics: that if she had loved some one person more, perhaps him, perhaps another, she would have remained somewhere gladly, and that what had made her movement so easy was her empty heart, her sun-like indifference to people and places. The woman on the move knew this was nonsense—jealous, psychobabbly nonsense. She *had* to move. And

yet, he was dying, and she understood that the moment itself mattered, not for sentiment, but because her father was to undergo that great, forced movement from this life into the next.

Her cousin prodded her about logistics: how would one continue moving while keeping a death vigil? A bedside exercise bike? A hospital room made mobile? There would be problems at the border ... They debated the entire way, but when the woman on the move finally arrived at the steps of the old-age facility, it took all her considerable determination not to freeze at what she saw. On the sprawling porch, which was shaded among oaks whose leaves drooped like tired, open palms in the hot afternoon, her father, who was dressed in a pale hospital gown and flip flops, who appeared to have shrunk to half his former size, like he'd been put through the dryer, was pushing away two attendants as he tried to reach for his toes, then managed a single, demented-looking jumping jack.

The woman on the move ran up the steps. He'd lost his mind, she thought. But when their eyes met, she knew: her father was using up his last spurt of energy to do as she had: he was embracing motion. He continued flailing, his stubbled cheeks blanched, the skin under his exposed arms swinging in puckered waves. Shooing away the worried attendants, the woman on the move watched as his eyes bulged with effort. Mid-motion, he extended his parched mouth up to her ear, the chapped lips almost grey, and whispered to the daughter he had never truly known: "I'll move with you from now on." And then he straightened from head to toe, slackened, and died.

She did not cry out. She didn't want the attendants to come running with their gurney, their haste to ready her father for the grave. Instead, she looked to her side and noticed a wicker chair further along the porch that had an unimpeded view of a green slope and a far-off pond dotted with ducks. She lifted her father's diminished body into her arms and began to walk towards that chair. His thin hair was patchy, and one long section flopped over and was pulled down by gravity in a limp triangle that covered an ear. His flip-flops swung from his stiffening toes. They made a perfect contrast: the father, expired, and the woman on the move standing very tall despite her thinness, her bright jumpsuit covered in logos and symbols and flags.

She considering the moment of death. It had not been as she'd thought. It had not moved her. Worse, her father had only pledged motion for her sake, not his own. Now he was gone and the woman on the move felt certain that there was nothing more to it. This knowledge filled her with unfamiliar, depleting sorrow. A valve seemed to open up inside her and belief

seeped away like water. She envisioned depositing her father's corpse in the wicker chair, a fitting end, a return to his grandmother's vegetable-like state. She saw herself returning to her cousin and the rental car, only a day's travel from the limitless ice fields. But nearing the chair, such weariness overtook her that she sat down with him still in her arms. She knew it wasn't from love, since she had never felt as close to her father as she might have and had certainly not cherished him as he had her. It was just that pond, resplendent under the sunlight that moved across its surface like a string of crystals. How could she not have seen such a thing anywhere else? For once, her mind did not hop to the next subject but remained puzzling over this unsolvable question, as she remained seated in the chair, the full weight of her father's body laid across her lap, her lavish sneakers resting on the bare porch boards for so long she didn't notice herself lose track of time.