

Accident on Mulholland Drive

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From my hospital bed I could see one spiky palm tree silhouetted against a flawless blue sky. It was a perfect day for a run on Mulholland Drive, for inhaling the intoxicating scent of eucalyptus, sage, and wild grass and watching the big hawks surf the air currents high above the Hollywood Hills. But I wasn't going to be running anytime soon. Maybe never again.

My right leg was hideously swollen, red, but also yellow where it had been painted with Betadine before the surgery. The deep gashes on my right hip where I'd landed had been stitched shut. My sprained left wrist throbbed mercilessly, still embedded with gravel. It hurt more than my leg—which was fractured in five places—and my dislocated and chipped left shoulder combined.

The last thing I'd seen before the car jumped the curb and hit me were the terrified faces of the driver and his passenger, both young men, eyes intent on the road. The driver's hands were braced on the steering wheel and—the passenger's, the dashboard. Both had been gritting their teeth.

Tears spilled down my face. I'd cried buckets since the doctor outlined his treatment plan for me. I'd be in traction for a month before he immobilized my hips and thighs in a spica cast for six months, both legs encased in plaster, with a metal bar between them for support.

I was 29, used to taking care of myself, recently returned from four years on the mean streets of New York City, watching my back. I'd studied kung fu and karate, and had been running for years, to blow off steam, burn off calories, ward off the blues. I had to keep moving. But three days earlier, an 18-year-old in a borrowed Porsche had stopped me in my tracks.

The rear fender of the car hit my right thigh, then I was airborne and everything went gray. Hurling through the air, I was suspended for the moments it took for a brief carefree chapter of my life to end and a new era to begin. I hit something and plummeted to earth in time to hear more screeching tires and the unmistakable sound of cars colliding.

I lay on my left side next to a chain link fence. Myriad specks of dust sparkled in the afternoon sunlight, then settled leisurely over me, coating my tongue and eyelashes. Groping behind me, I twined the fingers of my right hand through the fence and pulled myself to a sitting position. My left arm and shoulder hung awkwardly at my side, and my arm wouldn't work.

My right leg was bent down, but not at the knee, and the lower part of my leg twisted grotesquely to the right, swelling fast, already puffed to nearly twice its normal size. Clearly, something was broken.

I focused on my good left leg, the calf and thigh tanned and fit, then thought, "I'm going to be just fine." And then, fiercely, "I'm not paying for a penny of this."

A moment later, without warning, I felt as if the top of my head opened up. Through the opening, I "saw" blue sky directly above me. An instant later, I "watched" as

my consciousness expanded in all directions at once the way shapes shoot out from the center when you peer into and then rotate a kaleidoscope. Then came a sudden moment of clarity. I had the sense that I was right where I was supposed to be.

I couldn't know it then, but this would be a turning point for me. I was beginning to see beyond my own small life, to understand that something deeper and broader was at work.

I was hurt, but I was also lucky. The chain link fence had stopped me from flying over a cliff. I could see I'd been flung a long way downhill, and was worried no one would think to look for me. But someone did. A man who was watering his lawn in the housing development nearby heard tires screech after the Porsche hit me and before it hit the other car. He'd looked up in time to see me fly through the air. As he ran to where I lay, I heard him yell to someone nearby "Get a blanket!"

Still clinging to the fence, I twisted around to look at him, and called out, "No! Get the name of the guy in the car!"

I asked him to call my boyfriend, and gave him our phone number. Soon, Greg was crouched at my side. Feeling his hand on my arm, hearing his voice – naturally warm and hopeful – I was finally able to let down. I closed my eyes, relieved, while he brushed the dirt off my face and out of my hair and called me by his pet name for me. "Hang on, Fur. You'll be all right."

Neither of us knew the extent of my injuries. Greg had arrived after the paramedics straightened out my femur with a single swift yank. It was excruciating and I yelled, but the leg had to be straightened before they could immobilize me for the trip to the hospital.

At first, the little hospital in Sherman Oaks didn't want to admit me. My health insurance had ended when I left my job in New York two months before. The two female clerks at the Admitting desk consulted, then suggested I be taken to the Los Angeles County Hospital, downtown.

Greg knew the County Hospital's reputation as the hospital of last resort. "She can pay," he urged.

The clerk across the desk pursed her lips, then glanced at her colleague, who crossed her arms. "We need proof."

Greg pressed on. "She has an American Express card."

Apparently this was sufficient evidence that I was a person of substance, because they admitted me. In truth, I had about \$200 to my name and he didn't have much more, but we couldn't worry about that right then.

Now, three days after the accident, I was tethered to my bed by the traction pin that protruded in two places just below my right knee. It wasn't pretty. Just yesterday, the manager of the hotel where I'd worked since moving to LA had dropped by to see me and blanched, asking, "Is *that* your leg?"

I lay there, wondering for the twentieth time why the three steps I took to the left after the red car jumped the curb and started its slide down the sidewalk—coming for me impossibly fast—hadn't been enough to move me out of harm's way.

What were the odds, I mused, that I'd arrive at that stretch of sidewalk, the only one on Mulholland, at the same time as the Porsche? I rarely saw a car on the road



between Laurel and Coldwater Canyons. I was on a sidewalk – a place that’s supposed to be safe – and I’d been hit anyway.

A kind policeman who’d been at the crash site came to see me at the hospital. His investigation showed the driver had only been going 5 mph over the speed limit when he lost control of the 911 on a tight curve. And there was sand on the road that might have caused the tires to lose traction. The kid hadn’t even been issued a ticket. “It was just one of those things,” the policeman said, “Wrong place, wrong time.”

To me it didn’t matter who was at fault; I just wanted to get better. Still, when the driver’s friend, the passenger in the Porsche, called me at the hospital to say the kid wanted to apologize, I said “Tell him I appreciate his call. But I can’t talk with him right now.”

I just wasn’t ready to tell the driver—“It’s okay.”

Why, I brooded, hadn’t I chosen to read a book on the afternoon of June 28, 1982, instead of taking a run? If I’d stayed home, surely my right leg and the shorts the doctor had cut off of me in the emergency room would still be in one piece.

From my hospital bed, I saw a swallow flit past the window. It was then I remembered the hawk.

About a week before my accident, an enormous brown hawk had swooped down and kept pace with me as I ran along Mulholland Drive. I’d seen trios of hawks circling high above our rental house in Laurel Canyon, so small they were just visible. But this one had appeared six feet to my left as I ran downhill, flying above the drop-off of a steep cliff. I spotted it out of the corner of my eye and glanced over, still running. It turned its head my way, fixed its yellow eyes on mine for a long moment, and then soared away.

I hadn’t thought much about it at the time – didn’t even tell Greg about it – but now I wondered whether the hawk had somehow been a portent of what was to come.

To some Native people, hawks are considered messengers, symbols of a higher perspective—and broader vision. The hawk’s cry is a warning to beware, to pay attention. Was that hawk warning me in some way? If so, I thought, the message had clearly gone over my head.

I’d always felt powerful, indomitable. Martial arts had taught me to push myself hard. For years I’d had dreams with a recurring theme: something bad was about to happen to someone, but I always got there in time to stop it. I’d confronted flashers in Central Park, and remained calm and present when a rapist followed my friend into my West Village apartment. He didn’t assault us.

But it was the Porsche, a danger I couldn’t anticipate, that brought my life to a standstill. I lost some precious things: my ability to move and the sense that I could protect myself. I now knew that anything could happen at any time, no matter how careful I was. What, I wondered, were the ramifications of turning left instead of right, leaving two minutes later, or taking one route home instead of another?

I was now completely dependent on other people. Bedpans were a humiliating new reality. The Demerol helped to dull the feelings of helplessness, but it didn’t last. It was great when first injected, completely eliminating the pain in my leg, wrist, and shoulder and sending me into a state, I imagined, like a baby being rocked contentedly in the womb. But after about 3-1/2 hours, the pain would return and I’d spend the last



half hour in agony. The Demerol was wearing off again. I began to squirm in my hospital bed. My gown had bunched up under the small of my back, and I'd been lying cockeyed. Carefully planting my left foot on the mattress, I arched as much as my traction would let me and quickly yanked the gown down with my right hand, then yelped. It felt like someone had stuck a knife into the middle of my right thigh where the bone used to be. I moaned and fumbled for my call button, hoping the nurse might break down and give me my next shot early.

When Greg called to tell my father about the accident, I was in the ICU and couldn't talk by phone. My father, a doctor, assumed my injuries were very serious. My sister told me that he paced back and forth across the living room carpet, stomping his feet, saying "Damn it! *Damn it!*", making fists of his hands and bringing them down hard, punctuating his distress. Then he canceled his patients for the next few days and booked a flight to LA.

Hearing my father was on his way, I asked the nurse for help with my hair. My left arm was bound to my side and I couldn't wash my hair with one arm. A hospital volunteer shampooed me. I cooperated by hanging my head off the top of the bed. I sighed with relief as she worked the shampoo through my hair, and again as she poured cool water over it. When she was done rinsing, the water was gray with dust and small pebbles.

I woke when I heard my father's voice in the hall. I ran the fingers of my right hand through my hair and bit my lips to put some color in them. I'd lost a lot of blood when my leg broke and was pale beneath my tan. I waited.

"Hi Doll!"

"Daddy!" I smiled, hoping I looked okay.

I think he'd expected to find me in really bad shape, because he looked apprehensive when he stepped through the door.

"You're a sight for sore eyes!" I blurted. I couldn't believe how glad I was to see him.

When I was a little girl, my father, a former Marine, had tried to toughen me up. He'd say, "Don't wear your heart on your shirtsleeve" or "Don't have hurty feelings" when the sensitive nature I struggled to conceal poked through. Still, he couldn't stand the thought that his little girl was suffering.

After my father reassured himself that I was okay, he began thinking up ways to entertain me. When I mentioned that the hospital food was bland, he left, looking for a pay phone, then returned half an hour later with fragrant cartons of Chinese take-out.

"What's this?" I teased, opening the first carton. "Sea cucumbers?"

I shuddered, remembering a memorable meal we'd shared five years earlier when I tagged along on a trip to China he organized for a group of doctors and their wives. Our hosts took us to the famous Peking Duck Restaurant in Beijing. Every dish in the banquet included some part of a duck, accompanied by frequent toasts (for the men) of Maotai, a liquor distilled from fermented sorghum. I'd resolved to try some of every dish to honor my father's admonition not to be an "ugly American," but the ghostly crunchy sea cucumbers in duck broth nearly broke my resolve.

"They were out of sea cucumbers," he said. "So I got hundred-year-old eggs."



I remembered hundred year old eggs. We'd seen a batch "aging" at a commune outside Shanghai, nestled between layers of dirt and straw. "Those things are putrid – even served with ginger."

"Not *my* cup of tea." An understatement from my beef-loving father.

"But I brought something to wash 'em down." he said.

He drew a can of Coca Cola from a damp paper bag, removed the pull tab and handed it to me. Then he flipped the tab off a second can.

After draping a white hospital towel across my chest, he opened the cartons, arranged them on my rolling bed tray, and dragged the guest chair next to the bed. My father wasn't expert with chopsticks, but he managed to transport plenty of good old American chow mein into my mouth, morsel by morsel.

Finally I had some undisturbed time with my father, and it bolstered my spirit. In my brokenness, I was his child at last. He'd been in medical school when I was born, an intern living at the hospital after my mom left him, and married again by the time I was four.

Here in my hospital room, far from the house he shared with my stepmother, Stevie, in Bellevue, Washington, we could be ourselves. I was delighted. I couldn't remember the last time we'd joked and laughed like this or had been so openly affectionate. Maybe before he married Stevie in 1957.

I'd sensed my stepmother's jealousy even as a small girl, and learned to edit everything I said in front of her, careful not to be too exuberant or too affectionate. I'm pretty sure my father did, too. I always cherished the long rides to his house when my sister Elisa and I had our father to ourselves. On the Sunday nights when he drove us back to Mom's, he often detoured to the Dairy Queen for Dilly Bars and unfettered chatter.

When my father and I finished our chow mein and the kung pao chicken, a silence settled over my hospital room. I lifted my can of Coke in a salute. "Gambay!"

"Gambay!" he echoed, then we both took a long sip.

He met with my orthopedist at 7 am the next morning, then headed back to Seattle with my x-rays, hoping to find some other solution for me besides six months in a spica cast.

After he left, Greg appeared at my bedside, a cheerful smile on his face, bearing *The New York Times* and a cup of good coffee. Later, friends would tell me how depressed he was after my accident, worried I wouldn't be okay, but he never let on. He washed my face, brushed my hair, and caressed my breast to let me know I was still attractive, then left for work, promising to return in the evening with the Thai food I'd requested.

Now I lay alone in my room. No one came when I pushed my call button. I glanced at the clock on the wall. The nurses took forever to respond when they were changing shifts.

The cards and gifts from my family lay on the bedside table to my left. Daddy had left a white bakery bag with a red and white logo: Mrs. Fields, a gift from my sister Randi. By contorting myself, twisting to the left with my good right arm, I was able to open the bag. I stuck in my hand and pulled out a cookie. The cookie, chocolate chip,



had that pale, cooked-just-right look, studded with chocolate chips. I raised it to my mouth and took a bite.

When that perfect confluence of chocolate, vanilla, butter, sugar, eggs and flour hit my taste buds, my native enthusiasm came flooding back. Surely, this cookie was proof of the goodness of life. And there were a dozen of them in that bag.

I lifted an electronic gadget from my sister, Elisa. It was heavy, a bronze rectangle the size of a box of brown sugar, complete with earphones and a slot for a cassette tape. The word “Sanyo” was printed on the top. I’d never seen anything like it. With my right hand, I wrestled the earphones over my ears, and flipped the switch. Idly, I rotated the radio dial, not expecting to find much here in the Valley. Static – static – then a pulsing, energized tune I’d never heard in New York: *And I Ran* by Flock of Seagulls. I’d stumbled on the hottest station in Southern California. Soon I was rocking my traction, grooving with the “new music” on KROK, the Rock of the Eighties.

My two new discoveries, Mrs. Fields cookies and that Sanyo, held me together for that blessedly brief stint in the hospital in Sherman Oaks when I was faced with the prospect of six months in a cast and no exercise.

Within days, my father was back, lugging a traction splint – the kind medics use on the battlefield to keep broken femurs from shortening up. He’d found a doctor in Seattle who’d pioneered a method for inserting a rod into femurs with multiple fractures. After viewing my x-rays, the doctor said he could do this for me.

The day I checked out of the hospital in Sherman Oaks “against medical advice,” my father was dressed in his usual checked button-down, short-sleeved polyester-cotton shirt, tan knit slacks, and suspenders. I was loaded into the ambulance wearing a black skirt and a T-shirt from the recent Clash tour that read “Know Your Rights: The Future is Unwritten.” This act of bravado was meant to convince me I was still myself. By that point, though, I was beginning to suspect the future might not be entirely unwritten.

Greg followed the ambulance to the airport. He kissed me, patted my good thigh, and whispered “You’ll be a hundred percent in no time.”

Greg and I had gone through some rough years early in our relationship, but we’d survived them and had been looking forward to a new life together in LA. I gazed at him, memorizing his almond eyes, full lips, and the V of smooth brown skin in the open collar of his blue denim work shirt. I gave him a quick kiss. Then the ambulance attendants seized the ends of my stretcher and carried me and my traction splint onto the DC-10, angling the stretcher into a spot just inside the door in First Class. My father had purchased three tickets: two for me and my stretcher and one for him.

We toasted with complimentary champagne and miniature bagels. “To the champagne and Demerol flight,” I said. I was feeling no pain. My father had shot me full of Demerol so all the jostling wouldn’t hurt me in transit.

When we arrived at Swedish Hospital, also via ambulance, the good times were over. My right leg had shortened despite the traction splint, and the orthopedist placed me in traction so powerful that my hip felt like it was being pulled out of the socket. Time for more Demerol. In another week, though, my leg had settled down and I was ready for the surgery.

The operating room was vast, much bigger than the ORs they show on TV, cast in blue light, and chilly. The anesthesiologist stood at my right and, on my left, I glimpsed



racks of metal instruments that looked like implements of medieval torture. I couldn't afford to be afraid, though, because this surgery was my ticket out of six months in a spica cast. A mask was fitted over my face and I was told to count backwards from ten. I made it to six.

"Hey, Lizzo." A familiar voice welcomed me to consciousness. Through more good fortune, my high school friend, Leanne, was on duty in the recovery room that day.

This didn't seem strange to me, just emerging from anesthesia. "I feel like I've been hit by a truck," I muttered.

Leanne told me she'd watched my surgery through the window in the door of the operating room. "They were really pounding on you to get that rod in place."

"I can tell."

Leanne stayed after her shift and accompanied me to my room. I was still woozy, but not too woozy to remember the careless, corpulent x-ray technician who rammed the large, metal x-ray plate into my just-operated leg in an attempt to slide it underneath. When I yelled, Leanne turned on him. "Hey, buddy! Be careful!"

It was good to have someone watching my back – or my leg.

The morning I was wheeled to physical therapy for the first time, three weeks after being hit by the car, I was shocked by what I glimpsed in the mirror: a painfully thin version of me wrapped in a lime green seersucker hospital robe, so thin I looked like I'd just been released from a concentration camp. My body had consumed my fat to help heal my leg, and my muscles had atrophied from weeks in bed. I'd spent most of my life trying to be slim, counting calories and exercising, but this was nothing like what I'd envisioned. How had I ended up here?

I'd spent my life striving to do things the "right" way, ever vigilant, dotting my I's and crossing my T's. I worked hard, ate right, exercised every day, was generous with my time and the little money I had, was a faithful girlfriend.

For the first time, I had an inkling of how vulnerable I was. My heroic dreams had dried up. How could I protect another person when I couldn't even protect myself? I felt powerless, diminished, less of a person than I'd been before. Gazing at my reflection, I shook my head, and resolved to do everything in my power to heal and feel like myself again.

Figuring out what had happened when my consciousness expanded or why the hawk flown alongside me could wait. I knew the Universe was there, but was I content to leave it to its own devices.

Two physical therapists strapped me to a big board and slowly tilted me to a standing position for the first time since the accident. Being upright made me dizzy. When they asked me to take a few steps, I felt like they were asking me to fly instead of walk. I'd forgotten how.

Within days, though, I was paddling around the therapy pool with my good right arm, kicking with my good left leg, dragging my right leg behind me. Despite the ridiculous cotton hospital swimsuit I wore, secured with safety pins, I was exhilarated to be in motion again. I wove like a crippled mermaid between patients who'd just had their hips replaced, and felt more like myself than I had in weeks. I was sure that soon I'd be as good as new.



A week later, 4-1/2 weeks after the accident, I was out of the hospital, living at home with my mom and stepfather in suburban Seattle, eating Mom's delicious cooking and sleeping in my childhood bed. Safe in the womb of my family, I worked tirelessly to get back to my old self. After a month in the hospital, I'd learned to focus on what I could do instead of what I couldn't. I couldn't run anymore, but I could swim. So I swam an hour a day at local pools, driven there by my mom or my friends, helped into the pool by the lifeguard on duty.

The surge of water around my limbs, the whoosh of my breath, the blue water, and the black line running along the floor of my lane lulled me into a contemplative state. I found myself thinking about what had happened on Mulholland Drive. I couldn't let it go because I was sure being hit by the Porsche was no accident. I remembered how my consciousness expanded right after I was hit. I'd never experienced anything like it. And I remembered the sudden knowledge, as I sat in the dirt clutching the chain link fence, that I was where I was supposed to be. But why?

Was it because I'd been enjoying a delicious in-between time with Greg after a year apart: sleeping until 11, playing Ms Pac-Man at the 7-11 in the afternoon, working room service at the LeParc Hotel several nights a week instead of looking for a "real job" where I could work 80 hours a week like I had in New York? That didn't seem right. I wondered if the reason was deeper and older, something I wouldn't be able to comprehend if I tried.

There's a snapshot of a very slim version of me that summer, standing on crutches outside the Raison D'Etire coffeehouse in downtown Seattle. In the photo, I'm smiling and holding a red book, *You Cannot Die*, with its spine facing the camera. A friend gave me the book as a joke, but it echoed ideas I'd read earlier: we live multiple lives, and there's a reason we incarnate when we do, in the families we do, and have the experiences we do.

Physically, I bounced back amazingly fast. My surgeon glowed when he told me, six months later, that my leg had healed faster than most people who had a single fracture.

It took a lot longer to bounce back emotionally. I didn't feel safe in life the way I had before. One Sunday after I finally made it back to LA, Greg and I drove to Long Beach to look at a Volvo that belonged to a friend. I'd never driven a Volvo with a manual transmission, so Greg drove it home. I drove his Volkswagen "Thing." It was my first time behind the wheel since my accident. Driving that beach car, basically a tin can, canvas top off, up I-405 at breakneck speed with cars screaming past on the right and left brought me to the edge of panic. For the other drivers, this was just another day on the 405. But I knew there was very little between me and disaster. I was at the mercy of the Thing, whose doors could be lifted out of their sockets, and the competence of the other drivers.

Looking back, it's clear that my vulnerability offered an opportunity to heal some important relationships. If I hadn't been hit by the car, I might never have had time alone with my father, the chance to experience the easy, joyful rapport we'd shared when I was small. In our years together, Greg had never had felt the need to take care of me because I was so strong and capable. The accident showed him the depth of his feeling for me and gave him a chance to show me how much he cared.



On the surface, being hit by the car on Mulholland Drive was an accident, a case of “wrong place, wrong time.” But on some level, it was “right place, right time.” Maybe that’s what the hawk had been trying to tell me that day: that sometimes we need to be broken before we can heal.

