

FLYING SOLO

REIMAGINING
MANHOOD,
COURAGE,
AND LOSS

LEONARD KRIEGEL

ALSO BY LEONARD KRIEGEL

Falling into Life

Quitting Time

On Men and Manhood

Notes for the Two-Dollar Window

Working Through

Edmund Wilson

The Long Walk Home

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WHEELCHAIRS

"THE WHEELCHAIR was the way home." The line is taken from my first book, published in 1964, a time when I believed I was done with wheelchairs forever. I was thirty when *The Long Walk Home* was published, a husband and father, about to embark on a Fulbright year abroad. But the words younger men choose have a way of catching up to the realities older men must face. If the self-consciously dramatic tone I used to describe the origins of my love affair with the wheelchair is a trifle embarrassing today, the judgment itself remains surprisingly accurate. The wheelchair was, indeed, the way home.

For the first time I ever used a wheelchair was the moment I was given back the mobility I had surrendered six months earlier, when I lost the use of my legs. I was eleven years old, confined to bed, and about to discover why the wheelchair was to be the way home. In life, as in memory, that wheelchair proved as much salvation as I could claim during the twenty-four months I spent being remade as a cripple in the New York State Reconstruction Home.

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I am once again an eleven-year-old boy sitting up in his bed in the ward for boys between ten and thirteen. This ward has been my home for five and a half months and I will live here for another eighteen months. An explosion of joy sweeps through my body as I look up and see my mother and father and uncle. My father is pushing a wheelchair in front of him. It is a few minutes after one o'clock on the last Sunday in January 1945. Sunday is visitor's day. And as it does on every Sunday, a sense of expectancy lingers in the air like the smell of breakfast coffee. Every boy in the ward is breathing a bit quicker, sensing the possibilities awaiting him on visitor's day. On the edge of meeting a destiny that six months earlier would have made me shudder, I feel prepared and grateful and anxious. I am alive and I am to have a wheelchair of my own.

I had hungered for that particular possibility for two months, ever since the hot pools to which I had been subjected from mid-August until Thanksgiving succeeded in baking the stiffness out of my body and left me with lifeless legs alone to worry about. And my hunger was about to be fed. That wheelchair my smiling father was pushing toward my cubicle was to open up the hospital and its grounds for me. Better still, it was to open up life as a cripple for me.

It was a big, old-fashioned, straw-backed wooden wheelchair, its oak arms gleaming in the frozen January sun that flagged the ward and played the varnish shine as if it were some crazed shadow dancer. My father, still a gentle immigrant after fifteen years in this country, guided the chair alongside the bed in the cubicle I had shared since September with a boy named Morty, whose long narrow nose had earned him the nickname Moleman. Aided by my uncle, my father braced the chair against my

bed. "It's yours, Lennie," he said, voice filled with triumph. "We bought it for you."

No gift I would ever receive—not the baseball bat my uncle had given me for my birthday three years before polio struck, not the piece of yellow clay baked into the shape of an ashtray or candleholder I would receive twenty-three years later from my oldest son, crafted with a minimum of talent but with all the pride a four-year-old takes in being able to make what he gives—glows so brightly in my memory as that ponderous remnant of eighteenth-century rational design, that huge, ungainly, magnificently ugly throne on wheels.

We don't usually think of liberation as mechanical. The word strikes us as disreputable, tawdry, the very antithesis of liberation. *Mechanical*. One pushes the sound out of his mouth as it breaks off in midair, an impatient click that befits a forced, hurried exit. *Mechanical* leaves the mouth harshly. Link the word to any noun—*mechanical* freedom, *mechanical* style, *mechanical* abstraction, *mechanical* motion—and the implication is of something unearned, unimaginative, something for which one has not paid a proper price.

Yet it is accurate. That wheelchair was a mechanical gift that promised a mechanical liberation. And as I braced my hands on each side of its solid oak arms, and allowed my shoulders to take the weight of my body, slowly, cautiously, dropping into the seat, rear end meeting woven straw and wooden border, my back bracing itself against the slats of wood that made up the rear of the chair, I wanted to shout with joy for a happiness that was a jubilant, most unmechanical, gift. I wanted to bellow my liberation for the entire ward to hear. Ponderous and ugly and huge, this wheelchair was mine. And mine alone. Hands on its rims, I could feel possibility swell in the ward's steam-heated air. My father stood to the side, his joy matching mine, my uncle and

mother smiling alongside him. Then my father nodded, as if offering a prearranged signal—and my hands moved as far back as my arms could reach and then thrust forward in unison as I rolled out of the cubicle into the ward aisle.

"It's my chair!" I shouted.

"It's Lennie's chair!" the other boys in the ward chorused, like a group of street urchins in a low-budget musical.

They were no more jealous than I had been two weeks earlier, when Morty had received a wheelchair from his parents. The war was still being fought in January 1945—like Archie Bunker, I still think of it as "*the war, WW II, the Big One*"—and most of the wheelchairs in the country had been sent, along with the green on the Lucky Strike cigarette pack, to help those who had been wounded in battle. Wheelchairs had been recruited for the duration. The only way you could get your own chair was if your parents managed to hunt one down and buy it. Wheelchairs, like meat, were rationed—subject to the demands of the nation's war effort. I suppose it is a simple irony that the war would prove highly beneficial for those of us destined to spend a lot of time in wheelchairs. Wars produce most of the truly significant advances in orthotics and prosthetics. Among its gifts, "the Big One" gave us the folding wheelchair, constructed out of steel and chromed to as striking an example of functional design as a racing car in the Indy 500. But chrome and vinyl and anodized aluminum were still in the future. In 1945, I was overjoyed to push that big, ungainly varnished wood and woven straw Packard of a wheelchair.

I loved that wheelchair with a passion that embarrasses me to this day. A man should love god or women or his children or the smell of salt air on the beach or his country or books or good wine or rare steaks. A man should love baseball and fishing and

stamp collecting and Vermeer's *View of Delft*. But a wheelchair? A wheelchair should be nothing more than a necessary interlude in a man's life, a comic substitute for useless legs or arthritic bones. And yet, I truly did love that wheelchair, so wholly, so absolutely, that the memory of such a singular passion still takes my breath away and makes me giggle like a schoolboy.

What a gift of overwhelming freedom that chair endowed me with. After months of going from bed to therapeutic hot pool and back again pushed on a flat mattress-smelling stretcher by a hospital orderly, I was enthralled by my newly won mobility. Within the week, I had been transformed into a wheelchair addict, spinning joyously through the long gray corridors of the hospital, pushing myself over the small hills and pebble-encrusted grounds as if I were an explorer making his way across some unknown continent. Like a tank driver, I maneuvered my chair's bulky presence down the rutted dirt road that led from the hospital to Letchworth Village, a state home for the mentally retarded that we boys, our verbal cruelty as much a mark of our crippled state as our wheelchairs and braces and crutches, derisively called "Crazytown." I had my first experience of adolescent sexual passion in that wheelchair. And in that wheelchair, I played baseball and basketball and Ping-Pong, ignoring even the memories of the athlete I had been in the sheer joy of once again swinging a bat, even if I was seated in a chair. I first learned to shoot craps in that wheelchair, bending low outside a toilet stall in the ward lavatory (the first "wheelchair accessible" toilet stall I would know) as one of the other chair-bound boys blocked the entrance as guard, ready to yell "Chickie the nurse" as soon as the enemy was spotted, my left hand holding the left rim of my chair for balance even as my right hand rubbed the dice against the spokes of the wheels for luck. In that wheelchair, I dashed off to my daily physical therapy sessions, raced

other boys to the schoolroom in which we were confined for an hour and a half each afternoon. My chair was a throne on wheels as it held me in solitary splendor in the dark hospital auditorium each Friday night, where I sat through the weekly movie that fed an already overly rich fantasy life.

The wheelchair was the way home. And in August 1946, the way home needed no more pointers. I had my wheelchair, which I had used for a year and a half. I had my long-legged braces tied around my middle by a leather pelvic band. I had my adjustable wooden crutches. In short, I was as reconstructed as the New York State Reconstruction Home could make me. One early August morning, an ambulance pulled up in front of the ward to take me home. The first thing that I remember doing after I arrived home was to get out of my chair and walk through that small apartment in the Bronx on my braces and crutches. I was thirteen years old, a soft fat boy who knew that he was unprepared both for the adolescent years ahead of him and the toughening-up process he would need to get through those years. Yet I also knew that the apartment was an older home than the ward I had lived in over the past two years—an older home that was yet a place of beginning again, where my wheelchair did not belong.

Even then, I understood how much I owed my wheelchair. Racehorses whose careers are finished are put out to pasture and old dogs spend their last years as beloved pets, however mangily odiferous, allowed the run of the house. These are the proper rewards of love and service. Had I possessed a stronger sense of style, I would have blessed and then burned that wheelchair in some sort of public ceremony, the way the Vikings burned their long ships as funeral pyres. I would have acknowledged the gifts of freedom and movement it gave me during the eighteen

months I spent in it. And I would have totaled my debts to that chair through an emotional arithmetic that might truly match the value of all that it had presented me with. The mobility it offered had fed my need for exploration and adventure. My chair had framed the sense of possibility a crippled child needed so desperately. A wheelchair helped make me, as it helped make so many of the boys in that ward, adaptable—and adaptability would prove the most valuable trait a cripple could possess.

It is a night in May after dinner in the ward. In a few months, I will return home. But for now, mine is one of eleven wheelchairs making their way to the small town about a half mile down the road from the hospital—an invasion which will result in our being restricted to the ward for a week and which immediately is absorbed into our myths of defiance of the "normal" world. We are eleven boys in wheelchairs and we are matching ourselves against the collective authority of doctors, nurses, and townspeople—all those whom we have thought of as the "others" ever since our own arrival into the world of the crippled. In the soft twilight, we know we will be punished. But we are proud of ourselves, we are happy, we are not supplicants. At least, not for the moment. Huck Finn has his Mississippi and his raft. We boys have this half mile of poorly paved country road—and our wheelchairs.

The wheelchair was the way home.

But I didn't burn my wheelchair in some mock Viking funeral. For the next year, it stood jammed into the corner near the window of the room I shared with my younger brother. I swore off it, rather dramatically, I must confess, promising aloud to that God I already claimed to scorn that I would never again use it—not,

at least, as a wheelchair. Only I couldn't give it up. Not altogether. Perhaps it was an emblem of my need, a token of the defiance that linked me to that hospital ward where one did not need to confront the "normals" because in our crippled society they didn't matter. At least, we liked to pretend they didn't. And so I still used it—but used it now as an armchair, seating myself, like some young Buddha, against that slatted wooden back, my eyes surveying the street below the window.

Two days after Christmas, even as my two years in the Home receded in memory, all of New York, including the street below my window, was buried beneath the most severe blizzard in the city's history. That blizzard was to bring twenty-six inches of snow to the streets of the Bronx. And the snow would pack and ice over throughout a long, cold, gray winter. For the city, the blizzard would be transformed into a legendary event. But it would make me a shut-in until the end of March. And once again, my chair would service my needs. I sat in that demobilized throne, gazing out over the bleak, desolate, snow-crueted street, banking the memory of that long-ago May invasion of a small country town, because only memory could deny the frozen streets and make reality palatable.

But after every winter, spring must come. The ice broke, the snow melted, and one late-March day the long winter was over. And with the end of winter, my hibernation also ended. I learned to get downstairs, at first boosting myself on my hands to move from step to step on my rump, then teaching myself to walk up and down the stairs on my crutches. Although I had been away from the city for two years, I quickly readapted to its temptations. The street became an extended living room. I no longer needed to sit by the window and observe life below. As the world began to open up, the wheelchair that stood in such ponderous

isolation by the window turned into a visible anachronism, a reminder of that past I was determined to move beyond. That August, a year to the day of my return, I asked my father to get rid of the chair. He pushed it up Bainbridge Avenue and donated it to Montefiore Hospital five blocks away. I was a crutchwalker now.

And I swore, aloud, as solemnly as only adolescent boys can swear, that I would never again use a wheelchair. No oath I ever made seemed more serious. Nor more clearly earned. As I forced my body to adapt to the prospects before it, I came to feel a curiously self-righteous contempt for the eighteen months I had spent in that chair, as if acknowledging the pleasures I had experienced as a wheelchair rider had somehow cheapened the drama of battling illness.

Crippled or not, I was a pure product of this America, weaned on the pragmatic sense of possibility all Americans like to think of as theirs by right of birth. But in my case, at least, that much-vaunted pragmatism disguised my true passion, the need to surmount whatever was difficult, to prove my worth by overcoming all obstacles in my way. I was at my most American in my determined insistence that a man could satisfy ambition with individual acts of virtue—his own manly virtue. To test oneself was as American as a hot-dog eating contest on the Fourth of July.

I had taken an oath, renounced ease, promised myself that I would earn the endurance needed by a crutchwalker, no matter what the cost. If nothing else, the throbbing sensation in my shoulders after I forced myself to walk on braces and crutches through the streets of the Bronx for three or four miles confirmed the transformative power of pain. Pain was an indication of tenacity. "The tougher, the better." "No pain, no gain." "Show 'em what you're made of." Like every other cliché thrust before those who were crippled, such slogans told me that I was ex-

pected to content myself with aching muscles and throbbing shoulders. These were proof enough of my worth as a man—or so one crippled adolescent believed. I had to "earn" even the right to claim my disease through public acknowledgment of a private condition, just as I had to earn the right to call myself "cripple" through my performance as a man on crutches. I had to see myself, as well as be seen by others, as being in the American grain.

As I reconstructed my life, I refused to think about a wheelchair as an alternative to walking on braces and crutches. In fact, I avoided thinking about wheelchairs at all. On those few occasions that I spotted a chair coming toward me on the sidewalk, I felt threatened, as uncomfortable as a card shark at a public session of Gamblers Anonymous. I would fix my eyes on the horizon beyond the chair. If it were possible to do it without being too obvious, I would walk across the street to avoid confronting the temptation of being a wheelchair rider once again. Not that I refused to acknowledge a fellow cripple. My refusals were deeper, more complex. I could acknowledge man or woman. What I couldn't acknowledge was the wheelchair in which they might be sitting.

And all the time, I hyped my hunger for the "normal" by telling myself that abstinence from the ease a wheelchair promised me was "healthy" (all abstinence, to my fiercely puritanical adolescent mind, seemed healthy at that time), an imperative of any successful rehabilitation. I wanted what those who have undergone great change invariably want—to be both a singular presence and, at the same time, to be like everybody else. How eager I was to prove myself worthy of the admiration of the "normal" men and women I saw in my neighborhood. I soon learned to despise such conventional desires. But if you hunger after what others assume as a right, you make yourself over in the image of

those others—no matter how poorly the suit fits or how twisted the tie knots. There is a peculiar violence to need, particularly when it lies beyond the scope of one's ability to define precisely what one's need is. First, I discovered that violence. Then I embraced it.

Yet I do not want to place too great a psychological burden on my need to be a crutchwalker. The truth is that walking on legs encased in steel and leather, crutches beneath my shoulders, really was preferable to sitting in a wheelchair. It wasn't so much that I myself believed this but that I, like almost every boy I lived with during my two-year hospital residency, had absorbed it into the psychic economy of a cripple. The belief that using a wheelchair signified some sort of spiritual surrender had been absorbed into all that I believed made a man a man. "No pain, no gain!" I am still stunned at the ease with which I was able to accept such banalities, even more stunned when I recall how often I hear them bruited about today—in gyms, sermons, televised football games. And yet, even more amazing is the knowledge that, in some quiet corner of my mind, I still believe in those banalities—passionately.

I would be lying were I to write that rejecting the wheelchair didn't prove valuable. By any standard, mine was a strikingly successful example of physical rehabilitation. In many ways, I remain a textbook case on how a man can adapt to physical adversity. Had I remained in a wheelchair, I suspect I would have settled for whatever easier options were available. But in some corner of my being where logic succumbs to fear, to continue using a wheelchair would have seemed a terrible surrender. My task was simple: I had to learn to be my own hero, my own role model—which is another way of saying that I had to learn to live with neither heroes nor role models.

Walking on braces and crutches endows a man with a peculiar vanity as well as with a remarkably vivid sense of the possibilities of bodily grace. It may prove a surprise to those who are not crippled, but a man can feel like a prince of his own making while walking on braces and crutches. He can go as far as the strength in his arms and the rage in his heart allow. The most intimate of embarrassments, it is, as Hemingway said of bravery and courage, probably better not spoken about. But the vanity of walking on braces and crutches offers a man a certain sense of his own durability. A wheelchair is different: It is difficult for any man to feel truly brave in a wheelchair, for it is difficult for him to acknowledge the profound, often painful, difference between those who sit and those who stand. A crutchwalker knows that he *needs* those braces strapped to his legs and those crutches beneath his shoulders—but they are *his* legs on which he is standing. And he *is* standing.

At thirteen, I got out of my wheelchair. A year later, I got rid of it. At thirty-three, I was forced back into a wheelchair for six weeks. A freakish accident (all accidents are freakish in memory) that I would laugh about as the years passed. But a warning, too, of what the future held. I would never laugh at that.

I am walking the baby-sitter home. It is a windy night in late October. The baby-sitter lives in the apartment building across the street. The wages of baby-sitters in New York in 1966 are fifty cents an hour and being escorted home. I drop her off at her apartment, say good-bye, and make my way back to my own building. It has begun to rain, hard, the wind scooping the street's hollows with gusts that drench me. I hurry on my swing-through gait across the street. As I hurtle through space to jump the curb the way I always do, a sudden gust of rain and wind

slaps against me. Afraid of losing my balance, I stab the night air with my left crutch and it comes down not on the concrete sidewalk but on . . . a banana peel! Chaplinesque wind-me-up-and-throw-me-down doll spins through rain and darkness until my outstretched left arm breaks not the fall but my wrist. You cannot walk on crutches with a broken wrist.

The wheelchair was the way home.

I had been down that way before. And not just in the wheelchair. Polio had left me like a fighter perpetually in training for his comeback. The return match was what I dreamed of. It was both fate and identity. I had constructed a balance sheet of triumph and defeat from memories of the normal boy I had once been. As a consequence, I learned early on that the price that is demanded of the cripple for success is that he always be prepared to perform. "Show 'em what you're made of" was not merely a cliché; it was also a religious catechism for one's burgeoning ego.

Yet however much I might dream of my comeback, I learned that a cripple, even a successful cripple, is like a talented but punchless boxer. He soon learns that style alone is insufficient. Not even an intelligent and courageous fighter can get by on style alone, just as no cripple can get by solely on the determination to outdo the individual who is not crippled in the game of being "normal." One soon recognizes the difficulty of pretending one is keeping on even when one does not want to keep on. And as one grows older, it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that one's inner being has grown tired—tired of defiance, tired of resistance, tired of the daily grind of trying to take pleasure in what has become mere routine. The difficulties do not usually stem from the natural losses to which flesh and bone are heir. Forget what has been written about post-polio syn-

drome, forget the accidents that beset all of us as we age. Those are simply the spin of the coin. Mortality may be a disease, but it is a disease shared by all men and women. I am talking, rather, about losing one's inner self, one's drive. I am talking about the danger of losing one's sense of purpose. For when a man loses those, he loses courage. Only in literature does suffering ennoble. In life, it just wears one down, until one reaches the point where all that can be said is "To hell with it!"

Admittedly, "To hell with it!" reverberates with as true a ring of cliché as "No pain, no gain!" or "Show 'em what you're made of!" Like all clichés, it tells a man more about why he is the way he is than he would like to admit. "To hell with it!" is an acknowledgment of a sense of outrage, the cry of an individual who has faced expectation too often and who has realized that when certain skills begin to erode, determination and effort and discipline will no longer do the job. They are simply no longer sufficient. One is all blown out, finished. The will is dead, exhausted, like the will of Roberto Duran when he failed to answer the bell after the eighth round of his title fight with Sugar Ray Leonard. Unable to defy fate any longer, he finally cried out, "No más."

I find it curious that Duran's "No más" immediately labeled him a talented fighter who lacked heart. For a man who carries the memory of a wheelchair as temptation's own seductive goddess, Duran's "No más" seems, rather, the remark of a fighter overwhelmed by the excessive demands he had made upon himself. One might more accurately speak of him as a fighter finally overwhelmed by the courage demanded of the self. Only an individual finally prepared to allow himself to give in to fate can say, "To hell with it!" Only someone ready to acknowledge that the body has finally reached the point that one has always been terrified it will reach—the point at which skill and training and determination and defiance have been exhausted and have become

warring cancers battering off each other—can accept the urge to say, “*No más*.” Think of what it takes to leave the mind emptied of all illusion. Think of how even the idea that one has resisted fate valiantly must finally be surrendered. Nothing is left except the weariness of once again trying to resist the temptation to give up. The ego is stripped even of the surrender lurking within. It was not heart Duran lacked—it was memory.

I used to wonder precisely what goes through the mind of a fighter down on the canvas, as he listens to the referee counting him out while he tries to work up enough strength of purpose, what we like to call courage, to get back on his feet. Now I think I know. It is not defeat a fighter fears as he hears that count, and it is certainly not the consequences of defeat. Those consequences may even seem welcome as he lies on the canvas, struggling within himself. It is that the ending he has always feared is on the verge of finally arriving. No more metaphors exist with which he can shield the self from its imminent demise. “To hell with it!” Why not? Over, done, finished. Revelation is at hand. If not for the audience, at least for one’s own self.

It was not the mundane events of aging that brought me back into the wheelchair. The broken femur of my right hip, the carpal-tunnel syndrome in my left elbow, the fractured index finger that made gripping crutches difficult—these all would send me back into a wheelchair for short periods of time. And it wasn’t simply that as I moved into my mid-fifties, I began to feel as if my sense of balance had cut loose from my crutchwalker’s grace, as if it had been waiting for the opportunity to take off on its own and leave me to my own scheming. Aging is inevitable, and I never had any illusions about that.

But accident and aging only explain my intermittent returns to the chair. What they do not explain is how my mind began

once again to embrace the image of the wheelchair rider I once had been. They do not explain how, as I would walk toward the faculty dining room of the college at which I taught, I would see, not ghostlike and stripped of dimension but solid and secure and tempting, an image of that huge straw-seated wooden-backed hulk that had set me free so many years ago. Was it merely a vision my inner man desired? Or one that my fate now demanded? I don’t know. Neither truly explains my weariness at the prospect of living up to my own idea of who I was and what I could still do with my life. “To hell with it!” explains that. Were I a fighter who had thrown everything he had into the possibility of triumph and still come up short—tired, inadequate, beaten—then “*No más*” would explain it, too. The wheelchair was no longer a mechanical liberation—it was now a fitting metaphor for where I was and how I had managed to get there.

Getting back into the wheelchair was not the spiritual death I feared. It may be that a touch of shame accompanied it. I’m not sure, although I confess to the lingering suspicion that I made the move too early, that I might still have had a few years of walking on braces and crutches left—no matter how difficult the effort. No one knows better than I that the way a man views the world standing is different from the way he views it sitting in a wheelchair. Modesty, false or earned, has no place in my equation. Simply put, no one of my acquaintance, neither man nor woman, had a better right than I to tap his body on the shoulder and say, “Well done . . . but enough.” And that being the case, let me add that I don’t know anyone who has a better right to have come to that point in his life where it seems suitable to say, “To hell with it!” It is that simple, and that complex. For more than forty years, a crutchwalker, and now, a wheelchair rider again—in reality, as in memory.