



Mar. 22nd 1992

An inspiration hit me like a bolt of lightning. My will to live exploded forth. It was like this incredible surge of an extraordinarily positive force. I have felt that same energy on a number of other occasions. I had a purpose that was not to be denied. I had no time to lose. I had been underwater for what felt like a substantial period of time. I knew I was oxygen deficient.

My seatbelt!! Right!! I unlatched the seatbelt and began to thrash against whatever was leaning against me. I was wearing contacts and have done so all my life, so it was instinctual for me to keep my eyes closed. Besides, it was underwater at night, so it was zero visibility anyway.

I continued to thrash about... fighting for... What?... What?... Come on, what? A life?... Yes, you ungrateful motherfucker... A life... My life... My astonishing, incredible, magnificent, outrageous life. Something that had enormously more value now than it did just moments earlier... I think!!

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore, I had to breathe in. My lungs were about to burst. The sensation to inhale was just too overwhelming. I inhaled. I was expecting to consume nothing but water...

A Sound from Somewhere

Wahhhhhhhhhhh, Wahhhhhhhhh, Wahhhhhhhhh.

I heard a sound that was reminiscent of a babies wail, coming from someplace that I couldn't tell.

Suddenly I realized that not only was I consuming water, but I was consuming air as well.

I was actually choking and coughing and spitting up water. I had reached the surface of the bay.

I then realized that the wailing sound that I heard was actually coming from me. It was a sound created out of the desperate need to **be**, which was exacerbated by the fact that the water was filled with jet fuel. There was a strong stench of it in the air.

As I stood in the belly of the beast, I couldn't help but feel that it was like a rebirth. I was still alive after I had already accepted and had prepared for my death.

Standing in this water felt like I was back in the womb again. It was cold with jagged edges. There was no coddling or pampering. Just a sense of the pure will to live... Survival at its best. I understood that. I was comfortable with that. I came out of my mothers womb like that.

Perhaps without that valuable training, I wouldn't have had the mettle to survive this challenge.

Perhaps all the challenges I've ever experienced were just preparations for this one big challenge. Perhaps my experience as a combat medic in Vietnam was a prelude to the real kiss of death.

Perhaps my experience with drug addiction and hitting my personal bottom was just a mere preparation for me being able to deal with the bottom of Flushing Bay.

Perhaps my collective experience in life, the circumference of all that I know, all that I am, gave me the presence of mind to stay in present time and really confront what was before me.

I had surfaced in the belly of the plane because it was upside down. It was like a metal cave with hydraulic wires running from front to rear... Or rather what was left of the rear. The plane had broken into pieces at the midway point. The rear of the plane did not exist.

If you could imagine being in a giant glass and the glass was on its side laying in a pool of water that half filled the glass. That's what it was like. There was fire on the surface of the water near the rear.

Helpful Passenger

Here, grab my hand.

It was a man's voice and I couldn't quite figure out where it was coming from because I couldn't see anyone. To my right, I could hear low murmuring voices within the plane but I couldn't see them. Directly to the left of me was a hole about the size of a manhole cover in the street.

I saw a man's arm descending from the top of the hole. I waded over and took hold of the arm and it helped pull me through the hole in the side of the plane.

The gentleman who pulled me out of the water was a rather tall man. I really didn't get a good look at his face. There was an older gentleman sitting there as well. He looked like he was in total shock. He was just blankly staring into space. We were on a piece of the plane that was peeled over like the top of a sardine can. It was about the size of a twin bed. The

driving snow had slowed to almost a stop. I slowly looked around and pondered where I was.

There was an eerie, surreal quality about the beauty of this picture. The lights across the bay seemed to dance in the night, while the flames from the burning jet fuel lit up the evening sky with a beautiful spectrum of oranges, yellows and crimson.

It was a *Life Magazine* cover shot if there ever was one.

I laid down because I had severe trouble breathing. I had swallowed jet fuel and it was affecting my lungs and sinuses and my ears... I couldn't hear very well. I was breathing like I had just run up twenty flights of stairs.

Suddenly, there was an enormous flare up near the rear of the plane. The flames had evidently hit another pocket of fuel. I thought, "Oh shit, this thing is going to blow up."

The three of us jumped into the water and were going to take our chances swimming. After jumping in, I discovered that the water was only five feet deep and I could wade to shore around the nose of the plane.

When I got to the shore line, I looked to the left and saw people gathering near the center of what was left of the plane. My fear was that the plane could blow up so I didn't want to go where they were.

By this time I was freezing. My hands were like two blocks of ice. They were excruciatingly painful. There was a sea wall that stood about six feet high that I had to negotiate to get away from the area. That same guy who helped me earlier, now helped me up the wall and I never saw him again.

I saw a piece of the burning plane about the size of the hood of a car sitting about twenty yards from me. I ran over to warm my hands. I'm

standing there with my hands over the fire trying desperately to get enough heat to my hands without burning myself. Suddenly it occurred to me that my clothes were soaked in jet fuel and I was potentially a human torch. I jumped back at the thought.

To survive a plane crash, and then get burned up trying to get warm was an inconceivable thought.

Rescue vehicles were just starting to arrive. I found out later the reason why it took them so long was because they couldn't figure out who's responsibility the rescue effort should fall under; The Port Authority because the plane was in the water or the Airport Authority because the plane took off from there. They had a power struggle which delayed the reaction time.

I noticed a person running across the tarmac, approaching the accident site. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt. By this time I was shivering violently and my teeth were chattering hard enough for them to be chipped. My body had taken on an out of control spastic quality. I ran to him.

Me

Sssssir, ppppplease, ccccan
yyyyou hhhhhhelp mmmme?

He was an African American man and glad to help.

African American Man
Yeah brother, come on with me,
I'll get you some help.

He took me by the arm and led me toward the arriving rescue vehicles.

All of a sudden he looked hard in my face, gradually getting closer for a better look. His face suddenly lit up as if he were on 125th Street and Martin Luther King Blvd.

African American Man
(with surprise and glee)

Say man, you the cat on *All My Children* .
Well, I'll be damned. It's good to see you man.
Wuts going on Bro '?

I stood there for the longest time not really knowing how to respond.

Me

What's going on!? **What's going on!?**
Well, lets see. Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, nothing
but a little plane crash. Starring in a little
TV show here and there. Play a little golf
from time the time, you know, just trying to
chill out and be cool. Stress free... You know
what I'm saying.

I didn't say that, but that's what I was thinking.

Look, the gentleman wasn't being insensitive. He was as real as you can get. As a matter fact, it was quite beautiful. It gave the situation some levity. Levity is good.

There was a lot of levity to around at night. Later that night, in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, one of the survivors shared his experience with me. He said that after he walked out of the bay, soaking wet, covered in seaweed, smelling like a kerosene torch, he started walking toward the rescue vehicles. The fireman approached and asked,

Fireman

Are you one of the people in the plane crash?

Passenger

(smiling and casual)

No, I just made a wrong turn off the Expressway.

Paddy Chayefsky, one of the great writers about time, who wrote *Network* , *The Hospital*, *Middle of the Night* , and *The Goddess* to name a few, would always instill some levity at the highest moment of drama.

Levity: **1. Lightness of manner or speech, especially when inappropriate 2. The state or quality of being light; buoyancy.**