“I Fell Out of the Sky”

Category: Stories
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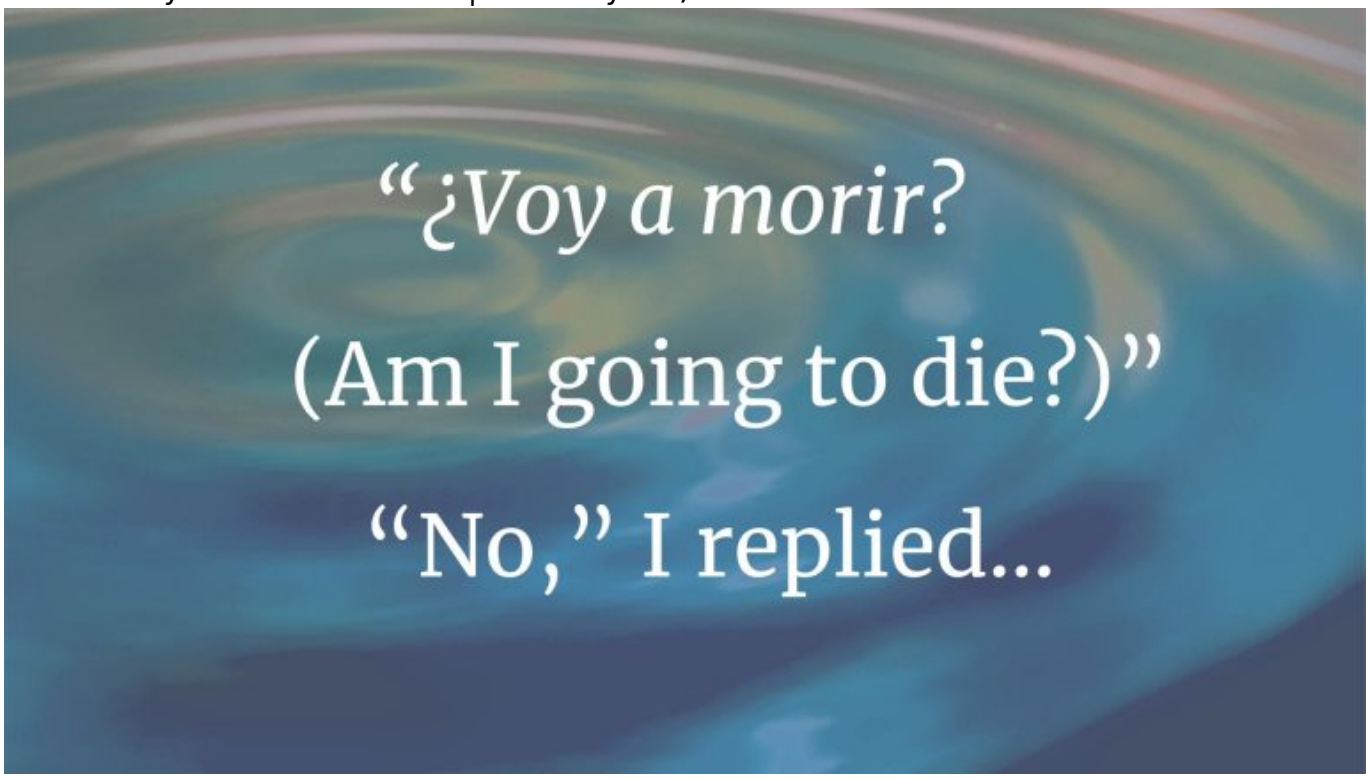

It had happened before; the previous time, it was a phone call on a Tuesday morning. This time, the message came by email on a Friday.

“Do you remember me?” wrote the sender.

“Do I remember you?” I wrote back. “I think of you often and fondly, although it has been over twenty-five years since we last spoke, and thirty-four years since we first met.”

Writing these words, I felt a wave of intense emotion: Our meeting, on January 25, 1990, has profoundly influenced me, both personally and professionally.

It was a drizzly evening that fateful Thursday. I was exercising on the NordicTrack when the phone rang. It was my brother.

“I heard that a plane crashed on Long Island,” he said. “Are you all okay?”

“We’re fine,” I replied. Resuming my exercising, I turned on the television news.

The news was dreadful: Avianca flight 052, a Boeing 707 from Bogota, Colombia, to New York City, had run out of fuel after a failed landing at JFK Airport and had crashed on Long Island’s North Shore.

Soon the phone rang again. Annoyed, I answered. It was the hospital: They’d declared an emergency and wanted me to come in.

I'm a child psychiatrist, I thought. *What can* I *do for the crash victims? I won't be handling their clinical care….*

Without stopping to shower, I changed into my work clothes and told my family that I'd be back shortly.

At the hospital, I joined 200 other healthcare providers. The emergency room had been evacuated; the cafeteria was now a makeshift ER, and the hospital's elective patients had been sent home to make room for an unknown number of survivors. Our anxiety grew as a helicopter arrived bearing the first of them.

As each patient's stretcher was wheeled into the ER, it was surrounded by a nurse, a surgeon and a Spanish-speaking translator. The injured were sent for X-rays or directly to the operating room as needed. It went astonishingly smoothly.

As the first child came in, I went to translate and to provide emotional comfort. It was terrible to see the children frightened and in pain.

Several hours later, I visited the pediatric floor and saw the director of pediatric social work. Feeling overwhelmed by the trauma surrounding us, we decided to round together for mutual support. We imagined that many people had died in the crash, but no one knew how many. Photos were taken of each survivor, and a number assigned to each, paired with a description: "ten-year-old boy"; "three-year-old girl" and so on.

In the pediatric intensive-care unit, we visited an eight-year-old girl with serious injuries. She seemed to be asleep, but as we began to move away, she opened her eyes.

"*¿Puedo hacer una pregunta, por favor?* (May I ask a question, please?)" she asked.

"Sí," I responded, feeling tears welling up.

"*¿Voy a morir?* (Am I going to die?)"

"No," I replied.

With a look of relief that I'll never forget, she asked, "*¿Puedo dormir?* (May I go to sleep?)"

"Yes," I replied. Walking on, my colleague and I were in tears—what a lovely child; so sweet and graceful. We wondered whom she'd been traveling with, noting that she hadn't asked her family's whereabouts.

After visiting the surviving children, we met with the family members of the missing passengers. These families were advised by officials to go to the Nassau County morgue to ask for information about their loved ones—an unbearably painful statement to hear.

Before I knew it, I'd been at the hospital for twelve hours. I returned to

the pediatric floor to check on the children again. Some were in surgery; others were asking questions. The eight-year-old girl (whose name was Andrea, I learned) asked none.

Writing this, thirty-four years later, I appreciate anew the profound impact that this evening's events, and meeting Andrea, have had on me.

What followed over the subsequent days is hard to describe. I contacted a physician mentor in San Francisco, Lenore Terr, who suggested that I carefully write down my experiences—what I heard, what I said, how I felt. I am incredibly grateful for that wise guidance, which I followed to the utmost of my ability. For almost two and one half years after the crash, I continued to work with twenty-one of the children and their families, seeing them on a monthly basis.

Andrea's injuries would keep her in the hospital for six weeks, and I met with her every day and kept careful notes of our visits. Her mother and brother had perished in the crash; her father had survived, but told me that he felt unable to go on. He feared that he might harm himself.

"I can offer you a hospital bed," I told him sympathetically. "Remember, you have an eight-year-old daughter who needs you now more than ever."

We hugged; we cried together; and he agreed to keep on for Andrea's sake.

Soon after this, he told me, "I need to travel to Colombia to bury my wife and son."

I nodded.

"Can you watch over my daughter while I'm away?" he asked. I agreed without hesitation.

During his weeks of absence, I visited Andrea three times daily: before work, after work and at midday. An index card with my name and phone numbers sat at her bedside.

As a father of two children, I could only imagine how drastically her world had changed. We developed a deep bond: When she saw me coming, she would call out "Fornari!" as if cheering at a football game.

Andrea's injuries eventually healed, and she and her father returned home to Colombia. Nine years later, they visited New York, and we had a reunion. She was seventeen, a young woman. During our meeting, she shared her desire to become a child psychiatrist; she wanted to help and support children the way she felt that I'd helped and supported her.

In the following years, I thought of her often. And each January 25th, I reflected on my experiences with the survivors and their families.

The tenth anniversary of the tragedy was commemorated with a memorial service at the crash site and a church service in nearby Oyster Bay. Survivors thanked their rescuers; families mourned their lost loved ones. In 2010, the

twentieth-anniversary services took place. A generation later, survivors once more thanked their rescuers, and families once again mourned their lost loved ones.

And now here was Andrea’s email, asking whether I remembered her.

How could I forget?

She wrote that she was now forty-two, married, and the mother of two daughters, ages three and seven.

I asked whether we could have a Zoom call, and, after thirty-four years, we saw each other once again.

Andrea’s face was now that of a mature woman—but I’d recognize it anywhere.

“I can’t believe I’m speaking with you!” she exclaimed, weeping.

“I often think of you and wonder how you’re doing,” I assured her. I held up the photos of her, taken in 1990 and 1999, that I keep in my desk drawer. Seeing them, she cried again.

“I think of you often,” she sobbed.

“Why contact me now?” I asked.

“As my daughter turns eight, I imagine what her life might be like without me,” she replied. “I thought of how I fell out of the sky, and how you caught me.”

We spoke for thirty minutes. I was left feeling humbled and grateful for the privilege of having worked with this child, and for hearing from her so many years later.

We often wonder what happens to our patients, and whether we’ve made a difference in their lives.

With Andrea, I know.