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SIEGFRIED KRA

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TRUE STORIES

*Dancer* *in the*  
*Garden*



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# *HOLDING MY BROTHER'S HAND*

2011

**G**LOVED, MASKED, DRESSED IN A PLASTIC DRESS WITH A funny-looking plastic hat as if going to a Halloween party, he instead finds himself in a bright room without any decoration. A jumble of sounds reaches his failing ears: steadily dripping fluids from bags hanging at his side, the hissing, whistling, and blowing of unfamiliar machines, indistinct voices. Young people masked and gowned peer at blinking computers, ignoring him.

He is lying on a bed, strapped down like a prisoner with leather straps. There are tubes in his mouth, tubes in his neck, tubes in his stomach. They stand over him, so many in this cold cubicle with no windows, speaking as if he were not there. One of the gowned women raises the bed sheets and looks at his flaccid penis, also connected to a tube. She checks the boots, large as a cowboy's, riding up his legs to prevent clots from forming. Around the necks of the other young masked and gowned people hang long black tubes called stethoscopes, once used to listen to the heart, now mere decoration. For with all the monitoring equipment, there is no space on his chest to place a stethoscope. Even if there were, it would be hard to hear his beating heart above the beeping of the machines.

Another machine is wheeled into the room and all the young masked and gowned people step out and, zip, an X-ray is taken. Then another machine scans the chest, and he can see flashing pictures on the screen.

He groans and moves around, fighting to loosen his strapped hands.

Someone says, "Don't do that."

"Is he deaf?" another says.

Still no one approaches him, as if he has a contagious disease.

"Does he understand English?"

"He's probably demented."

I walk into the cubicle just as the word “demented” is uttered, another gowned and masked person, but no longer young.

The man lying on the table is three days post-op after a complex operation: two fistulas, or holes, repaired. Although semi-conscious, he moves his head as he is going to be extubated.

One of the masked and gowned people says “he looks good” in a tone of authority, standing by the door.

Still no one touches him as the tube is pulled up out of his throat. He coughs.

Another yells, “How do you feel?”

He does not answer but again begins to fight his restraints, pulling at them, making sounds like a trapped animal. He is partially deaf. He is not demented. He is a practicing attorney. He is my brother.

I take my gloves off, take his hand in mine and squeeze it. He responds with a nod of his head and becomes calm and subdued.

His wife failed to mention that he was deaf. After the operation, she and her son were afraid to hold his hand or his head.

“Just touch him,” I tell the masked and gloved figures. “Hold his hand and it will give him a feeling of comfort and security. He won’t be so frightened. It’s an old method I learned in medical school, before you had all these machines.” All medical care should include the ancient bedside practice of taking the patient’s hand. “It works better than Xanax,” I tell them.

I squeeze my brother’s hand and do not let go.

PLANE CRASH  
*on a FROZEN LAKE*  
1982

THE MORNING OF FEBRUARY 21, 1982, WAS GRAY AND dreary. I was making arrangements for a trip to Boston and upstate New York as part of a lecture publicity tour for my recently published book. All morning I felt uneasy, restless, and exhausted. I was peculiarly reluctant to leave. Perhaps it was the comfort of Sunday morning, surrounded by my chatty, cheerful family at the breakfast table.

I had been booked to leave from the New Haven airport at six that evening, but I had an 8:00 a.m. TV show to do. I decided to leave earlier and arrive in Boston in time to settle in before bedtime. I thought of canceling. I told my wife that I was worn out.

“I am coming down with a virus,” I said. “My stomach feels upset.”

“You really love to go on these tours,” she said reassuringly. “You’ll see, once you get on that plane and to Boston, you’ll be yourself again. And in the morning, in front of the cameras, you’ll be on a high—you’re a born ham.

She was right, of course. I always found it exhilarating to be front and center. Even though these tours harvest few book sales, I really enjoy the notoriety. And while they only last a few days at a time, they offer a change from my tumultuous medical practice.

The day was unusually warm for the end of February. A slight drizzle started as I arrived at the airport. Waiting to board, I saw a little girl in a blue coat embrace her mother and then run out to the plane. I wondered why anyone would allow such a small child to travel by herself. I embraced my wife and daughter and felt a bit sad, and terribly uneasy. I suddenly wished I had driven to Boston, but then I’d have had to drive to Syracuse and Rochester and Buffalo.

An experienced traveler, I always request the seat behind the pilot on these small Otter planes. It makes me feel more secure. Snaking myself

down the narrow aisle, I caught a glimpse of some of my fellow passengers. There was a tall black man. A mother and her son were in the seat opposite mine. The little girl in the blue coat sat next to a young man at the back of the plane. There were twelve passengers on this fully booked flight. My raincoat was on my lap, as was my briefcase, which contained a new manuscript I was working on.

Once we were airborne, I spread the manuscript on my lap. From the window I could see New Haven Harbor, covered by an eerie-looking mist. There were two pilots. One was giving the usual in-flight instructions to the passengers, which were terribly garbled because of a defective PA system.

I wondered why pilots were always so tall and strong-looking, and charming. They gave me confidence and trust, making these small commuter planes seem somehow more substantial.

“Well, folks, we should arrive in Boston in forty-five minutes,” the senior pilot informed us cheerfully just as the windshield began being pelted with rain. I placed the manuscript pages back into their folder, returned it to my briefcase, and sat back, trying to relax.

I tried to plan what I was going to say on this next interview. But instead I began to wonder if I would die in a plane crash. I had been fortunate so far, having traveled hundreds of times without mishap. But what if the odds were turning against me?

My own death had not really preoccupied me until then, although as a cardiologist death is my constant companion. How many times had I stood by a bedside and witnessed the last moments of a human life? Everyone dies the same way, unlike births, which are all different. The last gasp of life is a universal phenomenon, regardless of the cause. Death is the end of a personality. Being a custodian of human lives, I am programmed to save them. This is as much a part of my brain as eating and sleeping. But who would try to save mine when the time came? Who saves the doctors?

I took a comb from my jacket pocket and began to straighten my hair, arrange my tie, smooth the blazer I was wearing, as if I were grooming for a party.

My eyes were transfixed by the windshield. The wipers were moving, large, thin blades that looked like long spider legs gliding back and forth, back and forth, across the glass. How could the pilots see through all the fog and mist? Then I realized that they were flying by the instruments before them.

Suddenly the wipers stopped moving in the middle of the windshield, like a movie that abruptly freezes a frame of the action. In seconds, ice formed on the glass, and I saw the pilots' strained looks as they started pulling and pushing different levers. I stretched out my arms in front of me. Did anyone else sense that terror was about to strike? The woman behind me who was about my age? The little girl? The secretive German traveler, who held onto his briefcase as if all his valuables were inside?

First came a faint odor, almost imperceptible, but somehow familiar to me. It was not disagreeable. It began to grow until I recognized an unmistakable smell I meet each day in my office, in the hospital, in the operating room: alcohol. Behind me, the passengers remained oblivious, comfortable, safe.

A little puff of smoke started to curl around the cockpit, slowly increasing, and in minutes the entire cockpit was hidden behind a thick blue miasma. The smoke made my breathing more and more labored, as if I were submerged under water. The passengers began to stir. Sleepy eyes now stared in disbelief and fear. Voices grew louder, "What the hell is going on? Seconds later, little bursts of flame appeared from the instrument panel, fire being spit by a dragon. The fire spread, licking the walls, the cockpit. I threw my raincoat at the fire. It was ablaze in seconds. The smoke increased. I began to gasp for air. I sat back and waited. We would not survive much longer without fresh air.

Is this what my family felt in their final moments in the concentration camp in Treblinka? The Germans didn't get me, but the gods would finally have their way. I wouldn't get to see my children married or make the bestseller list. The cabin had grown hot, dark, suffocating.

"How long can you withstand low-oxygen concentration in the blood," the professor asked me on the final exam, "before brain damage occurs?"

Someone shouted, "Where is the fire extinguisher?" and grabbed my tennis racket. This was a pressurized plane. We can't break a window, I thought. We mustn't. But someone did, smashing at the glass until it gave. The pilots were festooned in flames, but one of the ghastly figures stuck his head out the smashed window as the plane dove at a steep angle, shuddering and rattling. Death was upon us. I could see mountains, ice-covered mountains.

I'm in Switzerland again, in the very attic where I lived as a medical school student. There is no heat or hot water in my room, just a little electric stove, and it is a frigid winter. There is a small bed and desk, my open books upon it. Next door lives Klaus, also a student. On his desk are pictures of his father standing next to Hitler.

"Were you in the war, Klaus?" I ask.

"Yes," he answers me in German. "I was in the submarine service. I knew nothing of what went on. My father was Hitler's friend, a close friend."

Klaus and I often share coffee and exchange notes. One morning he is found dead, having jumped from the bridge in the center of town.

Suddenly the mountains are covered with a blinding bright yellow light. I squint to see. I hear soft voices. It is so peaceful, the most peaceful moment of my entire life, absolute serenity. I am floating above the plane, an objective observer calmly watching it burn.

I must have passed out—or had I died? The plane was on the ground. I unfastened my seatbelt, moved my arms and legs. There was no pain anywhere, only heat and stifling smoke. I lurched out of my seat. There was moaning and screaming around me, the sounds of disaster, as I tried to run to the back of the plane. The exit door was blocked. I cleared it, then kicked it until it flew open. A tall man standing behind me dove out of the open door like a swimmer diving into a pool. Lying at my feet was the little girl with the blue coat, shrieking. Her face was covered with blood. I grabbed her by her coat and dragged her out with me as I struggled to leave the burning plane. I touched ground. It was hard and icy cold. It must have snowed, I thought. I dragged the girl along the ice, away from the blazing plane.

"Stop pulling me," she screamed, "you are hurting my back!"

"Everything is okay, you're fine," I said, the doctor speaking. The man was terrified.

Suddenly one of the pilots appeared, black as charcoal, weaving from side to side as if drunk. His leg was ripped and bleeding.

"Get away from the plane!" I heard someone shout. Passengers were crawling, staggering away. The little girl in the blue coat stood and walked. A young woman, arms outstretched before her, was feeling her way.

“I can’t see!” she screamed. I took her arm and escorted her away from the inferno. Her face was wet and red, her eyes swollen shut. We moved slowly, a grotesque march from hell. Now a terrible explosion, as if planets had collided. Then an ugly pile of acrid-smelling, burning debris was all that was left of Pilgrim Flight 458 headed for Boston. That same sense of utter peace I had experienced when the conflagration began returned. Still I felt no pain, though I knew I’d been injured. There was no numbness. My knee was swollen to the touch, and my ankle looked black. We could all feel the warmth from the burning plane. Was I still alive? The young woman placed her arm in mine.

“I’m so scared. Please! I don’t see anything. Where are we?”

“You are fine,” I reassured her. “We are saved. Don’t worry. I’m a doctor. I will take care of you.”

“Are you really a doctor? Oh, thank God! God sent you to me.”

What I thought at first was frozen ground was a lake, a frozen lake on a warm day. Somehow we had to cross this icy surface to safety. I strained my eyes to spot the shore and thought I saw it a long way off. If the ice were to give, the blind girl clutching my arm with all her strength would pull me down, and I too would drown. I could have left her to wander off by herself, to save my own life. I was well enough to make it to shore. But I had never abandoned a sick person in my life, and surely wouldn’t now.

“We have to walk very carefully,” I told her softly. “We’re on a frozen lake, but the ice seems spongy, wet. Walk carefully, step carefully.”

Her grip on me grew tighter. She took small steps, brought her feet down daintily, as if she were walking on eggs.

“Just pretend that we are walking in the park on a nice fall day and that everything is safe and beautiful,” I said softly. “We are lucky to have survived the plane crash. You will tell your grandchildren of that one day.”

Our stroll continued, like two lovers arm in arm. Each step could mean the end of us both. I felt the patches of soft ice move slightly below our feet, but the lake remained frozen despite the warm air. The plane, we were later told, had crashed right in the center of the frozen lake. I never felt the impact. The plane slid and sailed a thousand feet across the ice before the nose gently dipped into the lake, a huge bird taking a drink. One of the wings of the plane had broken off. We approached it on our promenade across the lake. The bird’s wing lay flat on the ice, smoldering. I watched it slowly begin to sink and disappear below the surface. I didn’t tell my blind

escort what was happening, but she heard the terrifying hiss it made and the swishing sound as the reluctant wing was drawn to its icy grave.

“What was that?” she asked in panic.

“It’s the wind, nothing more. We’ll be on the shore soon. We’ll be safe.” Now I could clearly see the shore. On the banks of this lake of death were some young boys, standing, watching, but no one else to help.

“Walk towards the other edge!” they yelled. “It is all melted here.”

We changed our course like mariners sailing the dark sea. Now I saw that others had already reached land. They urged us on. We approached shore, and the ice became soft as pudding. It reminded me of how I once crossed the streets in New York as a child. First stepping on the ice on the edge of the sidewalk and then suddenly being in water, slush. Three young boys came to the very edge of the lake with their arms outstretched. We were entering water now. The young woman clutched me ever more tightly as, with each step, we began to sink. The icy water reached my thigh. It felt like hot moss. One more step. Safety was five feet away. I threw her with all my strength, and the three boys grabbed her by the arm, pulled her out. I struggled to get to land, the water almost reaching my shoulder. Another step. Another. The boys had me. A mighty pull.

Soaking wet, I began to feel terribly cold. We walked, the three boys leading us through thick vines. Surely this must be a beautiful spot in the spring: yellow forsythia in full bloom, framing the lake. We then climbed over a barbed-wire fence, and now we were on the road. I looked back. We had cheated the Lady of the Lake.

One of the pilots was lying on the ground, a terrible pile of charcoal, unconscious.

“He is the doctor!” someone yelled.

I struggled over to the pilot’s body. He was still alive. What did they expect me to do? Here? Now? It took twenty dreadful minutes for an ambulance to arrive. Isolated from the world, we had crashed in the Scituate Reservoir in Rhode Island, a body of water that had rarely ever frozen, no less on a day when the temperature was 50 degrees.

They packed me in the ambulance with the burned pilot, the blind young woman, and a mother and son, who both suffered bone fractures and head injuries. In his haste, one of the ambulance attendants forgot to close the back door, and as we sped off we began to slip toward the gaping hole, like children in a park on a slide. I held fast to the stretcher nestling the

unconscious but groaning man. The others were screaming for the ambulance to stop, but the driver did not hear our plea. In desperation I grabbed a bottle of saline solution from a rack and threw it at the window separating us from the driver. He turned his head toward us and was horrified to see us hanging on for our very lives. He stopped and closed the door securely.

For the rest of the trip, as the ambulance raced toward Rhode Island Hospital, I felt helpless trying to give some comfort to this poor man who was burned over at least 75 percent of his body. He had been a great hero; so had his co-pilot. He had brought the plane down while his body was encased in flames, somehow steering it with his head outside the window. None of us on that flight will ever forget him. Both pilots would receive awards for their heroic acts. Those of us who survived (two would not) realized that a miracle had occurred.

After the longest ride of my life, we finally arrived at the emergency room. I walked out of the ambulance against the warning shouts of the emergency-room staff to wait for help.

“Don’t bother with me,” I said, “I’m fine.” I walked toward the cafeteria while other patients looked on as if I were mad.

“Doctor, you must sign in and be examined. You just survived a plane crash!” the nurse shouted at me.

I gave her a derisive smile, and said, “All I want is a hamburger. I haven’t had one in years, since I’ve been on a damned low-cholesterol diet.”

I was hungry. Famished. I felt as if I hadn’t eaten in weeks. The adrenaline was overflowing. I ate three hamburgers and then called my wife.

“Don’t get worried, you probably heard of the crash. If you didn’t, turn on the radio. Come and get me. Bring a coat, a hat, and a bottle of scotch.”

When my wife and daughter arrived, I was lying on a stretcher being examined by an intern. They did not know what to expect, and both burst into tears of joy when they saw that I was in one piece. Much to the dismay of the emergency-room staff, I grabbed the scotch and drank to my heart’s content. My knee was injured, but I refused to stay in the hospital. As I was leaving the emergency room, Jeremy Geidt, a Shakespearean actor from the Yale Repertory Theater, approached me to thank me for pulling his daughter off the plane. She was the little girl in the blue coat.

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