

What Happened To Me In My Own Words  
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All I remember is white light. I was leaning forward in seat 23C (on the aisle) of the airplane bound for my semester at an international high school in Oman, drumming my fingers, worrying about how the toilets there are just a hole in the floor. Then there was a rumbling sound and my vision went white, and then I heard nothing. And I felt nothing. And then the water was all around me, up to my chin like an iron lung.

I want to be really clear about this, because people always ask. The plane was quiet, and the cabin lights were on, and the temperature was maybe a little cool but nothing out of the ordinary. Every seat was full, as far as I could tell. A woman and her baby were sleeping next to me, and across the aisle a couple of businessmen were sharing candy out of a shiny box. Nobody looked angry or antsy or threatening at all. The rumbling I heard wasn't mechanical, it was more like thunder. I didn't even notice it until it was loud enough to notice, and then everything was completely gone. I opened my eyes and I was floating in the ocean, and I have no idea how much time passed in between.

There was nothing. No severed airplane wings, no smoking metal carcass sinking into the waves, no floating suitcases. I was too shocked at first to even be cold. Then I yelled, and the sound that came out barely reached my own ears, let alone anyone else who could have been floating somewhere out of sight. I feel very bad about that. I should have tried to yell louder.

High school doesn't teach you how to deal with situations like this. I knew from movies that I would die of thirst in about a day, if I didn't freeze before then. But I also have asthma, and had no inhaler. I'd like to say this was a concern because I wanted to swim and find other survivors, but I have to admit I also wanted to avoid the existential embarrassment of dying from an asthma attack after surviving what I assumed had been a catastrophic plane crash. Just as this thought passed through my mind, something knocked against my cheek, and like an idiot, I thought, "fish?"

It wasn't a fish. It was my inhaler, in its little plastic baggie, floating in the water beside me. It's a small inhaler, so it's possible that I didn't see it when I was looking around before. But still, I remember thinking this was a hell of a coincidence. I grabbed it and stuffed it down my shirt, wondering whether it was better to save my energy for flagging down a search party or whether I should move around to keep myself warm. I decided on the former, and floated on my back for what I would guess was an hour and a half, but felt way longer. The sky was that bright cloud-gray that sears your eyes into their sockets. I thought about my mom and dad and brother, and about the lady from Young Scholars International who was probably waiting for me at the airport even then. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing a rescue helicopter to appear in the sky above me.

To my surprise I heard a faint whining noise, and, thrashing upright, I saw a little lump on the horizon crawling from right to left. A boat. It cut towards me across the water, and as it drew near I saw three men peering down at me. They had curious eyes and dark shiny skin. They pulled me aboard with some difficulty—I was pretty heavy back then—and spoke to each other in a rapid language I didn't

understand. The boat was shabby and held a few empty oilcans, a fishing net, a little computer GPS, and a fat canteen of water. I sat on the fishing net like a nest.

“English? Do you speak English?”

The man with the strongest-looking arms, who I assumed was the captain, said something else. I switched to Spanish, which I’m pretty bad at, but the way they looked at each other told me this wasn’t getting me anywhere regardless. The shortest man fired up the boat and began steering us across the water.

At this point, I later learned, word was just reaching the international newswire that Royal Jordanian Flight 2855 had disappeared off all radar maps. By the time I stumbled off the boat and into the coast town of Beilul, Eritrea, the governments of five countries had assembled a task force to find the plane and the 206 people on board. Already there was disagreement about which country should lead the task force. My name scrolled across a screen in Times Square in a list of the missing.

I was led through the town to a central intersection. The road was lined with corrugated metal houses, chickens and children tumbling in and out of their curtained doorways. A man walked past holding a full-size goat in his arms like a baby. My rescuers took me into a small building where eight men sat around a conference table smoking cigarettes. I introduced myself with lots of hand gestures, trying to emphasize that I wanted to get to the capitol city or to any airport, where I assumed their officials would know where to take me. A bunch of children had followed us, and pressed their faces to the window—maybe they had never seen a chubby white girl with dyed blue hair before. One of the smoking men, luckily, spoke

English and arranged to have me placed on a bus to Asmara, the capitol city of Eritrea. His name was Youseff, and he told me the bus would not pass through for three days.

During this time, one of my rescuers deposited me with his mother, whose name was Kidisti. She was hunched and thin but had a hardy, lined face, as though she could have been a war general in a different life. She gave me a long beige dress and a blue head covering—it matched my hair—and fed me lamb stew as every single one of her friends and relatives visited to stare at me and touch my fat cheeks. I was weirdly calm as these things happened, like it was a movie with the sound turned off. Meanwhile, my own parents were driving from St. Louis to meet with the President of the United States and the husband of the other American on the plane, an immunologist from Doctors Without Borders named Brian Lahey. On the third day, photojournalist Martha Jefferson took the picture of a weeping Michael Lahey being hugged by my mom that would end up on the cover of *The New York Times*.

The three days passed. The air was hot and dry and I slept on a pile of rugs. A scorpion crawled into the front door once, but when I started whimpering Kidisti swatted it right back out. I tried to make myself useful during the day by sweeping the floor and offering to stir bubbling pots of food, but she usually waved me away, clicking her tongue like an Italian. In the evening I sat in the front doorway watching the town fall asleep, the door-curtain resting on the side of my face. The sky over Beilul at night was absolutely spackled with stars, and made me think of how alive I probably was. I didn't get a chance to go back to the ocean.

On the morning of the third day, a green bus rattled into town and idled, sputtering, in the central square. The only pretty thing I had on me at that time was a cheap silver necklace with a T-Rex charm on it. I gave this to Kidisti as I stepped on the bus, and waved to the probably 80 people gathered to see me off. They waved back, and a few of them hit metal pots with spoons. Once I was seated, I cried for the first time during this whole ordeal.

Six hours later, everyone was unloaded in a city that I was very distressed to find was not Asmara. I walked around like a total chump for at least two hours saying “Embassy? English? U.S. Embassy?” before a call to prayer sounded and I followed it through the streets to the masjid, where I learned that another bus to Asmara would leave in the morning. The imam I spoke to wore wire-rimmed glasses over distant, pensive eyes. He appraised me in a way that told me he wondered why I wasn’t carrying anything, not even a touristy tote bag or a digital camera. I realized I couldn’t remember ever being outdoors back home without something weighing on my shoulders or in my hands or stuffed in my pockets. I then realized I had left my inhaler on the bus. I hadn’t needed it yet, but this still worried me. The imam watched my forehead pinch as I idly patted my hips and sides for it. “Masjid is not closing,” he said.

I sat awake in the mosque all night, watching the moonlight angle slowly into the high windows and ignite the tiled walls. At one point a cat with a crooked tail sauntered up the rows of rugs. I imagined him vanishing through the wall and padding on tiny cushions through the air, following the same straight line all the way to Mecca. This was the first time I really let myself wonder if I was dead.

The next morning was jolted with the words of a feisty U.S. Senator heavily implying that Russia had a hand in the disappearance of my airplane. This was not taken well, as there had been eight Russians onboard and only two Americans. As small dictators began buttoning their speech-giving jackets, I was boarding yet another bus to the capitol. I waited in line as the imam spoke to the bus driver for me. The street was busier than in Beilul, and motortaxis set the paper signs in the nearby market stands fluttering as they whizzed past. I hugged myself and looked at the rows of hanging beads, at the giant baskets piled with bags of chips and candy bars with Arabic writing on the wrappers. I was really tired, so the plastic glint in the sand next to one basket took a few glances to really catch my eye. But when I stared at it, there was no question. It was my inhaler.

I stepped out of line and approached it slowly, as though it would run away. Nobody seemed to mind me crouching in the dirt to pick it up, and when I did a wash of weightlessness came over me. There was no way it wasn't mine—the baggie was crinkled in the same way I remembered, and the inhaler inside was green and had my initials on it in fine-point Sharpie. I looked around the market like it was a dreamscape. Suddenly I didn't want to think about what a gigantic coincidence this was. I tucked it under my arm and got back into line.

By 2 p.m. the inflammatory U.S. Senator was soundly embarrassed by the news that I, the only known survivor of 2855, had just marched into the Eritrean U.S. embassy. I was still wearing the dress and scarf Kidisti had given me, and my eyes were red from the sandy air. The first picture taken of me upon my "return" is of the grimy palm of my hand framed in blue cloth, held up to shield my face.

You've probably heard about what happened next. By the time I was DNA tested in Switzerland and finally flown back to the U.S, it had been nine days since the plane disappeared. I ate six packages of mini cookies as the flight home was taking off, to distract myself. I also made my poor agent from the Department of Homeland Security talk to me for the entire time, because I thought it would help me keep calm. His name was Nevin. He has an Airedale retriever.

A mob was waiting for me in the airport. A lot of them were religious types who believed I had been "brought back" through divine forces, or else thought I had been left behind by the Rapture and therefore was some sort of demon. There were also a good number of protestors who thought I had never been on the plane to begin with, and was pulling a publicity stunt. *Publicity for what?* I wanted to ask them. Someone threw a banana peel that hit my shoulder, and someone else threw an egg that hit Nevin in the side of the head. A couple people were there who had dyed their hair blue like mine, I'm not sure why, but that was kind of nice. Apparently my most recent school picture had been on the news a lot, which is obviously a nightmare. In front of it all was my family. There were tears all around as I hugged my parents, and reporters' cameras snapped like a spray of bullets.

I told my story first to the military, then to the CIA, then to a therapist, and then to the families of all the other people on the plane while the therapist and the CIA and the military sat in the back of the room. Most of the families crowded into grainy videochats on laptop screens held up by American volunteers. I told them what I've written here so far and their questions came stuttering through the speakers in a dozen languages. I did my best to answer.

That evening I went on Michael Hall Tonight, where I had my breakdown. I can't really excuse myself for that. As I was passed around backstage to different producers and makeup people, I could sense it beginning. Everyone touched my arms while they talked to me, as though they were trying to be chummy, but I knew it was because they wanted to dip their hands into a ghost. By the time the first commercial break was over there was pretty much no turning back.

"Welcome back to our *exclusive* interview with the girl who made a *harrowing*, and dare I say *heroic*, journey to find her way *home*," crooned Michael, all teeth and cufflinks. I hadn't slept, but I know that doesn't excuse breaking a chair.

I dropped out of high school, of course. Technically I'm a "delinquent minor," according to the state of Missouri. I've been trying to spend as much time with the families as they want; that's something I feel like I owe them. No, there was no panic on the plane, I tell them. No, I felt absolutely no pain and I'm sure they didn't either. No, I didn't see anything in the water, no belongings, no body parts. Some of them are very insistent about this, as if a sighting of their daughter's foot or their husband's severed arm would finally bring them peace. But lying would have crushed me, and also made the CIA very mad, so I keep having to say no, I'm sorry, I didn't see a purple hijab, no golden watch with the zodiac on it floating by on a bloody wrist. I'm so sorry, I didn't see anything.

The worst is when they ask about me. Accusatory questions would be fine, like what was I doing on the plane, or how much Arabic can I speak, or what are my views on U.S. foreign policy. But they're never like that. It's always, why do I dye my hair blue? Do I believe in God? What do I want to do after high school? As if these

things had saved me. As if they were imagining that somehow, if their brother had also dyed his hair, he would have survived along with me.

Why I survived became a very polarizing topic. Some people said aliens were behind the whole thing, because of course people are going to jump to aliens. One group in Texas believed that by “coming back” after the catastrophe, I had proved that I was literally Jesus Christ. They’ve mostly disbanded, but some still send me letters. A news crew from California even made the trek to Beilul and found Kidisti, who stood uncomfortably next to their reporter as he spouted leading questions. On the TV she looked older than I remembered. In the background of the shot someone had left an empty Coca-Cola bottle on the ground—its lettering in English, not Arabic. I felt nauseous imagining the village becoming a tourist spot because of me.

During all this, I’ve spent a lot of time looking at my inhaler: turning it over and over in its waterlogged baggie, wishing it could grow a mouth and tell me why it can’t stay lost. The plane still hasn’t been found, not even a scrap; billionaires are now offering to finance special submarines that will drag the ocean floor for bodies. The inhaler rattles in my chest everywhere I go, because out of everything, it makes the least sense. I mentioned this to my therapist once:

“How do I know I really survived? What if I’m still on the plane right now, and this is all a dream that my brain is spitting out right before I die for real? What if this is the afterlife and it just looks like Earth to make me feel better?”

My therapist tells me this is a normal way for a trauma survivor to feel. But if my system-failure mind invented a therapist, of course these are the sorts of things she would say. Just like how if my brain spit out a Hallmark-movie Wacky African

Adventure, it would make sure I always had my inhaler with me. And it would make sure that I was fed and gawked at, and that I faced confusion but not real hardship, and that I made it to the embassy in four and a half days and got to go on Michael Hall afterwards. What couldn't my brain come up with? Beilul, Eritrea isn't a town I had heard of before getting on the plane. But when I look it up now, of course it appears to be real. As real as the initialed green plastic in my hands.

That's why I came to this decision, to leave for a little while. The Grand Canyon's supposed to be beautiful this time of year, which seems dumb now that I think about it, because I'm pretty sure the rocks don't change with the weather. But off I go. I know I owe the families better than this, and probably my parents will be upset when they figure out I'm not bringing food or water. But this is something I have to do. I have my inhaler in its baggie with me, but I've left my new clean one here. Please don't try to come after me, no matter how firmly you believe that I'm Jesus, or a con artist, or whatever. If I'm right about all this, I will be back.

I want you to know I've had four asthma attacks in the six months since the plane disappeared. Every time I feel my breath grow thin and my head balloon I think of the mosque, and the moon shining cool and sharp on the tiles, and I pick up my new inhaler, but I don't use it. I muffle my wheezing in blankets, and I wait for the room to grow dark around me and wonder if I'll wake up again in the ocean; if that's where I was supposed to have stayed. But I never do. I never die.