

No Ejection Attempt



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*Accept the place divine providence has found for you, the society
of your contemporaries, the connection of events.*

—from “Self Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841

Although I had left my previous job in aerospace physiology for computer programming, the flight line was still more my home than any office. Everything I needed for cleanup detail was folded neatly in my backpack. It contained one set of fatigues with four stripes on each arm, comfortable boots, my wallet, and a room key.

The staging area was standing room only. Unlike the other side of the runway, the only spectators here were by invitation. I had met the Captain of the Italian team, Mario Naldini, while tending bar at the Officers’ Club in the evenings. He introduced me to Ivo Nutarelli and some of the other team members of Frece Tricolori.

Frece Tricolori was going up. They rolled onto the flight line in precise formation. Wingtip to wingtip, they roared by and swept up into the air, banking, rolling, and climbing upward until stalling and plummeting back toward the earth. Combat tactics without the enemy. Near the end of the show, they began their signature maneuver, “Piercing the Heart.” They came in from both

sides, narrowly missing each other, making the bottom of the heart. Ivo, the soloist, would pass through the shape and toward the waiting crowd. Ivo misjudged his plane's speed and altitude, causing him to strike one of the passing aircraft.

Ivo's plane caught fire as it cut through the tail of the other jet; his damaged plane disappeared across the runway. A black ball of smoke replaced it. "No ejection attempt, dead."

I would repeat that phrase two more times in the next seven seconds. All the emotions inside me were pushed away and shoved down into some dark hole. They were not important.

Two more planes came crashing down nearby me and burst into flames. Their explosions were silent concussions followed by a blast of hot air. No one survives fireballs like those. The invited guests were immobile, staring at what used to be a pair of airplanes no more than thirty seconds ago. Everyone I knew on this side of the runway was either dead or flying away.

There had to be people injured on the other side of the flight line. My friends were over there. They would have been up front. I could not stay where I was and do nothing, but I knew better than to walk across an active runway.

"I have to get across the runway. I can help. I have medical training."

The pilot driving the VW truck nodded and said, "Hop in." He remembered me. I had taught part of his refresher class at Edwards AFB.

I stowed my belongings in the medic tent as I arrived at the crash site. I had already passed by remains tangled in debris; the

dead could wait. They wouldn't mind. Waiting helicopters buffeted the triage area while other victims were lifted away. The critically injured were already gone. Practiced hands grabbed the stretchers, working together smoothly. Again and again we lifted the plentiful green stretchers. Inside one helicopter, a civilian covered in someone else's blood squatted next to a litter. His medical school training was already useful. It was the last time I would see him, but it was good to know that one friend had survived.

The last patient's transport signaled the end of duty. I could search for my own: the missing, my backpack, a safe ending. My outward identity was another casualty; it had disappeared along with my backpack. The base policeman shrugged when I asked about it, saying that it was probably in the morgue and would be there for days.

It looked as if I was trapped on Ramstein for the night. With no money and no belongings I started walking. I knew where one friend lived. If I could make it there, and if he was still alive, I could finally sit down. Placing one foot in front of the other, my mind buried in a black cloud, I made for the other side of the base as the sun set.

In the morning I had help breaking into my barracks room.

Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense.

—from a speech at Harrow School by Winston Churchill, 1941

I tucked my head down so fast that I nearly busted my nose on the steering wheel. Letting out a string of curses in English and German, I managed to make the turn at the end of the runway without crashing. Cursing myself, the military, the pilot, and the plane he flew in on as my schoolbooks tumbled to the floorboards, I dug in the backpack for a pack of cigarettes. Growling about the books and barely paying attention to the road, I lit a cigarette and sat up straight in the driver's seat after completing the turn that led away from the runway.

Somehow, even when they were visibly coming down the runway, the jets still managed to make me jump and that pissed me off. Maybe some people were afraid to fly and jumped like rabbits at every sound, but that was not me. Another jet took off behind me; the F-111's were probably doing bombing runs out at the range that day. It was time to get away from the flight line; there would be more planes taking off soon. I hated being on base. After getting out a few years prior, there should have been no reason to have to be on a base anymore. Every day after school, it was the same. I stayed as late at school as I could and then drove the long, empty road between the university and the base. Since eastern New Mexico was flat and treeless, you could see 100 miles of sky in any direction. I would watch the sky the entire ride to the base, hoping to not be surprised by a roar overhead, yet always cowering when one flew above me.

By the time I arrived at my spouse's unit, the ride in had reminded me of all the things that made me angry. The list changed daily, but there was always plenty since what I was angry

about was my own fear of something I had once loved. Picking up my husband and heading off the base toward home, we used the front gate. Unlike the back gate, it was far from the flight line and always quiet. Every night I thought about changing my route home and dropped the idea quickly. That would be giving into the fear and giving up on one of my greatest joys. Whenever thoughts would lead me in that direction, the memory of flying a jet and the freedom I had felt would rumble its way up from the depths, convincing me that I did not want to give that up.

I stayed angry after leaving the base. There was much to be angry about. Life was unfair. Everything that made it worthwhile kept disappearing. I had lost my career hopes, my marriage was awful, my cat had died a slow, awful death in front of my eyes, and recently I had almost lost my best friend in an accident. It had been a week at that point and she was in a coma. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) was the diagnosis. I tried not to think about it as I checked her house, watered her plants, and picked up her mail. She was in intensive care a couple of hours' drive away. Beside her problems, mine were nothing.

Heading home in the late dusk I faced another night. I wanted to sleep without the nightmares, to not to have the screams to choke down. Not wanting to bother my spouse in the middle of the night because I knew he would not understand and would blow it off as just another dream, I said nothing. Maybe God would finally answer my prayers and take the visions away. I recited the Lord's Prayer four times with three Hail Marys for good measure, saying prayers for everyone that came to mind until the names ran out.

The night was silent; the base approach pattern did not go over our house. Maybe that night I would be able to sleep.

In the depth of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.

—from *Return to Tipasa* by Albert Camus, 1952

The bus driver said my daughter never got on the bus home from middle school. I gathered my stuff and finished my phone calls. Questioning myself again if I was making too much of a fuss over something that might be nothing, I shook my head to clear it; that did not matter.

“It’s always the first few hours that matter if someone goes missing, Mom. I’m not over reacting. The worst thing to do is sit around and wait just to find out you shouldn’t have. I’m going to go look for her. If it’s nothing, well, then I’ll be embarrassed and survive. If it is something, then maybe I’ll be doing the right thing.” I was angry.

Her sister, usually the last one home, was waiting for me on the porch.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Where are we going, Mom?”

“We have to find your sister. I’m hoping she’s at the school.”

I felt the flashback waiting as we got in the car. I held it off; the old training that was my weakness was also my strength. I had already walked through hell and survived more than I imagined possible. I told myself I could tackle whatever I met. I shoved

doubt and fear away. I had called the mental health office already. I hoped she was there. They asked me to call them when I knew something after they asked if I was okay. The police station was on the way. I pulled in and out of the station parking lot. The school was a little farther up the road. I pulled into the school parking lot and saw what I knew I should have expected; a crowd of people watched the district track meet. My daughter's grades hadn't been good enough for her to attend the event.

She was not in sight. Telling my youngest to stay in the car, I headed toward the stadium at the other end of the parking lot. The flashback tapped my shoulder again when I passed a Guardsman. His BDUs were in that odd pixelated pattern that the military started using after I was discharged. I made note of the emotions and the situation and continued walking. Settling in to my search, I began to look carefully through the packed football field, noting similarities to my past trauma. Chaos, unfamiliar faces, tents, an ambulance, people yelling, tugged at the memories. Dialectical Behavior Training (DBT) was right: Recognizing and acknowledging reactions gave them less power, but it didn't work as fast as making them unimportant.

Just past the 50-yard line, she saw me before I saw her. Her excuses piled up as we headed back to the car and were met with the stiff responses of adrenaline-fueled anger. I was scared, so I chose to be angry. Less than a mile toward home, I had to pull over because the white noise was burying my thoughts. I put a name to it: disassociating. Flashbacks and intrusive memories were old

enemies that I knew better than my friends. My children were in the car. Getting home was not as important as they were.

Leaving my children in the car, I stepped out and took a few deep breaths. The wind blew through the parking lot, cooling the tears on my cheeks.

“Mom? Mom? Are you okay?”

I held on tightly to the two most precious people in my world and cried until I could think. Their existence was what kept me alive when I couldn't find any other reason. They were my anchor, at least until they reached 18 and no longer needed me for survival. What happened to me after that was unimportant. I could work on that later. It was September of 2013. My counselor saw me the next morning. After hearing what happened, he acknowledged that I fit the criteria for PTSD.

Neither hope nor despair have power on their own; they can only provide the fuel that you will use to prevail or be defeated.

—from “Bridges” by Charles deLint, 1992

The final alarm rang. I looked up at the ceiling of my small room in my mother's house. I did not think about whether I had any nightmares anymore. That part had faded into the past. Tired from staying up too late, I made my way around the pets by the light of the lamp that was always on. Turning on the light in my daughters' shared room, placing my feet carefully for my own safety, I woke them up for school. My happiness to see them went unnoticed. They grumbled and complained about getting up. I

considered blasting reveille and put on my old sergeant's voice instead. It was better when I did not have to be mean mom.

Breakfast went partially uneaten; the lunches were packed in a rush. There was nothing to wear in the pile of clean clothes. They debated about the necessity of coats and sweaters. Hugs and kisses at the door. I never said goodbye without letting them know that I loved them. If I didn't get to see them again, I wanted them to have those words. I won: they left wearing coats and sweaters.

Standing on the lee side of the house, out of the wind, I watched the cigarette smoke twist in the gusts and enjoyed a public concession to my lack of perfection. A robin landed on the lawn. It was down from the mountains due to the early winter storm approaching. The temperature was dropping. I could smell snow on the wind. The weatherman had been right for a change. I hoped that would mean less debate the next day.

Looking at the beautiful houses around me, I reminded myself that even Jesus was homeless. We had a very nice roof over our heads, and some thrift store clothes were better quality than I could find locally, even if I could afford them. I should not complain. It was easier to make it unimportant. If I thought about it too long, I would be in tears. A warm coat would be nice, but I would survive with layers until I found one. I did not think about that very long either. Thrift stores were something my best friend in college taught me about. Her memory of our friendship was one of the casualties of her TBI.

I should be content that she lived, but the pain of that loss is more stubborn than any of the dreams or wishes I sent to the

unimportant file. Recently, I had had to remove the paintings she did while we were still friends from my room. Trying to understand why I had to lose her friendship kept me awake for too many nights.

Hearing jet engines, I looked for the source among the snow clouds. It sounded as if the plane was at a lower altitude than normal for an approach to Reno. It was difficult to tell in snow; sounds acted differently. The noise faded away, and I was relieved not to hear a crash. I told myself to let it go and said a quick prayer for everyone on board. It was silly to keep doing that since most planes never crashed, but I did it anyway. Just in case.

I had already labeled too much of myself as unimportant. I had to reacquaint myself with my gut instincts. It had to be okay for me to worry about that aircraft. If I sacrificed any more, there wouldn't be anything left to keep alive. I wished for an answer. None came. The serenity to accept the things I could not change eluded me at that moment and tears welled up in my eyes. I was so tired of the fight, but I could not let despair win.

My dog whined on the other side of the front door. She was not used to my being outside without her. Heading back inside, I scratched her ears and smiled at her tail dusting the tabletop. I had lost nearly everything that I thought I needed, but I had what I really needed: food, shelter, my children, love, and a friend or two. Life was good, but I was not good at living. I kept telling myself to look at the good. It was not the solution, but it was better than the other options.

Gardening was a good metaphor for me. I had wanted things that would not survive. I had planted hothouse flowers in the middle of the winter storms and watched them die while learning to accept that not everything I wanted to have was possible. I watched goals and dreams succumb to my PTSD. I mourned them as if they were good friends. Each loss caused denial and anger, grief, and finally acceptance. I knew learning to want what I had instead of wanting what I could not have was a way to freedom and peace. To design a good garden, you had to consider where you lived and what would grow in the environment. You could not grow oranges in North Dakota or lilacs in Los Angeles without extraordinary measures.

I nurtured what I could in little ways every day and let the rest lie in God's hands. I searched and found the beauty in the desert and hope in the unceasing changes of life. I did have some victories over the years; they were my trophies. When my days went dark with despair, I held them up to remind myself that it was worth all the pain, and that good days would return. It had been a very long winter, but winter never lasted forever. There was beauty in winter too, if I looked for it. If I waited long enough, spring would return, making winter another memory. Hanging on to that thought kept me going another day.