

SPASTIC INVASION

I'M AN EPILEPTIC, HE'S AN EPILEPTIC, SHE'S AN EPILEPTIC, WE'RE ALL EPILEPTICS...
WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO BE AN EPILEPTIC, TOO?



AS WE WATCH HIM FLAIL ABOUT like a roach who's been hit with bug spray, I suppose we should pity the poor epileptic. Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying it isn't fun to hear him shriek like a clubbed seal, to observe his skin turn a bluish-grey, and to see enough foam pour out of his mouth to top off a cup of cappuccino—but I can't help wondering whether we can learn something from his feverish convulsions. After we've stolen his wristwatch and emptied his wallet, it might be nice to pause for some quiet reflection. If you're spiritually inclined, it would be a perfect time to thank the Lord that he didn't fashion *you* into a tongue-swallowing loser.

Of all the diseases to ooze from Pandora's box, epilepsy seems a peculiarly geeky affliction. It just doesn't carry the same pungent, musky aroma of sensuality that comes with a disorder such as, say, elephantiasis. When asked what they look for in a fella, most gals aren't likely to say, "big dick, oodles of dough, and frequent *grand mal* seizures." Cruising pick-up bars, only a dope would drop a line such as, "I'm an epileptic" with the same gusto that others might boast of being a Capricorn.

We've all heard the stereotypes and laughed at the jokes: Epileptics are dumb, hyperactive, pasty-faced nebbishes prone to typhoonlike bursts of rage and random violence. At the complete mercy of their brains' faulty wiring, they can't stick their toes outside without fear of a full-on seizure. Squiggling around on the ground, they elicit sympathy and more than a few chuckles. Surly and sensitive, they mumble bitterly to themselves as they plod down the street, picking fights with hot-dog vendors and sanitation workers. Their minds are wrecked by anticonvulsant drugs, their futures thrown into jeopardy every time they throw a spazz.

Yet there are many other curses which befall those who suffer from "the jerks." Compared with the general population, they're more likely to be poor, retarded, suicidal, and incarcerated. They suffer higher unemployment rates than the non-spasmodic. They can't even get a driver's license in some states. They endure the shame and self-hatred which come with organic mutation. The stigma—nay, the *stink*—of genetic disenfranchisement follows them around like a pair of phantom armpits.

"But what makes a person epileptic?" you ask with equal measures of youthful curiosity and feigned boredom. Well, the sad, lonesome truth of the matter is that they're brain-damaged. The damage can come from any one of a number of causes—whether through birth defects, head injuries, brain tumors, or infections, about one in every hundred persons is cerebrally crippled enough to have epilepsy. There are many hues in the epileptic rainbow, many paths on the route toward sufficient brain damage: Perhaps their pregnant mothers smoked crack or Daddy whapped them in the noodle one too many times; maybe they inhaled too much paint thinner during their mischievous teen years; it's possible that they had a motorcycle accident in which their head cracked open like a Grade A, farm-fresh egg; there's always a chance that a hockey puck struck them in the skull during an unfortunate sporting incident; perchance they popped a cerebral capillary while thinking about a calculus problem; whatever the reason, a part of their brain has withered to goat cheese. Surrounding the patch of dead grey matter are unstable, half-functional neurons which become the "epileptic focus." They form a weak link in the brain chain and can scatter electrical pulses like random thunderbolts. In a full-blown seizure, the nervous system overheats and shuts down like an old hair dryer.

The word "epilepsy" comes from a Greek verb meaning "to seize," and it is the seizure which gives the disorder its unique entertainment value. Seizures can be as harmless and localized as a twitching eyelid or as dangerous as a condition known as *status epilepticus*, wherein one major fit follows the next without any recovery time. Apart from being a perfect name for a death-metal band, *status epilepticus* can also be life-threatening.

In a smaller seizure, known among our cherished French brethren as a *petit mal*, the victim may merely smack his lips, grind his choppers, blink uncontrollably, or zone out in the middle of a sentence. At the onset of a more serious *grand mal* seizure, the epileptic's body stiffens like an ironing board, after which he emits a squeal like a mutilated dolphin and begins twitching as if he's just eaten some pickled dodo eggs. During the twitching phase, the victim may become incontinent, soiling his or her undergarments with embarrassing waste products. Apart from the prospect of pee-pee and poo-poo, male epileptics may achieve an erection during the seizure. If they're lucky, they may even blow a wad. As the crisis ends and the victim enters a muddled, half-conscious state, he or she is prone to violence and vomiting, although not necessarily in that order.

Even creepier than the seizure itself is the "aura" phase which comes before it. Described by an ancient Greek patient as a cool breeze swirling upward inside his body, the aura precedes the epileptic attack by a few seconds and gives the victim a sick feeling that something BAD is coming. The aura is often characterized by a horrifying wave of fear, the ugly grey dread that you're about to lose control. It is sometimes accompanied by visual and auditory hallucinations, the sudden experience of

weird tastes and smells, wildly throbbing heart palpitations, and temporary blindness. All in all, it's a monster head rush, dude.

To make things worse for these luckless saps, just about anything can trigger an epileptic fit. Everyday actions such as reading, eating, or an innocent cough can set off an unwanted brainstorm. Seizures have been traced to such seemingly harmless deeds as making a decision or drinking a few Heinekens. In other instances, the epileptic has a conditioned-response spazz-attack to a certain word (such as "marsupial" or "blunderbuss") or memory (such as your father rubbing suntan lotion on your nipples when you were six). In rare cases, a really good orgasm can trigger a seizure, which sort of takes the shellac off the "afterglow" phase.

The best-known form of such "reflex epilepsy" is *photogenic*, wherein bright, repetitive images induce a convulsion. A photogenic fit can be caused by pulsating disco strobe lights, sunbeams dancing on a lake, a fan's spinning blades, or the constant wagging of Gene Simmons's tongue. In some cases, even a badly flickering TV can do it. Digital colossus Nintendo has been sued more than once by angry parents who claimed that playing Nintendo's video games induced seizures in their little brats.

Not as well-known, but no less amusing, is the *musicogenic* fit, wherein a seizure is caused by loud, startling noises such as that of a firecracker or unexpected flatulence. It can also be caused by droning monotonous, certain types of music, or merely the sound of a particular word or language. Musicogenic epilepsy received national attention in 1991, when a 45-year-old East Coast woman suffered repeated seizures induced by the voice of *Entertainment Tonight's* germ-free hostess Mary Hart. Scientific tests concluded that it wasn't what Hart was saying which caused the seizures, but the *pitch* of her squeaky-clean, hamsterlike voice.

Most cultures of yore viewed epilepsy as a curse and devised several delightfully painful cures. Egyptians thought that seizures were proof of demonic possession and thus sawed holes into victims' heads so the demons could escape. Roman physicians called epilepsy "the falling sickness" and directed their patients to drink the blood of wounded gladiators. One remedy suggested a mixed drink whose principal ingredients were wine and powdered human skull. Another failed cure is my personal favorite—hippo testicles. My research didn't uncover the manner in which the hippo testicles are to be used—whether they are eaten or merely licked—but I can only hope that they were first removed from the hippo.

In contrast with almost everyone else, the Greeks saw epilepsy as a sign of divine inspiration and termed it "the sacred disease."



**Tony Orlando:
sexy, talented...and epileptic**



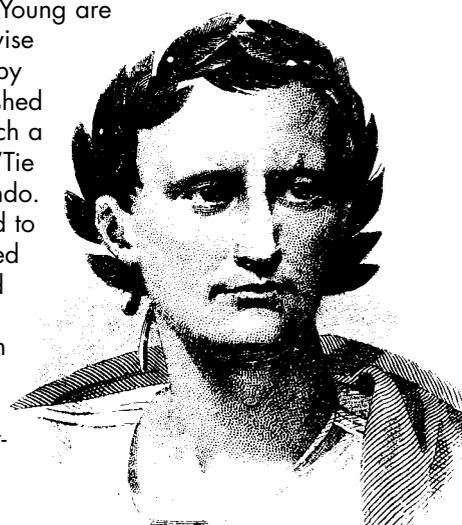
spark" as a mere cerebral misfire. Is an epileptic seizure the same sort of renegade brain activity which leads toward artistic greatness? That would explain the bold innovations (just don't ask me what they were) of ravioli-slurping Renaissance man Leonardo da Vinci, who is now thought to have been epileptic. Van Gogh? 'Leptic, 'leptic, 'leptic. Angry inventor Thomas Edison was also among the ranks of the fit-prone. It's possible that a stray filament or two of dead brain matter formed the blueprint for his shiny and much-beloved lightbulb. Alfred "Peace Prize" Nobel had more than his share of brainquakes, too. Now, if someone who had such a pioneering vision of global harmony had organic brain dysfunction, peace on Earth could conceivably be achieved through one simple surgical solution: Lobotomize everyone.

If you were to take each great writer and philosopher throughout history who just happened to be epileptic, and represent each such individual with a single navy bean, you could lay those navy beans end-to-end and go back and forth to the moon sixteen times! All right, I'm bullshitting you—there are only about five that I'm aware of: verbose novelist Charles Dickens; hemlock-tipping pedant Socrates; mystery-spinning old chick Agatha Christie; depressive Slav Fyodor Dostoyevsky (whose book *The Idiot* was partially based on his seizure-addled life); and psychedelic medievalist Dante Alighieri. Perhaps Dante's *Inferno* was not a religious allegory after all, but a metaphor for the twisted subterranean caverns inside his head.

Nor does the music world suffer from a lack of the epileptically inclined. Brain thunder may have given birth to the powdered-sugar symphonies of Peter Tchaikovsky and the dizzy angelic choirs of George Frederick Handel. Appalachian dumpling Loretta Lynn has lived her life as a coal miner's spastic daughter.

Dead fog-rocker Ian Curtis and unkempt singer/songwriter Neil Young are said to have been likewise afflicted. Epilepsy's wispy feathers have even brushed across the cheeks of such a show-biz titan as Tony "Tie a Yellow Ribbon" Orlando. I'm especially saddened to hear that this hot-buttered Greek-o-Rican superstud suffers from an organic brain disorder, although it may account for the unharnessed sexual electricity of his live performances.

Let us not forget the epileptic actors and actresses,



Julius Seizure...um, Caesar

Hmm—could these olive-scented bastards be onto something here? Are we mistaking epileptics for spazzes when they're actually *gods*? Instead of hacking oyster-sized gobs of phlegm at them, should we *worship* them? You would think that a culture responsible for both baklava and lesbianism would know divine inspiration when it sees it, wouldn't you?

Equating brain seizures with spiritual transcendence is an intriguing concept. Are the epileptic's hibbity-jibbity movements the same as one sees in religious frenzy? As he bounces around on the pavement like a bead of grease dancing across a hot skillet, does his excess psychic energy shoot into some normally uncharted brain terrain?

One could make a solid argument that epilepsy is indeed a godly disease. I'll betcha didn't know that world-famous obese mystic Buddha was an epileptic. So was Saint Paul, who was supposedly blinded for three days after "the scales fell from his eyes," or some such nonsense. Generic Vatican potentate Pope Pius IX was an epileptic, too, but we'd all prefer to forget about him.

Permit me to be biologically reductive for a moment. Allow me to interpret what is commonly known as the "creative



Buddha: overweight, jolly...and epileptic

either. We've all thrilled to the cinematic portrayals of concave-cheeked fortune-inheritor Margaux Hemingway, token sidekick Danny Glover, and pock-marked Welsh thespian Richard Burton. According to rumors, even annoying funnyman Tim Conway has a place in our epileptic utopia.

But don't think for an instant that everyone blessed with a seizure disorder is a wan, ineffectual "creative" type. Some of History's Biggest Bastards were epileptic. Among such ruthless notables were the salad-inspiring Roman emperor Julius Caesar, youthful slaughterer Alexander the Great, and dyspeptic dwarf Napoleon Bonaparte. These men were far from the epileptic's mega-nerd stereotype. Rather, they grabbed the world by the balls and shaved off its pubes with a clamshell.

So I was wrong—instead of *pitying* the epileptic, we should *envy* him. Rather than being a social handicap, epilepsy has a foamy, frothy, stinking sexual power all its own. We are facing, zine puppies, a brave New Age when seizure disorders will be *au courant*. The day will dawn when a protective helmet and a skillfully applied layer of whipped cream around the mouth will be considered high fashion.

There's an imperious smugness, a sense of radiant power, that comes with being a genetic mutant. I should know. I *am* one. I was lucky, though. Other family members turned out to be prostitutes, autistic, retarded, hopelessly drug-addicted, and even murdered. But the glacier-shattering truth is that, among other genetic defects, I'm mildly epileptic myself. No, don't get up—don't try to leave the room or offer me a hand-

kerchief—I'm OK. I first learned of my problem one night when I was around eleven, when my sister observed my young, sleeping body kicking like a pink, hairless mule. You see, I'm one of those types who only have fits at night. Some time later, when Ma chanced upon me flapping around on the bed like a sea bass on a ship's deck, my family decided it was time to have me tested.

Misericordia Hospital, Philadelphia, PA. I stare at the damp, Wrigley's-spearmint-gum-colored floors as workers fasten cold metal electrodes to my scalp. I'm instructed to lie back on the starchy white sheets and shut my eyes as they begin flashing the strobe. Green-and-red honeycombs spin on my closed eyelids. As I drift off, a row of twitching pens records the seismic disturbances inside my head.

The doctor who read my EEG said it showed abnormalities, but they were within the statistical margin of error. But since then, just about every girl I've slept with has at one time or another noticed my "night tremors." In many instances, the fits consisted of no more than my face turning red and my cheeks puffing out to blowfish proportions *à la* Harpo Marx. In even more cases, I've held prolonged conversations with characters in the bedroom whom I just happen to be hallucinating. After several nasty alcoholic blackouts in my late teens, I went to have a CT scan. They inserted my head in a spanking-clean, radiation-dripping white uterus as some bored doctor examined my brain one mozzarella-flavored slice at a time. Again, the test results were ambiguous.

It's debatable whether my neurological impairment has made me more creative, but I at least think it's allowed me to look at the world differently. Sitting here quietly, trying to

decide whether I should polish my boots or take a hot shower, I thank the Lord Jesus Christ for my epilepsy. I've learned that God sometimes works in mysterious ways, even among the brain-damaged.

