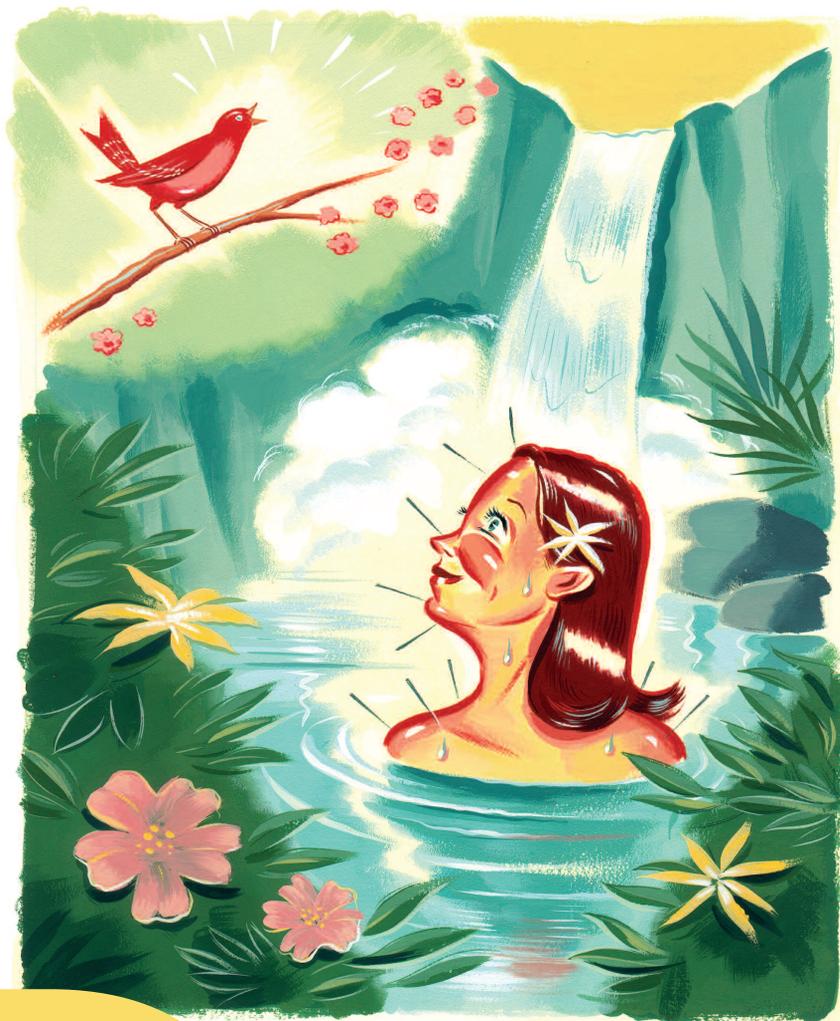


# Meet the Needles

Who needs chewing gum or inherited jokes? Let's go to the acupuncturist!



**Did a visit to the doctor's office always** seem like a few hours at the Tijuana bus station? You've got the fluorescent lights, the endless waits. The chairs are bolted down, and they make you yearn for those Sani-Seat things in gas station restrooms. Everyone else's bus is called except yours. And there are lots and lots of drug dealers. ♣ The big difference between an HMO (Humongous Money-Sucking Organ of the insurance industry) and the Tijuana bus station, though, is that the dealers at the doctor's office hand out free samples. The pharmaceutical company reps wheel in dollies and leave behind starter packs of drugs, pens, mugs, notepads, coasters, refrigerator magnets, Rolex watches, and pamphlets explaining how blissful life is going to be on Paxil CR. My heart goes out to doctors. They've gotten hosed as badly as the rest of us. They signed up to be gods in lab coats and have ended up as clerks, the nozzles

of the money-sucking organ.

My own doctor is smart and adorable, but when the hearing in one of my ears mysteriously disappeared recently, he was forced to send me to a specialist, or ENT (Everything's Normal Today). Calling upon years of medical training and hours of keeping up with the latest developments in ear science, the ENT delivered his crack diagnosis: We all lose hearing as we age. He also suggested that I stop chewing gum.

I missed the gum but enjoyed the new world of garbled transmissions I had entered. I sat through a conversation with a friend in real estate enchanted by her mention of the "inherited jokes" she was working on. I was wondering what legacy of humor I could amass to pass along to my lucky heirs when a loud talker in our group asked her how she'd gotten involved with the *Heritage Oaks* subdivision. Never mind.

Once I remembered that both my ears were roughly the same age yet only one had suddenly ceased operation, I decided to check in with another ENT (Evade, Equivocate, Elude—this one was all about the E). He explained that short of trepanning into the skull as the Incas did, there was no real way of ever knowing what was going on inside my ear. He apologized for being "a bummer" but concluded, "We're in a gray area here." (My brother the lawyer loved this diagnosis and plans to put it to use immediately. "Antitrust? Such a gray area. Pay at the front." Auto mechanics, you should try it too. "Hmmm, car won't start? Gray area. Ka-ching!" Air traffic controllers: What are you ever looking at *except* just gobs of gray area?)

So it was official: I was in a gray area. This is the area where you go to clinics in Radiant Aura, Arizona, for wheatgrass enemas or... see an acupuncturist! Next stop: Oh, let's call | CONTINUED ON PAGE TKK

LOTUS OPERANDI: I bathed in an ocean of personal attention.

## Meet the Needles

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it Lotus Moon Center for Chinese Medicine.

Here's what I immediately liked about Lotus Moon: no sick people in the waiting room. No one goes to an acupuncturist with hemorrhagic fevers; consequently, there were no hemorrhagic fever cooties waiting to infect me, the poor little hearing-impaired girl. This was already better. Other differences? Let's compare and contrast.

### SMELL

HMO: Nursing-home-strength disinfectant. Since everyone, especially the people in scrubs holding clipboards who pass through without calling your name, is hacking and coughing and wearing braces, you'll wish that the disinfectant were even stronger. In fact, you wouldn't mind seeing the floor melting.

Lotus Moon: Lavender aromatherapy mist combined with scent of Chinese herbs. The latter scent is mysterious and ancient, like an old confessional or wormwood, though I have no idea what wormwood smells like.

### SOUNDS

HMO: Various unintelligible messages on P.A., snick of credit card reader, time passing, ambulatory patients organizing armed insurrection, your name not being called.

Lotus Moon: Soft burble of aquarium, wind chimey New Age Muzak, leisurely conversa-

tion between two guys with ponytails about the mucus-producing properties of dairy products.

### READING MATERIAL

HMO: That Paxil pamphlet and a request posted above the completely empty rack: "Please do not remove magazines from waiting area."

Lotus Moon: Choose from new copies of a catalog of hemp products, *Yoga Journal*, or *Quacks Quarterly*, with articles on ear candling and flossing your nasal cavities.

### RESTROOMS

HMO: Standard institutional, with a sign giving detailed directions for a midstream urine specimen.

Lotus Moon: Just like yours, if you lived in a groovy-funky bohemian neighborhood. The sign here advises, "To help with the upkeep of optimal feng shui, please keep toilet lid closed."

### ART

HMO: Poster of the GI tract that lays bare the whole topography behind the lips, liver floating like a mushroom atop all the u-joints of the intestines, which makes you never want to kiss again.

Lotus Moon: Counting batiks, carvings, and tapestries, there are seven mythical creatures in the waiting room—nine depending on how you feel about the Sleeping Buddha and a medical person who (a) knows your name and (b) hasn't made you wait.

### TIME

HMO: I believe the rule of thumb here is that actual amount of time spent with actual doctor cannot extend into double digits unless there is an amputation involved.

Lotus Moon: The acupuncturist spends an hour going into exquisite detail about *my* ear, *my* menses, *my* moods, *my* chi, *my* meridians, *my* excess of yin. Every other medical encounter has been the briefest of cold showers; this is bathing in an ocean of personal attention. By the time he darts me with those needles, I am pulling so hard for this to work that I swear I can hear better already, and what I'm hearing is the sound of one hand clapping. For *me*.

### PAYMENT

HMO: Bend over and grab the bar.

Lotus Moon: Total cost for two hours of consultation and porcupine time plus small bottle of wormwood is less than HMO co-pay when combined with those little incidental expenses that insurance won't cover, such as lab tests, hearing test, CT scan, MRI, and any other procedure arising from or connected with being sick.

What's that you ask? Is my earring a carrot? I wonder why you would ask if my earring is a carrot. Though, hmmm, carrot earrings—that is a cute idea. Wait, I'm not wearing an earring. What? *Is my hearing any better?* Not really. But at least I don't have hemorrhagic fevers. ♣