

The Choke Artist

By Michael Fine

Note to readers: *The Choke Artist* was written in 2016, long before the death of George Floyd, and published first here in June of 2020, just after Floyd was murdered. It appears we may be back to square one.

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You're a choke artist. You're useless. Insubstantial. Impotent. Meaningless. Weak.

The choke artist is a man or woman but almost always a man who can't perform under pressure. Under pressure, the choke artist gets anxious, chokes up, and can't deliver. Can't catch the football when the crowd is cheering and the chips are down. Can't hit the baseball at the bottom of the ninth when bases are loaded. Can't swim the Bosphorus in the middle of the summer during a revolution and can't get it up to make love to the woman of his dreams who is standing on the other side. Loses his nerve, doesn't go for the jugular, gets beat on the deal. Has thoughts. Emotions. A two pump Charlie. Chokes up at movies when love or justice triumphs, when the hero finds himself or herself in the other. Doesn't win at poker. Doesn't sacrifice the other in the service of the self. We are Achilles. Hector is a choke artist, one of the tens of thousands who were destroyed by Achilles and his hot anger, their souls thrown down to Sheol because they choked.

A choke artist is not a hunger artist. A hunger artist gets attention by starving himself in public. He appeals to our unconscious fascination with the plight of others who are suffering, who also say to themselves, better him than me. How long will the hunger artist last? How will he weaken? How will he die? The hunger artist makes his living by dying on the installment plan and by inviting the throng to his slow, excruciating death. We experience the pathos of his death which is our life and death: the only way to find love is to consume the self. The throng grows larger when the panther comes into the hunger artist's cage. The hunger artist succeeds when millions of people come out to watch the panther tear him limb from limb, and watch the

panther devour his entrails, red blood coating the panther's black muzzle. That's the reality. Reality TV. We thrill as the panther licks his chops. Who's next?

But the choke artist just fails to act and then just fails, and is kicked off the wagon and left to die alone by the side of the road. Then someone else calls his failure to our attention. We delight in not being him, in being anonymous and not a failure, or not having our failures noticed, at least not right then. We discover that others delight in not being him as well, and so a larger self, a crowd, a mob, a mass is built out of all of us who delight in the failure of others. Someone does this to and with us. Someone acts to create a larger self for us by un-roofing our base instincts, by preying on that hidden part of our psyche. We are easily led, a stiff-necked people, idol worshipers and lovers of Baal. We love to mock the weak. Someone loves to call attention to the choke artist's failure which is not our failure. Someone uses our weakness to build a mob that rises when we don't or can't see the weakness in ourselves.

Them people come into our yard on Superbowl Sunday.

They talk Spanish or whatever and who the hell knows what they're saying. They could be ISIS or terrorists. The Christmas lights is still up and now I got a sign up too. Superbowl Sunday. I am watching the pregame and Maureen is on that computer, shopping and whatnot.

There are two of them, one greasier than the next.

One is short and built like a tank, big eyebrows and big ears and a moustache and a little goatee and a buzz-cut like he just got out of the joint and the other is little and skinny with tiny little ears and beady eyes wearing a army surplus jacket and also with a buzz-cut like they are

thugs or gangbangers or whatever and they are driving this beat up old pickup with the side panels all rusted out. No self respecting American would drive a truck like that.

I am watching Mr. Tom Brady choke up and thinking about Donald J. Trump and all that he is saying. I didn't get Mr. Trump at first with his talk about people who choke up. I get 'You're Fired' but I don't get the choke artist stuff. But he has balls, that Donald J. Trump. He called out George W. Bush that wimp and even John McCain who is a whiner and Trump ain't afraid to live large so I put up the yard sign but I don't get the choke artist stuff yet.

That Trump ain't afraid of much. But suddenly when I see the Spanish drive up I get what Donald J. Trump is about. We need people who can perform, who will defend us, defend me and my way of life, who aren't afraid and who just don't quit.

The Spanish and the immigrants and the terrorists come into our country and we let them in and before long they are coming into our yard on Superbowl Sunday and they are taking over. And this country isn't for us anymore, it's for them. If they can just walk right up today, they can walk right up at Christmas or any other day they want. Somebody let them in. That somebody also let all the good jobs go to Mexico. We had textiles and carpets and lawnmowers and we had costume jewelry and we had plastics and steel and machine tools and now that's all picked up and moved to Mexico, to China, to Thailand, to Bangladesh and Brazil, you name it. Whatever we had is packed up and gone. The rich get richer and the rest of us get screwed. They say go to school but shit, you can't nary get into one of them colleges. Them colleges is for rich people's kids only, and if you do get in they charge you an arm and a fucking leg and their loans keep you bound and gagged until you're sixty and like to die. Once upon a time you'd get four percent on your money in the bank and a house loan would cost you five percent. Now you get

nothing in the bank, and maybe a house loan cost four percent but the houses ain't worth shit no more so you owe more than house is worth and now the jobs is gone and you gotta work two crappy jobs to pay down the loan but you ain't never going to get anything for that house anyway. The fix is in. Them Wall Street bankers get paid but we get screwed. And with this Obamacare now you can get insurance but the insurance costs more than a house loan and it don't cover shit so when you go to the doctor they still charge you an arm and a leg and they still sit behind them sliding glass windows and all they care about is your co-pay which is now more than a doctor's visit used to cost and now they won't give you no medicine if your back hurts or if you got the headache. They hide behind too many drug overdoses and shit. They got rules and forms and reasons but we the people who built this country and we the people who died for it, we keep getting screwed.

We got a blow-up Santa in the yard and three of them light-up reindeers, the ones that move their heads back and forth, back and forth. I got myself a yard sign that is half as big as the house and I am flying a big old American flag right over it and I have red white and blue Christmas lights laid over the bushes and wrapped around the house.

Anyhow these boys come into the yard. I'm in the living room, watching the Broncos kick the ass of The New England Patriots. That high and mighty Mr. Tom Brady had it coming. I'm in the living room and I see the truck pull up and these boys get out, come into my yard and start to come up my drive. I see them out of the bay window in the condo and I am thinking, choke artist, choke artist, choke artist.

The hunger artist acts by withholding action. The choke artist only chokes. The hunger artist has an art to what he does, a perverse skill. But there is no art of the choke. The choking person just chokes up and then someone else who has something to sell mocks him or her and turns us away from his own failings and from the failure which he suggests he will avoid because he isn't afraid to mock the weak. I am better than that, he says. Because he speaks, we believe him, because we are easily led and weak ourselves, a weakness we don't feel as long as someone mocks the other, or we mock the other ourselves.

This is not a story about art. Art excites the imagination so we see ourselves in the other, so we see how the other sees and feel how the other feels. Art is intentional. Art is light. Not mockery.

Which means the choke artist is not an artist after all. He's a sub-artist or an anti-artist, a man who fails to do what he knows how to do. Or perhaps doesn't know how to do. We never find out if he's any good because he chokes up.

The architect of the choke, on the other hand, is able to feast on the livers of the damned. He can make a man or a woman choke so you can laugh at them. Lots of ways to do that. Let the chokee know you know what he's secretly terrified of and make that public. You are too small, too big, too smart, too dumb, too dishonest, too rigidly honest, too awkward. You'll see the

chokee stand up straight and start to sweat when you hit the soft spot, so watch out of the corner of your eye. Mock his mother. Threaten his kid. He loves. He's vulnerable. Move in for the kill.

The architect of the choke is the sleuth of the unconscious and the maestro of fear, the man who can find the fears you keep hidden from yourself and who can make you believe that what you are afraid of is what is about to happen, so you focus on the fear and not on the task at hand. The architect of the choke cuts off the air of mindfulness, the air that the mind breathes as it stands in the present moment. The architect of the choke deflects your attention from him to you as he deflects our attention from you to him, and with the same sleight of hand submerges his own character so all we see about him is that he just beat you – we don't see how and we don't see who and we don't see why. All we see is that you are weak. Even when you're not.

There are other chokes and other architects. We say grow tomatoes and give you a loan to build greenhouses, which you do. The bottom drops out of the market. You can't pay the loan. Choking, you sell your land. We say, here's a cool device which your kids will love. You love your kids, you buy the device, the kids use the device and you never see them again. You choke on your love. We say you need school to be successful. School is expensive. Take a loan. You take a loan, go to school but never find a job. Choke on the loan. Or you do find a job and you do pay back the loan but now you can't afford a spouse or a house or a car or kids, so you have a loan but no love. Choke on the loan again. He says he loves you so you sell your house and move west, and then he loves you and three or four others. Choke on love.

I'm on it. I yell to Maureen, call 911 we got trouble, and I reach into the hall closet where my little surprise lives in its little box on the highest shelf in the back. My little .357 surprise has been waiting for something like this. My insurance policy. My ticket to ride. This is what I got her for. I pull her out and pop her into the waistband of my camouflage pants behind my back where you can't see her and I have the front door open before those boys get past the bushes at the bottom of the walk. After I got laid off from the carpet plant, I used to restore cars before I got disabled from the back pain and the neuropathy and a bad heart, but I'm still pretty quick.

I open the door and stand out on the porch.

"You boys stop where you are," I say.

"We no fear," the stocky one says.

"Looking work," the little one says. "You got work? We got truck. Mower. Chain saw. We clean basement. Yard work. Shovel snow. Whatever. We good work."

"You stop where you are, turn yourselves around, get in that truck and take yourselves back to wherever the hell you came from," I say.

"Good work," the stocky one says. "We good work."

"Get the hell out of my yard," I say, and I start to come down the steps. "This is private property." My voice is loud now.

Them two boys look at one another like they never seen a man stand his ground. My neighbor who himself is a Spanish guy hears us and comes out on his porch. He himself is

Spanish but he is American, by which I mean he was born here and speaks normal. Teacher by day. Security guard by night.

“This is private property,” I say.

“No trouble,” the stocky guy says.

Two or three other neighbors come out of their houses. Julio the teacher picks up a baseball bat and walks off his porch. The Spanish guys start to back away.

“You Trump?” the little guy says, and he grins, a smartass

“Yeah Trump,” I say, and I pull the gun out of my waistband. “Make America great again.”

They talk, we listen. They must think we're all stupid. Because we are. We let them talk and we listen as if we are learning something but they are always exactly the same and we let ourselves choose one over the other, distracted by the spectacle as they steal our patrimony and set us against one another. We love the thrill of people fighting, the way kids in the schoolyard thrill to watch the bully taunt the weak kid or the different kid or just any kid. They keep testing our unconscious fear, sniffing our nether regions, searching for a smell everyone else can smell or a weakness everyone else can see or they invent one, conjurers that they are, and see if they can get the kids on the schoolyard to suspend their disbelief and ride with them, imagine with them, and then they ride that thermal of a rumor or a myth, ride the ugly wind of the collective voice, rising in their own minds above the earth. We elect them or crown them or obey them – and they

go and cut deals, using the public space and the illusion of their power to make themselves rich. We are stupid to believe them, and yet we do, over and over again. They are the choke architect and the lie artist and the mirage artist. They colonize our uncertainties, doubts, and fears.

We gather and we thrill. Eventually, we choke or are choked, as the architect of the choke turns to us. First we choke on our own weakness. Then we consume ourselves, digesting our own flesh to stay alive. The panther comes into the cage.

That .357 changes the equation. I hold it in front of me, pointing it at the stocky one who backs off behind a bush.

The other neighbors start to come off their porches and the two Spanish guys back away more, keeping their eyes on me.

I hear sirens in the distance. The sirens is still far away but they is coming closer. Too bad I told Maureen to call the cops.

“Asshole,” the little one says. “Trump asshole.”

Whatever you think of Donald J. Trump it is just not smart to come on a man’s property and insult him, particularly if that man is holding a firearm. I am at the bottom of the stairs and I walk forward towards those assholes. Julio starts to come across the grass between our houses. Other people come down from their porches.

“Fuck you,” I say. The stocky one is half behind the shrub at the bottom of the driveway. I don’t have a clean shot. I draw a bead on the little one. But he’s a fast bugger and he drops behind the Ram which is parked next to the house.

The sirens are close.

I advance. Fuck them all.

The first cop drives up fast. He is big and Black and he turns off his siren as he pulls up but leaves the lights flashing. Then there is a second and a third and they drive right up on the grass or leave their cars at angles kitty-cornered in the street, blocking it. There are five or six cops and five or six cop cars.

Two or three of them cops are black or Spanish. Isn’t that a nice how do you do?

They have their guns drawn.

And those guns are pointing at me.

“Drop the weapon,” the black cop says. I look for the Spanish guys. I didn’t know one of them had a weapon.

Then suddenly it hits me. The guns are pointed at me. The black cop is talking to me. And to him I am the perp. Holy fuck. All at once I start to see the whole thing like it’s on television, shot from the perspective of a cameraman in a helicopter hovering just over my head.

“It’s them,” I say, to the cop, as I turn towards him. “They’re the trouble. I live here. I’m the American here. I’m the good guy.”

“Drop the gun. Drop the gun. Drop the fucking gun,” the Black cop says.

For an instant, I hear the voice of the TV reporter who exists only in my head.

“Wilmington man was gunned down by police after a standoff that involved two hostages,” the voice says, and I think, holy shit, that Wilmington man is me. Goddamn cops, my brain says, maybe I should take one or two of them with me, I’ve had it up to here. But then my gut takes over from my brain, and I throw the gun down and hit the deck.

Then they are all over me, my arms pinned behind my back, a nightstick under my neck. Big white guy on top of me, huffing and puffing. They are too damn big for me, those cops. The Black cop stands off to the side like he is in charge.

“Watch my back. Watch my fucking back,” I say. “I’ve got a bad back. And neuropathy. And a bad heart.”

The choke artist is pinned on the ground, his hands pulled behind his back, a night stick jammed against his trachea, gasping. I can’t breathe, he says.

And then he dies.

Goddamn it’s hard some days to respect the law and remember that the Constitution says citizen have rights, even dumbass citizens who wave guns around in the late afternoon at the end

of January. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I'm not seeing how there is a right to wave a .357 Magnum around like it is a red white and blue pinwheel on the Fourth of July.

My guys have emotions too. They don't love having weapons pointed at them. Don't love is an understatement. They get hyped and they overdo it when they get hyped. Tempting as it is to let the little white guy suffer, I call off the dogs.

"Stand down," I shout. "Book him, don't strangle him. Just because he's an idiot doesn't mean you have to be idiots as well."

You give these little white guys guns and they think they are the masters of the universe. They think they can do what they want and that they can say what they want and that the law doesn't apply to them. Second Amendment my ass. The last thing this country needed was to put .357 Magnums, AR-15s and Uzis and into the hands of Joe Six-pack.

I'm the police. I'm also a Black man in America. I think, for a moment, about my own people, who never get the time of day. Not from the police, not even from my police, not from anybody. If this guy had been Black, you know and I know and my guys know that the little white guy would have had five holes in him before he hit the ground. It's all out of control. Out of everyone's control. Unless we take it back.

The cop stands, leaving the night stick on the ground, and rubs his hands together, a dead man at his feet. Who is the artist? What do we know about the hunger artist who died and the choke artist left behind? See the power of words. See words run. See words choke. See Spot choke on words. See us use our words. The Wall Street bankers and the venture capitalists and

Federal Government use their words to take everything from us, even human dignity, even compassion, which all got sacrificed to a twenty percent return. When was the last time you heard a human being answer a telephone? Words come from the automated attendant but they aren't real words with real meanings because there is no person on the other end, speaking them. Language has meaning only when two people talk to one another. They don't even have human beings at the checkout counters of the supermarket anymore.

Thank God the choke artist didn't die. The little white guy lay there gasping for breath. His throat and neck was going to be seriously sore in the morning. "I can't breathe," he gasped. But he could breathe, this time. I used my better judgment and we let him live. There has to be some common ground left, some place for us to be together as human beings. The ambulance rolled up, its lights even brighter than the lights of the squad cars, the red blue and bright white light bathing all of us in strange colors and shadows in the late afternoon.

Who is the choke artist? Are our lives real or are they just art? Have we all been reduced to pederasty?

The architect of the choke is the Music Man and Darth Vader, Hitler and Jesus and Lucifer and Buddha and Moses and Mohammed and Mick Jaeger and Paul McCartney, all rolled into one. Nothing happens until somebody sells something. The architect of the choke is choker and chokee at once. We all need someone to bleed on. And you know if you want it, you can bleed on me.

That Black cop must have had second thoughts, and he and another cop pulled that mad dog off me. I must have blacked out. I wake up gasping, my throat closed, my head ready to explode. But then the light came back and I could see them all standing around me. They cuffed me and rolled me over. Then they lifted me, one guy on each side of me. Then Rescue rolled up and they put me in it.

“Get him checked out before we book him,” the Black cop said. “Mister,” he said to me, “don’t you ever do like that again. Call 911. Don’t be waving a goddamn gun around your neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon. You coulda got three people killed.”

“They came onto my property,” I said. “I got rights.”

“I don’t care if they came into your goddamn bedroom while you were fucking your wife’s sister,” the Black cop said. “Dead men don’t pursue happiness. Just call 911 and leave the weaponry to us please.”

The artist is always an actor, someone who does. The choked is forced into inaction, so stuck he or she can’t even move air into his or her chest. And then he dies. Democracy is for the living. We are a society made of actors, who interact. The architect of the choke locks us down, so we don’t move. He takes our love, our compassion, our decency, and he monetizes it and then he weaponizes it. He calls us a choke artist, a wimp, weak, small, white, black, yellow, a loser, so that we choke. He sells us what we don’t want and don’t need and then we choke. He thinks he is laughing, all the way to the bank. And he is not alone. He is just one incarnation of the evil

impulse. He and his brothers and sisters in crime are out there sucking up all the air we breathe. Which is the air they breathe. Just sayin.

Art awakens the imagination so that we see who we are and who we can be together. The architect of the choke exploits the imagination in the service of his ego and his greed and he will destroy us all to feed himself. Lucifer. Nero. Stalin. Hitler. Caesar. Sabbati Zevi. Calligula. The dark side of the force. The black hole. The destroyer. The Dark Lord of the Sith. This isn't science fiction. It's our life, our experience. Give us this day our daily bread.

Man is born free but is everywhere enslaved. Workers unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains. Chain chain chain, chain of fools.

If we don't stand up for democracy we will lose it. The people who choke are the people who will die. Only the people who stand up together and act up together will live.

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country. And women. And everyone else, left and right, up and down and in-between.

Democracy is the air we breathe. The choke artist is standing on our collective neck.

It's time to stand up together and get this monkey off our back. And all them other monkeys with him.

No justice, no peace.

Kick out the jams.

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