

All in Your Head

The white fog didn't look deadly. It would have been peaceful weather for a walk, if you wanted to be alone and were dressed well for rain. Simone was five hundred feet above the ground and fighting a bubble of panic in her chest. She flew a rented Piper Arrow from the 1960s. The manic beep-beep-beep-beep in the cockpit had to be stopped. That type of alarm usually preceded a spin out of control.

Her fatal mistake was visualizing the mountains in front of her. The terrain that peeked through the fog convinced Simone that she knew the positions of the mountains and the ground, but in the fog everything outside was deceptive. Simone had pulled the nose gradually higher without realizing it. As the plane lost speed, a crash landing became more certain.

Simone put her weight into the stick. Normally it responded to a light touch, but Simone was having trouble convincing her limbs to initiate a dive, into what looked like the wrong part of the fog. The instruments reported a rapid descent with too little altitude. From higher up, Simone thought she could have stabilized the plane. A voice on the radio advised her to aim for a stretch without trees. Simone really wished the calm voice could just take over the controls. The stall warning quieted. Simone's calves tensed up during the seconds when she waited for the ground to meet her.

The impact tore the landing gear free of the plane. Simone tumbled, in complete disorientation as to which way was up. The plane's last bounce knocked the wind out of her. Simone felt the cockpit spin around a few more times just from her own vertigo. She came to rest upright. She slumped forward, and she exhaled a long moan.

For a long time she sat, head down, slack-jawed. She saw blood on her pants. Large ovals started in her thighs and were seeping down her legs. Simone couldn't tell exactly where it hurt, other than that a heavy blanket of pain stretched from her chest to her feet. Life was leaking out of her fragile body. She contemplated her legs. As she stared, someone cut her out of the harness. She decided to sleep.

Simone collected a few disjointed memories of overhead lights and oxygen masks. When she became alert again, it was already the evening of the following day. Her husband was sitting near her bed, eating.

"Greg," she called. He smiled at her. After a minute, she said, "I'm dying."

Greg stood up and came closer. He rested his hand on Simone's forehead. "You're going to be OK!" Greg enunciated the OK loudly.

"Greg, I'm going to die," Simone promised. She closed her eyes. Greg explained that she had a metal rod in one leg, and no other serious injuries, and he talked about the steps and the schedule for regaining full mobility. Simone was crying. When Greg was silent for a moment, she explained, "I'm going to die, someday." After a minute she added, "It's not fair. I'll just be gone and someone will replace me. I know it might be a long ways away, but I don't want to ever die."

Greg left his hand on Simone's head. No one spoke while Simone stopped crying. She took his hand and played with it. Eventually, Greg smiled on the left side of his mouth and said, "If you want to live longer, I don't recommend any more crash landings." Simone didn't answer, and eventually she slept.

Simone was sitting in front of a painted cave wall with a brown surface that was lit by a series of campfires behind her. The middle picture, in black charcoal, was of a streamlined hawk. The shadows streaked around the wall and the drawing of the hawk rose and swooped. Simone's dream-sense told her that the hawk could see her. Then she understood that the hawk was her brother, Peter. "Where are you flying?" she asked.

"I'm hunting," answered Peter. The hawk circled a meadow.

"Can you come out and be with me?" Simone wanted to know. "I miss you."

"I'm still right here," argued Peter. The hawk tucked its wings back and dove. It accelerated toward a moonlit trail where a field mouse looked for food of its own. The mouse had no way of seeing the speedy attack, yet, without any tangible warning, it sensed the approach of talons and death, and it escaped into a burrow. The hawk climbed above the treetops again. "Some of the rodents can feel me coming. Those ones I can never catch." He kept climbing, until he was out of sight.

Simone sensed that Peter was gone. She looked around at the tall dry grass. Now she was a field mouse.

All night long she explored with quick, dusty steps. If Peter had come back that night, she knew she would have felt it, through some primitive antenna kept inside her brain.

The painkillers weighed Simone down while the sunrise tried to wake her up. She eventually opened her eyes for the smell of breakfast croissants. Greg was sitting near her bed again. He asked whether she was comfortable. He fetched her water. Then he hovered near her pillow and watched for her to need something.

"Do you remember about my brother, Peter?" Greg nodded, mouthing a yes. Greg stood still while he watched her. "I always wanted to believe that he's in heaven. I thought that someday we'd be able to talk again."

"Of course you will," consoled Greg. "Someday."

"I don't know what I believe now. I almost died! I thought I'd never see anyone again. I can't really know if there's an afterlife. I'm not the kind of person to believe in something naive. Was I just willing to fool myself because those stories made me happier?"

"You're not fooling yourself," countered Greg.

"It's just pretty convenient for me to believe in something I can't see because I want for it to be true. How can I trust myself?"

"Hey, you don't have to worry about this right now," soothed Greg. "The painkillers are playing with your brain. You're not thinking like yourself. Give it a few days and you'll feel better."

"That's the point!" snapped Simone. "Just because I feel better about it doesn't make it right." She nursed her cup of water. "I'm sorry. I'm probably a little depressed from being here. It's not important right now." Simone recalled her dream as best she could. Greg tried to converse a few times, but the painkillers made her feel too foggy to pay much attention to him. At the end of a long morning, she slept again.

Recuperation from the surgery took Simone three days. Once she was able to move around on crutches, the hospital sent her home. She walked through every room just to see them all again. She ended the tour at her bed and lay down. "I am so glad to get out of that dark, smelly hospital room."

"It was pretty light," Greg corrected her. "I thought it was comfortable."

"No!" remembered Simone. "It was dreary. And

super dark. Look at how much brighter our bedroom is."

"Well," Greg disagreed. The afternoon sun had always charged through the hospital windows and made it hard to read. "This room will definitely be a lot brighter with you back in the house."

"Trust me. I spent a lot more time than you did in that hospital room."

"Trust me. I took a lot less drugs than you did while we were in the hospital room."

Simone grunted. "They weren't those kinds of drugs!"

Greg caressed her forearm. "When are you going to be able to fly again?"

Simone sighed. "I've been thinking about it. I'm going to force myself to fly at least one more time. It scares me to death. Getting into a plane is going to be hard."

"C'mon, it's all in your head. You'll be fine."

Simone rolled back out of bed. "So? This pain that makes me sick to my stomach is all in my head too. But that doesn't make it any less real."

"Hey, I'm just trying to talk to you," begged Greg. "Tell me what I can do to help."

Simone looked back and forth between Greg and the window. "You know how they say that people who are afraid of heights are really just afraid of themselves and that they may jump? I don't think I'm afraid of flying. I don't even worry about crashing. I think I'm afraid of myself. I don't want to sit in a pilot's seat and not know how to act like a pilot." Greg opened his mouth, but paused to collect his thoughts. "I've got this feeling like I'm supposed to play my role better all the time. I should be making something big and memorable of my life."

Greg mentally counted to five to make sure Simone had finished speaking. "Do you think there's something specific you need to accomplish?"

"I need to figure out what's expected of me. I'm mostly worried that I don't trust myself to make such a big decision." Simone dropped her gaze. Greg was wearing a shirt that said, "Go Hawks." Simone observed, mostly to herself, "Peter would want me to make him proud. I don't even know if he exists anymore, but I feel like I owe him something. Some part of me must still believe he can see me." Simone retreated out the back and rested on a patio chaise. Greg sat close by where he could hold her hand, but he

tried not to disrupt her meditation.

It was a week before Simone could maneuver comfortably on crutches. One more month and she preferred to limp without them. In four months, Simone committed to her first flight. It was an easy enough decision. One of her recent goals was to accrue more flight hours. Another was to spend time doing things she enjoyed by herself.

The takeoff was smooth but noisy, like every other time. She watched the artificial horizon on the instrument panel. Then she looked up at the horizon outside. It didn't seem so trustworthy, even on a sunny day. Simone plotted a flight path with a view of her emergency landing site. It looked peaceful, now that her position wasn't so vulnerable.

Above the clearing, a bird played on the wind, which reminded Simone of something from the hospital. When she had dreamed of the Peter-hawk, it drifted just like that. Peter left by flying high up out of sight, and as he did he had spoken to her. He said, "I trust you."

Simone frowned. That dream was the most realistic memory she had since the accident. She adjusted the stick for a bank and the plane obeyed her wishes exactly. "I think I can feel you, Peter." She scanned for the bird again in the clear sky, but as far as her eyes could see, she was the only living creature in the air. "If you're still teaching me, then you're not too far."