

TWWOA 2016 Hard Times Contest 1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner

Wow – what a story! And how clever to have the “story within a story” – juxtaposing family tragedy, terrible illness and fear with the soaring of wings.



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*August, 2001.* You were in the hospital. You don't remember much about those weeks just before, during or after 9/11. Your brain shielded you from the horrors America was experiencing, while you were dealing with your own personal terrorist – your brain itself. *Mom, you'd said. What's wrong with me?*

I kept a secret from you that summer, because you couldn't have sorted it out; I barely understood it. I didn't like keeping secrets from my daughter. We'd shared everything from looks (indigo eyes, pale Irish skin, 'big hair') to a penchant for party-giving, to the shock and grief of losing half our family – a decade earlier – in a private plane accident. The crash that changed our lives... following eight years your dad and brother built the experimental plane in our garage. It was like a member of the family in a way, growing bigger as you children did.

Only one other person knew the secret. "You're taking *flying lessons*?" The nurse on third shift examined me as if I were demented, too. I confessed in a four a.m. weep-a-thon in the waiting room. Nights of sleeplessness passed as I waited for your condition to improve. The nurse sat with me, kindly, over coffee, as I poured out our story. Your story.

Just before checking into the hospital you'd developed blindness, deafness, and dementia all at once. We had no idea the extent of this neurological attack or its reversibility. You were like Helen Keller in her 'madness' from loss of critical senses – sight and sound. At least Helen could walk; that week you also lost the ability to use your legs.

*She can't feel her hands either.*

The catastrophic siege continued. You were beset by fears, most real, some imagined, all petrifying. I came to stay evenings, after work, to spell your husband and other family members

as we took turns caring for you while doctors administered tests and medications. Often, I'd arrive after my twice-weekly flying lessons about which I'd told no one else. Who would have believed it anyway? It wasn't anything I'd ever wanted but, strangely, flying was a need that grew in me, starting the previous winter.

*Hang on, my girl. Hang strong.*

“Face your worst fear” – a challenge to confront fear instead of denying or running from it. The question arises: Is there any time or place we don't have some kind of fear? Flying had been my nemesis. With a job requiring frequent travel it was a scary ordeal on each takeoff or landing. The fear was about dying, of course, and you losing a third loved one in an airplane. But I couldn't *not* travel. I needed a way to convince my brain that the enemy was fear itself, not flying.

*This is Randy, your flight instructor.*

I started by riding in a small plane which turned out to be unexpectedly exhilarating. The sensual elements instantly resonated: aroma of motor oil, crisp drafts in a tiny cockpit, the crackling radio voices of air traffic controllers and other pilots. I quivered at sensations of drag, from head to toes as we pulled away from gravity. Amazingly, I wanted to fly the plane myself and began learning with an unflappable instructor. Randy, an old hand, encouraged me to work toward a pilot's license – an inconceivable notion. I considered flying lessons to be a journey, taken one hour at a time with a renewable commitment afterward, not a long-term destination goal. (As a teacher Randy didn't see it that way, naturally.) At first, to me, controlling an airplane was about avoiding fear; later, overcoming it; much later, about transforming it.

*Mom, I don't want to die, please help me, help me!*

When your brain began to malfunction, mine became numb. Nothing rooted in the ground made sense anymore, so I retreated to the sky. It was only there I found solace. Plus, I couldn't quit flying because I'd been working up to the big "solo" – the major, necessary milestone for a student pilot. How hard could it be to take off, do three touch-n-goes, and land in one piece, all alone, when I'd done these maneuvers dozens of times successfully with Randy? I'd been almost ready to solo when your nerves began cruelly misfiring, and then I lost my own nerve.

*No, I'm not ready yet. Maybe in two weeks?*

I was ashamed I couldn't solo, as most students accomplished the feat in 12 to 25 hours of instruction. I was beyond that and counting. And I was ashamed I wasn't with you constantly.

*I'm so scared, Mom. Every minute.*

You were being sedated, but the acute trauma overrode any soothing effects of drugs. You had screaming fits, so loud and angry that doctors threatened to put you in a psych ward. The merciful nurse saved you from that fate. She tried to calm you and didn't report when you lashed out, hurling cruel words and even objects at her, something you'd normally never do. (I'd told her what you were like before being struck down, how you volunteered your time at the Red Cross, how generous you were to homeless people and animals with food donations. How you bought your grandmother a TV and mentored young women in your medical transcription business. I told her how funny you were, how we had never-ending witty pun contests. I didn't tell her about your April Fool's jokes, however, because some were mean. It's good you don't

remember those.) The inhibition function of your brain had shut down. You were often hysterical. Your fear was frightening to everyone as it grew a life of its own.

*Cessna 3-6-2, requesting clearance for takeoff.*

The airplane became sanctuary. Flying became an escape from sorrow and despair, a way to get “above it all”. It focused me, I see now, on survival, which I’d begun to question. When piloting a plane, my every action was about assuring survival – mine, Randy’s, and those below me. I was in control. In the hospital I stood around useless, as your physical and emotional health deteriorated before our eyes. I’d developed that weary blariness people get when they spend too much time in the hospital waiting for tests, caring for loved ones, pacing and praying. When I vanished into clouds two thousand feet up, it rejuvenated me for another day of it.

“I’m not leaving her, I just want you to know,” he said, late one evening. I thought your husband, my son-in-law, meant he wasn’t leaving for the night. He meant permanently. That he’d been thinking about it gave me shudders. I guess he’d finally read up on Multiple Sclerosis. We’d been in denial for a year until this devastating attack. It’s the Primary Progressive kind of M.S., the worst kind, particularly *unkind*, discriminated from a milder form because of its series of weeks-long assaults on the body. Patients recover temporarily but are left with compounded residual damage, never improving. M.S. often results in uncorrectable vision, pain, spasms, paralysis, deficits in memory, cognition and eye/hand coordination... possibly, a permanent catheter. Just the thought of this stockpile of terrors, similar to, metaphorically, unrelenting

devastations tumbling one after another from the sky on 9/11 – could certainly make a young spouse consider running. Although I silently judged your husband for announcing his decision *not* to abandon you, my heart saw his fear and how he chose to face it head-on, out-loud.

Ten years earlier, after you and I endured the unspeakable tragedy of losing your father and younger brother, we didn't believe anything so shattering could ever happen to us again. *We've paid our dues, haven't we?* I thought, naively. This magical “exemption” made me confident I could face my worst fear without dramatic consequences. A false sense of security enabled me to take flying lessons. It lent me courage, up to a point.

Fears are relative, of course. Before all this happened the most gripping fears I'd had were “double-diamond blacks” – advanced ski runs. You were a hotshot skier, as was everyone in our family, except me. They took off first, the men, always ahead. You lagged behind with poor slow Mom, leading us down terrifying but breathtakingly beautiful paths in the Rocky Mountains. You took me off course into snow-laden trees, playing hide and seek, waiting for me to show up in your wake. We flew like the wind. I'd *never* have done it without you.

I was 49 when I started flying lessons, not the optimal age for an aviation student, especially one as nervous as I. Randy, my mentor, and the trusty Cessna 172 trainer made me feel safer. I appreciated the air traffic controllers who were infinitely patient. It became evident to all, quickly, that I lacked mechanical abilities, was not an innate pilot, and possessed not even aeronautical intuition. For example, I'd received a *negative* score in an aptitude test for ‘spatial relationships’. I would scream a little when Randy first did anything that scared me, like taking off sideways, pointing the plane into a dive, or landing elevator-style. Not a deafening scream,

just the sharp, stifled one... you remember. (It drove your father insane when he was driving the car.) When I began to execute take-offs, 360-degree spirals and stalls, those yelps of fear morphed into yips of astonishment – that I could take on the world again, like hurtling down the Rockies on skis.

But still, I couldn't solo.

*Next week.*

You'd been diagnosed with M.S. a year before this ruinous attack. That's when I first contemplated learning to fly. Becoming an airplane jockey seemed bold and brave when I needed a dauntless move to push me over the edge of fear. Fears. I'd become deathly fearful for you, for your health, so now there were *two* secrets to hide. I'd spilled all to the night nurse, your savior and my mother confessor.

When not in an airplane I was studying for the ground school test or reading aviation books and magazines. I counted on family to fill more of your needs. I thought about quitting, but I'd invested buckets of blood/sweat/tears/money and hours. If I didn't keep up the momentum, now, I knew I would never solo. But how does one concentrate on something as intense (and unnecessary) as flying, in the midst of chaos and tragedy? Every week I'd hoped would be the one to solo, yet it passed and I was still unable. If Randy was weary of accommodating this heavy payload of inertia in his breezy airplane, he didn't show it. His welcome delight in each success kept me going.

*Why am I flying when my daughter needs constant comfort?*

I may have had a subconscious need to complete my faceoff with flying, the lesser evil fear, before confronting the bigger one. I couldn't stop any more than you could halt the ravaging onslaught of your disease. The hardest thing I'd ever done, could never forget, was burying a husband and child. It opened my aperture to the potential power and unpredictability of suffering. Hence, fear of more. I needed to slay this dragon.

When you make up your mind to confront your worst fear, you can't do it halfway. You commit; you take the plunge, like poling over a double-diamond black; you go for broke. You have to *embrace* it – that's what I believed.

*Cessna 3-6-2, requesting clearance for landing.*

After you went home from the hospital with a wheelchair – dementia calmed, sight and hearing restored – I washed and combed your long wild hair. You sat on your bed, sobbing. I backed up to you.

*Hop on, girl...we'll fly!*

You grabbed around my neck and glommed onto me. The last time we'd done this, twenty years before, you were lighter. I crouched down, then popped up with surprising strength, carrying you around the room, crowing my best caw, thrusting out my arms and flapping them.

*Woo-hoo! You're a condor, Mom.*

You would certainly have been appalled to know I'd been flying for real, in an airplane. Though I longed to tell you, this revelation may have struck like an arrow opening up old griefs or poisoned with new fears. When the specter of accidental death descended on our family, it



left us staggering. It had taken years to recover, both of us working together, to find joy and hope for the future. We were as intimate as a mother and daughter could be, chatting on the phone daily or visiting weekly, sharing clothes, creating projects, and planning parties to celebrate every good thing, big or small, that came our way. Sometimes it seemed as if we were the same person with two different lives.

*My feet are numb. I can't feel anything.*

“Onward, fearless one,” I said, trying out tough love. “Pretend you’re skiing.” You’d tried walking, over and over, only to flop down in floods of tears. Then you managed three slides. The next day, baby steps. And again. One day you moved forward alone, awkwardly with a cane, on feet that couldn’t feel an arrow.

*Look at you! You're walking!*

Inspired, I called Randy to announce I would solo – how could I not? I drove to the airport, primed, finally ready, but jittery and sweaty. Minutes before I was to command the Cessna alone, he called it off. “You’re not ready. Psychologically.” *That* was tough to hear.

“You’ve got this,” he said. “Dammit, I know you do. Pretend I’m not in the plane. Don’t talk to me. Don’t even look at me, okay?”

Together we went up, one thousand feet, into the flight pattern around the control tower. I communicated with the ATC and executed every maneuver perfectly – three touch-n-goes. I

didn't speak to Randy; I don't believe he moved a muscle. After my stellar final approach and ultra-smooth landing he said, grinning: "Come back tomorrow."

The following day I soloed, performing in the exact same manner. No errors, not one single hitch or glitch. I earned my 'learner's permit' to fly alone, the next best thing to a pilot's license. I went home shouting my secret to anyone who'd listen. Except you. There was no way I could divulge what I'd been doing. You were overwhelmed with your altered life, coping with its coming undone as your body went haywire. But when I was with you, I imagined it was *my* brain's myelin sheath being destroyed, so closely connected we were, so tangible was your anguish.

A week or so later, mid-morning, I traveled to the designated practice area, still in disbelief that I was up there by myself. I was (now confidently) practicing stalls – i.e., elevate the nose, lower the wings, cause the plane to quit flying – falling toward ground to 'recover' using every one of my hard-earned skills. A familiar ATC voice came on the radio: "Cessna 362, return to the airport ASAP." I couldn't ask *why* but did as instructed, worrying. *I must have done something terribly wrong... but what?* It became more mysterious as I tuned to a flurry of crosstalk. All aircraft were ordered to return. After landing we heard stunning news: airspace over the entire country had been closed. It was 9/11/2001.

The following days were filled with renewed grief as we re-lived our own family's loss. In learning about thousands of families' lives devastated by terrorist attacks, we knew all too well the agony of sudden death.

Afterward, having been glued to the TV during the country's first week of mourning and unity, I needed to fly again, to join other pilots in solidarity. Terrorist fears did not hold them hostage. I considered the countless brave souls in hostage airliners and in the twin towers and on the ground. My fear of flying now seemed trivial. My fear of your no-cure illness was beginning its long journey toward acceptance of life transformed, of newfound gratitude that you were alive. I'd heard story upon story of staggering loss and courageous action during 9/11. They emboldened me to live better, stronger, and not waste time or opportunity. Time was more than precious.

Soon I earned my F.A.A. pilot's license, a monumental achievement for such a self-proclaimed no-talent. When I braved to reveal my secret, I was astonished at how thrilled and *unfearful* you were. I asked, pointing up, if you'd like to go for a ride. When you said "YES!" my wall of tears sprung a leak.

After practicing another three months, I became an "excellent pilot" according to Randy, first official passenger. I'd mastered the radio communications in high-traffic airspace, the complexities of high-density altitude flying with frequent wind shears and bumpy skies near mountains, and even the mystery of airplane mechanics. I asked my brother, sister and mother if they'd fly with me and each said *No, thank you*. But who could blame them?

*Yes! I'll go up with you! When?*

You and I walked to the Cessna. Past where your dad and brother last took off (though you didn't know that). I prepped the plane, lowered you in, buckled your harness, and adjusted your headphones.

“Hey girl, can you hear me?”

“Roger.” (Pilot talk for *A-okay*.) Your smile eclipsed sunrays glinting off the wings.

“Roger that!”

“Did Dad know Roger, too?”

You *remembered*... you resurrected an old family joke. Your father had sprinkled his ordinary talk with words like “Roger” or “Over and out”. We'd tease him about his ‘invisible friend’: Did Roger go out? Is it over between you and Roger?

I taxied to the run-up line, got clearance from ATC for take-off, rumbled down the runway, and tipped up. You let out a yip of glee. I let out a deep breath. We climbed and soared through wisps of glistening white as we watched the brown ground disappear. I leveled out on top of a cloud. Blue yonder everywhere.

*Woo-hoo! We're angels!*

We were fearless, again, you and I. Here, no thoughts of death, disease, or disaster – it was our moment. We occupied this moment. We flew like the wind.

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