

LIFELINE

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BY CHRISTOPHER KEITH

Lifeline

Clotho

Balloon: Altitude

Balloon: Solitude

Balloon: Latitude

LIFELINE

CHRISTOPHER KEITH



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Death is a process, not an event

1

For a *world-class* facility that employed Europe's finest surgeons and biologists using breakthrough technology and equipment, it was barely fit for purpose.

The room holding the only patient inside the facility had yellow-painted concrete-block walls and a stained linoleum floor. Five stacks of cheap plastic chairs lined the wall made up of tiny glass squares, pouring artificial light over the forty-six-year-old man in the bed.

Responsible for bringing the patient back from the dead, Dr. Huber looked at his colleagues gathered around him. 'It's time!'

Dr. Huber was young for such an accomplished medical professional, specialising in human biology, biochemistry and neuroscience. Admired and respected by everyone, Huber's deep, raspy voice commanded attention. He rarely slept and had a slight hunch with small shoulders that looked deformed.

He leaned over the patient with his hands behind his back. 'You can hear me, Herr Smolensk?'

The patient's face twitched. Dr. Huber parted his lid and shone a light above his left eye. 'The pupil dilates.'

The medical team of eight was eager to learn if the tricky surgical procedure to remove the right eye and requisite blood vessels, muscles, and optic nerve had proved successful. The surgery, though a triumph, posed risks post-op, with the next few days of recovery critical.

'And brain activity?' asked Dr. Steinhart.

Dr. Huber shook his head. 'Too early to know.'

In his drowsy state, Mr. Smolensk heard many sounds echo around his consciousness: squeaking shoes on linoleum, trolley wheels in motion, the air ducts humming in the ceiling, people talking, but he didn't move or make any sound to indicate a cognitive return.

'Herr Smolensk, you can hear me? My name is Dr. Huber. The year is 1968. You're in the underground facility in Vaduz, Liechtenstein. Do you know why you are here?'

The atmosphere in the room was quiet and tense. Arms folded, nerves frayed, the medical specialists exchanged small talk in hushed voices, waiting for Mr. Smolensk to regain a waking state.

It happened at six minutes past four in the morning. His left eye opened. He experienced sentient darkness for a full two minutes as though he had come into existence from nothing. Gradually, as the dark turned to light and he regained some visual clarity, he saw a fly repeatedly thumping against the tube bulb, which gave off a cold, clinical glow.

Reaching a third minute of consciousness, his memories flashed and sparked as he slowly pieced his life back together. All his muscles felt numb, he noticed with a primitive jolt of fear. For some reason, he couldn't swallow. His tongue tasted of metal. A chemical scent lingered in his nostrils. He could only see out of one eye. An eye that had long seen nothing, the world concealed behind a dome of skin. Through his blurred vision, he saw wires curving out of his body like slimy feeding tentacles.

And who were these strangers in white lab coats grinning down on him like imbeciles?

Where was he? What had happened?

Eight minutes ticked by. He had no colour in his cheeks. His lips were white as if all the blood had been leached out of them. His mouth opened with a gummy pop. He rolled his head to one side and whispered, 'Am I alive?' in a voice that he barely recognised as his own.

'Yah,' said Dr. Steinhart. 'Gratulation, you just make the history!'

Cheers and applause erupted with a loud cacophony. Dr. Steinhart yelled into the corridor, and a dozen more doctors and biologists filed into the room, bringing champagne and glass flutes.

Dr. Huber popped the cork and white foam drizzled over the bed. He raised the green bottle above his head and yelled, 'Gratulation! Ich möchte einen Toast auf Herrn Thomas Smolensk aussprechen!'

The celebrations echoed around the room and along the barren labyrinth of corridors.

A month later, Mr. Smolensk was escorted to a limousine by a chauffeur, who eased him into the back seat.

The chauffeur engaged first gear and drove the limousine out of the car park, away from the facility. 'How does it feel?'

Mr. Smolensk turned to observe a dramatic forest in the undulating landscape unspool in the rear window, captivated by the low valley and majestic alpine peaks, his first taste of freedom. Sunrise planted orange shades on the Alps, and the harsh light brought a sharp pain to his left eye.

Equally uncomfortable was the patch over his right eye, now a permanent fixture on his face.

'How does what feel?'

'You are gone for a very long time. Now you go home to a new life.'

'Home? I don't know what that is anymore. As you say, it's been a very long time.'

Liechtenstein, situated on the east side of the Rhine River, was smaller than London, and he watched the scenery glide by, making connections, threading his past life into his present, rummaging through old memories.

'How's my son?'

The chauffeur swallowed nervously. 'He's alive and waits a long time for your return.'

'Thank you.' Smolensk looked out the window. 'Now stop talking!'

The chauffeur nodded and raised the window separating the front and rear compartments. He didn't say another word until they reached the airport, where Smolensk boarded a private jet for London.

By midday, he was in another limousine heading west along the familiar country road, passing villages, forests, and fields patterning the land in irregular quadrilaterals.

The solid stone boundary walls of Windermere House, an eighteenth-century mansion deep in the English countryside, popped up on the left side of the road, a forbidding fortress. The mansion, with ninety-five rooms, was surrounded by three hundred and fifty acres of fields and forest. The chauffeur drove through the wrought-iron gate and followed the winding driveway that dipped and curved, terminating outside the mansion in a gravel circle with a large water fountain in the middle. A young butler in a black tailcoat and bow tie opened the door.

Mr. Smolensk climbed out and took in the essence of his home with deep breaths. He had to steady himself against the limousine. His mind was spinning. Monocular vision would take some getting used to. He had lost depth in his sight and the ability to triangulate on an object, near or far, and his peripheral vision had been reduced by twenty per cent. He just needed time to adjust to this new reality. Time was the great healer and would make him whole again.

For now, he was just grateful to be alive.

When the dizziness passed, he studied the mansion while the butler retrieved his luggage.

The entire entrance had been redesigned in gothic revival architecture with a symmetrical façade and a steeply pitched red slate roof after a fire had gutted the original structure, he had learnt on the flight home.

He had also learnt his son was on his deathbed.

‘This way, Sir,’ said the butler, leading him along the pine-panelled hallway with a cold, marble floor. They passed the drawing-room and study and the many landscape and portrait paintings adorning the walls. He remembered painting each one, and to see them still intact gave him nostalgic pleasure.

Floorboards creaked as they climbed the spiral staircase and walked towards the master bedroom, big and square.

The butler stopped him at the door. ‘I should warn you, he can no longer speak.’

An old man was lying in bed, his head sunken into the pillow, his pale face unfamiliar with the passage of time. The veins in his arms were a vivid purple, and bulging arteries webbed the back of his hands. The stench of a sickbed lain in around the clock accompanied the depressing scene.

The old man came around; a sparkle of delight lit up in his grey eyes.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ said Mr. Smolensk, smiling down on the old man. ‘It’s your father!’

2

Bryan Morgan's mother had died the day before Christmas in 1972, inside the hospital she had worked at as a surgeon. Fourteen at the time, he had listened to his father explain that she was never coming home. After the funeral, *he* disappeared, too, abandoning Bryan, his only child, to concentrate on his RAF career.

Now thirty-five, Bryan could still feel the young, hurt version of himself not so deep inside. He blinked back tears, but a few escaped and ran down his cheeks as he fitted his motorcycle helmet, flicking up the visor.

'I have to go, Mum.'

He stood up from the bench and squatted beside her cheap headstone. Many of the words had faded over time, including her name, but he knew the inscription by heart. He had come to visit her grave for two decades, no more able to conquer his grief than prevent the sun from rising each morning. He never

missed her birthday or the anniversary of her death. He visited every month, rain or shine. To show his respect, he always wore black. He kept her photo tucked away in his wallet. He hardly ever looked at it. He couldn't. But he wanted to always have it on him as a reminder of the blessing he once had.

Taking a cloth from his backpack, he wiped the dust off the headstone and brushed away the dead leaves with his hand.

The damp, earthy smell of early autumn hung in the air. The cemetery lawns and flowerbeds had received minimal landscaping during the summer. Ranks of headstones stood decrepit, and a maze of larger tombstones and mausoleums were like a shantytown. It used to be a thriving memorial park. These days, it seldom attracted visitors, save for the tramps seeking asylum on the park benches or the occasional relatives paying their respects to people once good to them.

A lorry backfired outside the cemetery gates, startling a flock of pigeons.

Bryan shot up. He slipped his cold hands inside his leather jacket pockets. Caretakers had arrived to lock up the cemetery for the night. It was much later than he thought, darker than he realised.

Two agents in black suits had been standing outside the gates, studying Bryan through their binoculars all afternoon.

He hadn't noticed them, absorbed in the memories of his childhood. 'Happy Birthday, Mum. Love you.'

Julia approached the front door with hesitation and rechecked the bolt and chain-lock. Then she pressed her eye against the peephole.

Assured no one was out there, she returned to the lounge and curled up on the sofa. When the phone rang, she reared up and slowly reached for the receiver. 'Hello?'

She heard someone breathing over the mouthpiece.

'Who is this?'

Someone entered the kitchen through the rear door.

She hung up the phone. 'Bryan? Is that you?'

Bryan walked in and hung his keys on the rack, leaving his helmet on the table. He took off his backpack and black leather jacket and chucked them on the stand.

'Hey,' he said.

Julia fixed him with an icy stare. Her face was make-up free, her long, brown hair still wet after her shower.

Something was bothering her, and Bryan had a good idea what it was. He let the silence lengthen, giving her the chance to speak her mind.

'Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you.'

'I was with my mother.'

'All day?'

'It's her birthday.'

'She's dead! She's been dead for twenty years.'

He shot her a sharp look but aborted an angry response and raised his hands in conciliation.

He spotted a bottle of brandy on the kitchen worktop and poured a generous measure into a glass, conscious of his wife's eyes upon him.

'Drinking again?'

He ignored her and knocked back the brandy, exhaling a cloud of warm breath. 'Why is it so cold in here?'

‘We have no heating. Our electricity has been cut because we haven’t paid the last three bills.’ She paused and put her hands on her hips. ‘Don’t worry, it gets worse. The bank has just applied to the courts for a repossession order on our house as we’re now several months behind with the mortgage. I got a phone call this morning.’

Their financial crisis was entirely his fault, beginning with a series of bad investments and ending with his unemployment. He had no issues accepting full responsibility. ‘I can fix this. I will fix this. I promise.’

‘We can expect an eviction notice any day now.’

He raised a weak smile. ‘Well, we both want to leave!’

‘Don’t joke! If we get evicted, we’ll have nowhere to go, and a black mark against our name will only make renting or buying elsewhere difficult. Just find a job. It’s been over three months. I can’t support two of us on my salary.’

‘We talked about this.’

‘One of your patients committed suicide in your office. I get it. It was traumatic. But you can’t hide your face forever.’

‘It’s not that simple, and you know it.’

Julia put her hand on his shoulder. ‘Listen, I understand how you feel. And what happened with the police and media attention was stressful and unfair. But you can’t let it ruin your life. Look what it’s doing to us. We can’t go on like this. I’m going out of my mind.’

‘We need to get out of this neighbourhood. But you know it’s not a good time to sell with the current state of the market.’

‘I’m willing to cut our losses, to be honest. That’s how desperate I am to leave.’

‘No, we won’t do that.’

‘We might not have a choice. I can’t take much more of this, Bryan. It’s been six months since the break-in here, and I’m still a nervous wreck. I shouldn’t have to feel this way in my own house. Either you sort yourself out or’

‘Or what?’

She pushed past him, sprinted up the stairs, and slammed the bedroom door.

Massaging his temples, his gaze returned to the bottle of brandy.

Bryan woke with a hacking cough, deep, phlegmy, finding himself ensconced on the sofa the following morning. Sunlight cut through the curtains, and there was activity out in the street.

Sitting up, he rubbed his blonde hair into a mess, loosening his grip on the empty brandy bottle he had been cradling.

At the kitchen sink, he popped an aspirin and downed two glasses of water, then opened the front door to collect the milk from his doorstep, inhaling the fresh morning air to appease his headache. He saw a skinhead teen dressed in a black-and-green tracksuit kicking at a patch of grass that had overtaken a kerb. A car of youths playing loud jungle music pulled up to collect him. If it wasn’t boy-racers and teenage gangs, it was junkies scuttling along the pavement or young kids role-playing drug dealers. Revved engines and burnouts late at night. Fresh vandalism each morning. An abandoned housing project of half-built homes stood opposite their house. Several gardens were overrun with brambles and leftover building materials. Windowpanes were smashed in or barricaded with plywood sheets full of gaping holes as if they had been blasted with a

shotgun. Squatters lived in half of them. He used to love the neighbourhood, once an exclusive London suburb where they had bought their dream house. Now it had become an ever-expanding community of gangs, drug-users and troublemakers, colonising the street one house at a time. He was convinced one of those thugs had broken into his home. At times, he felt as if he was being watched or followed. Even then, standing on the doorstep, holding the milk.

He closed the door, put the milk away and went upstairs. He crept into the bedroom, careful not to wake up his wife cocooned in the covers, and changed into his golfing gear.

He applied gel to his dishevelled hair at the bathroom sink, so long now it hid his ears. He brushed his teeth and stroked his stubble, in no mood to shave.

Leaving the bathroom, he stopped at the door and stared at Julia's beautiful face. He wanted to fix things in his marriage. She deserved better than this. She was right, she talked sense. He had to get himself back into the workforce. He missed counselling patients through their turmoil. It was in his blood. He was the son, the grandson, and great-grandson of medical professionals in one field or another.

After what had happened following the incident in his office, he carried a burden. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Michelle Locke, the patient who'd unceremoniously killed herself when—

The phone rang.

Bryan ignored it, picked up his helmet, and left the house.

The answering machine kicked in and invited the caller to leave a message.

‘Bryan, it’s your father. I know you don’t want to talk to me after all these years. I understand that. But it’s important you do. It’s about your mother.’

3

The new golf complex featured exclusively designed greens, set to stage two major opens on the European Tour. It had just opened and was regarded as one of the finest in Europe, complemented by first-class clubhouse facilities.

With his rented golf bag on his shoulder, all paid for by Flymo, who enjoyed flaunting his wealth, Bryan strolled to the West course, similar in standard to the East course but slightly longer.

Bryan found his friend at the first hole. He had known Flymo since the Falklands War when their paths had crossed during a ferocious battle on a mountain in freezing conditions. An almost unbroken line of machine gunfire had ripped through the air. Two bullets had struck Flymo's thigh, and Bryan had fought to restrain him to administer painkilling medication, patch up the wound, and assist him back to base for treatment. His fieldwork had saved Flymo's life.

What you saw with Flymo was what you got. And what you got was an overconfident man who had learnt that his size and presence gave him a free pass in life. As a teenager, he had caused his parents all sorts of headaches. He regularly broke curfew, went to adult parties he was forbidden to attend, lost his virginity at thirteen, and was often locked up overnight for drunken-related behaviour. Bryan, on the other hand, never found himself in trouble and had his first sexual encounter at eighteen with Julia, now his wife. He and Flymo were chalk and cheese.

Flymo was fit for his years, prominent across the shoulders with a large, rounded chest – the build of a man who worked out regularly but who also loved his food. He woke early each day to run six miles to the park and back. He had spent almost two decades in the army and had just returned from the Gulf War with a promotion to Staff Sergeant. To celebrate, he bought himself a Dodge Viper, which satisfied his love of loud, brash sports cars and speed.

Flymo was wearing bright, yellow-checked trousers and a black Ralph Lauren polo shirt. He always dressed smartly, no matter the occasion, and took great pride in how he looked. Unlike Bryan, only dressing up when the occasion called for it.

‘Saw you a mile off in those trousers.’

Flymo spun on his heel. ‘About time. I thought you had fallen off the planet.’

‘I woke up late.’

He shook his head. ‘Mate, you look like shite. Don’t tell me, on the brandy again?’

‘Maybe.’

‘When are you going to sort yourself out, mate? You can’t go on like this.’

Bryan raised his eyebrows. ‘Let’s just play. Nice car, by the way.’

‘Isn’t it? An absolute gash magnet.’

‘Flashy, tasteless, and totally pretentious. I noticed that you parked it in a disabled spot.’

‘Do you see any cripples around?’

‘Cripples?’

‘What?’

‘A bit disrespectful. How many soldiers do we know who wound up in a wheelchair?’

‘Just play your shot, Mr. fucking noble.’

Bryan took up his striking pose, eyed the green, and gave the ball a whack.

Flymo stuck out his bottom lip. ‘Not bad. For you. Step aside and let me show you how the pros do it.’

‘This I’ve got to see.’

Clenching the driver with his large, powerful hands, he stepped up, assessed the wind, and judged the angles.

He glanced back at Bryan and grinned. ‘Watch and learn, mate.’

‘Let me write you out a prescription for your delusion.’

Flymo struck the ball, and it flew towards the first hole. Bouncing twice, it missed the bunker and stopped shy of the green.

Bryan laughed. ‘Unlucky.’

‘Are we watching the same game?’

‘You didn’t kiss the ball for good luck before you hit it.’

‘Is this another of your bullshit superstitions?’

‘Superstitious beliefs promote a positive mental attitude. That’s a fact.’

‘I didn’t see you kiss *your* ball.’

‘You didn’t *see* it.’

‘What toss. I told you about that guy I once served with, right? The bloke who wouldn’t fly to Europe on Friday the thirteenth?’

‘About a hundred times. He died on Thursday the twelfth in an accident on the way to the airport. That means nothing.’

‘Superstitions are like ghosts and monsters. They don’t exist. We humans just like to make shit up. Superstitions are just your mechanism to explain bad shit. Like this losing streak. When was the last time you beat me?’

‘I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.’

‘Oh, a lot on your mind! Huh. Not because of magpies or crows or ... or the fucking owl you saw at sunset? Not the ladder you walked under the other day?’

‘I never walk under ladders.’

‘You get my point, Bryan. I’m simply a better golfer than you.’

‘Beginner’s luck.’

Flymo laughed. ‘Beginner’s luck? Okay, whatever helps you sleep at night.’

He looked up at the dark clouds rolling nearer, noticed the wind agitating the trees, knocking off leaves. Most golfers had already retired to the clubhouse to avoid the incoming storm.

‘Let’s try and finish the first hole before it pisses down. Unless you’ve got some ridiculous reason not to continue?’

Bryan hadn't heard. He wasn't listening. He was looking at the clubhouse conservatory where the members were heading in droves.

Flymo watched his friend with increasing concern and snapped his fingers. 'What the hell's got into you, mate?'

Bryan swung his head back to Flymo. 'Nothing.'

'Something's up, what is it?'

'I think someone's following me. It feels like I'm always being watched. Even now.'

Flymo looked from side to side. 'By who?'

'The police? I don't know. Ever since that suicide at my work, I've been on edge. Everywhere I go, I get this sense I'm being followed.'

'The police have no reason to suspect you for anything.'

'Of course not. I didn't kill her.'

'You're just paranoid. No one's following you. You're not that interesting.'

Bryan felt raindrops on the back of his hand. He looked up at the clouds. 'I think we're done here.'

If only because he liked to shun rules, Flymo had left the green to urinate in the trees. He wandered back, nonchalantly zipping up his fly. 'Looks like you're off the hook.'

Bryan frowned. 'I'm not in the mood, anyway. Why don't we get an early lunch? This time I'm paying.'

Retreating to the clubhouse, warmed by a large fire and filled with the residual aromas of hot meat and thick gravy, they claimed a table by the window.

'Service?' Flymo clicked his fingers, summoning a waiter. 'Roast of the day, what is it?'

‘Chicken,’ said the waiter, looking displeased.

‘Two of those.’

Bryan shielded his eyes and looked into the distance.

Flymo launched into one of his op-eds. ‘This country has lost its sense of tradition. Roast lunch used to be the most anticipated meal of the week. Now you see families feeding their kids cheap microwave dinners and fast food I wouldn’t even give a pig. No wonder they have high cholesterol. They wouldn’t last ten seconds on the battlefield.’

Bryan was thinking about Julia, what she had said to him yesterday. He had to change his attitude, stop revisiting the past, and look to the future. After all, it was advice he had often bestowed on his patients.

‘What’s really on your mind?’

‘Julia and I had another fight. She more or less threatened to leave me.’

‘Why?’

He filled his lungs and emptied them with a loud sigh. ‘I need to find a job.’

He had taken a huge risk resigning on the back of a major economic downturn, joining roughly two million others out of work. ‘I don’t think I can face working in the public eye again. My face was all over the news until I was acquitted of any involvement and her death was confirmed as suicide.’

Different theories had been espoused in the local papers, mostly cruel and defamatory. Every time he had opened his front door, a camera was thrust in his face. His phone had trilled every five minutes for the best part of a week. That a reporter had broken into his house to snoop around in the

hope of finding a story had crossed his mind since nothing had been stolen.

‘You’ve had long enough to get over it.’

‘Get over it? It’s not the flu. Michelle was my patient. My responsibility.’

‘She’s the one who jumped out of your office window?’

‘I had only been gone a few minutes. When I came back, I found the window wide open, and when I looked out into the car park, there she was, all ...’

‘Mate, it wasn’t your fault. There’s nothing you could’ve done to save her.’

‘I left the army to get away from death. Because of what happened, I was forced to quit my job, and now it’s ruining my marriage. I dread to think what’s next.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘All bad things come in threes!’

Riding home, Bryan passed a black Land Rover with darkly tinted windows parked on the hard shoulder, its hazard lights blazing. He steered his motorcycle in front, stopped, and kicked down the stand. He pulled off his helmet, walked over, saw the bonnet fastened upright and a short, balding businessman arched over the engine.

‘Do you need some help there?’

The man removed his hand from the engine. The tips of his fingers were smudged with oil. He took a rag from a side groove and wiped them. ‘All fixed,’ he said. ‘Thanks, anyway, Dr. Morgan.’

Bryan froze. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘Let’s talk inside the car.’

Bryan paused, and his eyebrows went up. ‘Who are you? Police?’

The man walked to the driver’s side. ‘Let’s talk inside. I will explain.’

‘How did you know I was going to stop?’

‘I know a lot about you. I have a detailed profile. Your likes, dislikes, your superstitious nature, which Flymo likes to mock. I know about your childhood, teenage years, and life before and after your marriage to Julia. I know your mother died and why you lost contact with your father. And I knew you would stop because that’s what you do. You help people. That’s why you became a medic in the Royal Army Medical Corps and have spent the last seven years as a counselling psychologist. Please, if you would join me in the car, we have a lot to talk about.’