

PART ONE

From Sunlight into Darkness.



What was my sunlight?

It was 1983, I was 29. I got along beautifully with my family, had my helicopter license and was working on my fixed-wing license. I had a full-time job as a Correctional Officer with the Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services while I earned my B.A. in Psychology at night. I also had some very enjoyable friends.

I had much on my plate and all of it was good.

There was a shadow, however. Since birth, I had had a mystifying variety of ailments: stomach aches, loss of

balance; of memory; pains running through my nerves—sometimes tingly, sometimes burning. I used to think if they all occurred at once, they'd kill me. But they'd come and go, and life went on.

I kept fit by skiing, swimming, cycling, and particularly, jogging, which had lead to longer and longer runs. Now, I was training hard for the spring Marathon in Toronto.

“Slow down Peter, you're becoming obsessed with running,” said Allan, a good friend.

I did use every extra minute to run. But obsessed? I saw running as a conquest. I was always that way; the bigger the obstacle, the more I was

drawn to it. Running itself was not as important as the challenge. Sometimes I'd end up running alongside others and it would turn into an unspoken competition.

Endurance is what it takes: the pulsing in my ears of the pounding of my heart; profuse sweating, which felt like a cleansing; and some inexhaustible source of determination, which lead me over the streets and into the hills, day after day; rain and snow.

But lately, when I was really pushing myself, I got these sharp, burning, headaches which would absolutely sizzle my brain and then abruptly disappear.

I started calling them my instant

volcanoes. I ignored them. Sort of.

I didn't think they were caused by running because they also hit me when I laughed really hard; and because I laughed a lot, I suffered!

They were arriving more frequently and lasting longer.

One morning, as I ran out of the woods, a police car came up the street and cruised to a stop; window rolled down; he called me over and asked if I was all right. Of course I was! But my legs weren't.

I was having difficulty standing up straight. The way he scowled at me, I got the impression that he thought I'd been drinking; but then realized it was

something else, and he offered me a ride, but I wasn't far from home; and later, after dinner, I felt fine.

I was back on the trail in the morning and was hit with another shock: my body was thick, stick-like; mechanical; my legs didn't move naturally. My well-honed rhythmic flow was gone. I tripped and fell; again and again. What the hell was happening?

After classes, I went to the track to test myself with a few wind sprints and as soon as I started to run, my legs could not hold a stride; my body was on its own; everything I had taught it was gone and, a flailing, 10 steps later, I was face down in the dirt. Again.

I felt as if something had taken over

my body. I was down but didn't know why. Then a rocket of pain burned all the way down my spine. Am I having a stroke?

A friend took me to my apartment and I slept through until the next morning. I woke up rested and feeling okay.

That afternoon, I had a late lunch with Allan and a pal of his who seemed to avoid looking at me; but when he did, he looked at my shirt. I thought I spilled some food on it and tried to quietly brush it away—but it was wet; not with soup—it was drool! I was drooling down my chin! Oh my God! I excused myself and stumbled as I left.

Allan told me later that his friend asked if I had a drinking problem.

I was very confused by all these changes but I kept fighting. More running; more falling; twisted feet; bloody knees and palms.

My confidence in my physical fitness was crumbling. My lips and right arm were a 'pins and needles' numbness; extreme headaches, loss of balance, and now drooling! I was losing control of my body and it was terrifying.

That weekend I drove out to the airport for my weekly flying lesson with Wayne, my fixed-wing flight instructor. When he came into the chart room, I got up to shake his hand, 'and I lost sense,' is the only way I can describe it, and fell back into the chair.

I got up again, more slowly, and this

time was able to shake his hand.

“Flight boots too big for you, Peter?”
he laughed.

A bolt of pain in my head and I fell into the chair again. Wayne thought I was being funny and his belly laugh lasted as the pain swept through, then I stood up once more and laughed too.

He lead us out to the aircraft, a very tidy Cessna 150. We did the pre-flight check, buckled in, taxied out to the runway, did the power-up and took off. It was a beautiful clear sky, a beautiful morning to fly; except for a blob of something on the altimeter. I reached out to wipe it but it moved. I reached again and it was gone. On the floor? I couldn't see it. Wayne barked at me:

“Peter! Look sharp!”

I pulled back on the control and we ascended to 3000 feet; went through our maneuvers and splat, a big blob on the windscreen. I automatically reached for it—not there! Twice more in the next half hour, I reached for blobs. I felt erratic, unsure of myself. Wayne was increasingly nervous and finally said: “Let’s head back, we’re done for the day.”

I called in to the Control Tower: “This is Charlie, Foxtrot, Mike, Echo, Lima; inbound at 2,000 feet, approximately 10 miles south by southwest; requesting landing instructions; over.”

“What are you doing? There’s no tower here!” said Wayne.

Oh, my God, there isn't. What was I thinking? Worse, what were those blobs?

"Peter, focus on your pre-landing check!"

Yes, right! And I concentrated on that. I noticed that we were losing altitude and the engine sputtered. I saw Wayne look at the tachometer and he cursed and grabbed for the carburetor heat control knob, which I had forgot to turn on. How could I forget that?

Wayne was intense; he yanked the controls and fought to keep us aloft; we landed just short of the runway. He looked at me, short of breath and said: "Don't fly anymore, son, until you pass a medical!"

I sat in my car for an hour. I couldn't

believe all the weird things that were happening: headaches, an uncontrollable body, slurred, spittle-speech, 'blob' hallucinations and now for the first time, anger, like I'd never imagined. I wanted to smash my windows; I wanted to take that plane up and smash it into the world! I passed out on the car seat.