

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 had employed Europe's finest surgeons and biologists using breakthrough technology and equipment, it was barely fit for purpose.

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

Responsible for bringing the patient back from the dead, Dr. Huber looked at his colleagues gathered around the bed. '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. His 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?’

He detected movement in the patient’s face. He parted the 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 involving removing the right eye and requisite blood vessels, muscles and optic nerve had been 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 numerous sounds echo around his consciousness: squeaking shoes on linoleum, trolley wheels in motion, air ducts humming in the ceiling. While he could hear the doctor speaking, he didn’t move or make a sound to indicate a cognitive return.

‘Herr Smolensk, you can hear me? My name is Dr. Huber. The year is 1968. You’re in an 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 his 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, he became aware of a fly repeatedly thumping against the tube bulb, which gave off a cold, clinical glow.

Reaching the third minute of consciousness, his memories flashed and sparked as he slowly and deliberately pieced his life back together. All the muscles in his body felt numb, he noticed with a primitive jolt of fear. For some reason, he couldn't swallow. His tongue tasted of metal. There was a lingering chemical scent 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 blurred vision, he saw wires curving out of him like feeding tentacles.

The room, this place, confused him. And who were these strangers in white coats grinning 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, whispered, 'Am I alive?' in a voice he barely recognised as his own.

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

Cheers accompanied applause in 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 with them.

Dr. Huber popped the cork and white foam drizzled over the bed. He raised the bottle high above him 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 into his present, rummaging through his 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.

Midday arrived and 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 land. The chauffeur drove through the iron gate, followed the winding driveway that dipped and curved, terminating at a gravel circle outside the mansion 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 merely 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 quiet confidence.

Nostalgia, even.

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 descended over his cheeks. He lifted the visor on his motorcycle helmet.

'Happy Birthday, Mum.'

Down on one knee, he placed a bouquet of flowers in the pot next to her cheap headstone. Many of the words had rubbed away 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.

Pulling a cloth out of 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 stood 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 benches or the occasional relatives paying their respects to people once good to them.

A lorry backfired outside the wrought-iron gates.

Bryan shot up, slipped his hands inside his jacket pockets. Caretakers had arrived to lock up the cemetery for the night.

It was later than he had thought, darker than he had realised.

Two agents in black suits had been standing outside the gates, studying Bryan through binoculars the whole time.

He hadn't noticed them.

He crouched beside the headstone. 'I have to go. Happy Birthday.'

Julia approached the front door with caution, rechecked the bolt and chain-lock. 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. 'Hello?'

She heard someone breathing over the mouthpiece.

'Who is this?'

Someone came into the kitchen through the rear door.

She hung up the phone. 'Bryan?'

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

'Hey.'

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

'Not 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 saw a bottle of brandy on the kitchen worktop and poured a generous measure into a glass of ice, conscious of his wife's eyes upon him.

'Drinking again?'

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

‘We have no heating.’

‘Why?’

‘Our electricity has been cut. We haven’t paid the last two bills. It gets worse. The bank has applied to the courts for a repossession order on our house because we are behind with the mortgage. I got a call this morning.’

‘Their financial crisis was entirely his fault. 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 grinned. ‘We 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. You can’t let it dominate your life.’

‘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 rotten 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.’

‘No, we can’t do that.’

‘It’s been six months since the break-in, 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.

Rubbing his forehead, his gaze returned to the bottle of brandy.

Bryan woke with a hacking cough, deep and 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 and loosened his grip on the empty bottle he had been cradling.

At the kitchen sink, he downed two glasses of water and popped an aspirin, then opened the front door to collect the milk from his doorstep, inhaling as much fresh 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 rap 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 at night. Fresh vandalism every 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 or barricaded by sheets of plywood with 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. Which of those arseholes 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 curled beneath 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, 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, 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 girl who had 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.'