

My own private Memorial Day

Remembering a way of life

It was 1989. God, that was twenty years ago. My life was perfect, really. I was an Air Force Captain, nickname “Magellan.” My fellow officers picked me as the best in Squadron Officer School, which was basically a popularity contest. I had received two Air Medals for courage under fire. I was a senior instructor navigator in one of the most top secret units in the country. Hell, we didn’t even answer to our North Carolina base commander, but to a tiny little office in Virginia, part of the National Security Administration. We were Air Force spooks. In 1989, I had been around the world so many times, I had developed a sort of instinctual feeling for how long it might take to walk it. Yet I was young, only twenty-eight years old. Five years earlier I had graduated from the Air Force Academy, in Colorado Springs, though I was never much of a conformist. As a cadet, I filmed a subversive satire on cadet life. The officers in charge didn’t even know the film existed until I showed it with some fanfare to the cadets exactly one night before graduation. To my knowledge, no one has tried anything like that before or since. I guess you could say I’ve always been a free thinker.

The movie *Top Gun* came out in ‘86. I remember sitting in the theater with a pilot friend, who pulled my sleeve and said, “My God. Troy, Tom Cruise looks just like you.” For months after that movie came out, strangers would honk and wave at me in my BMW and flight suit. Once on the freeway, a carload of young women almost ran me off the road, trying to get me to stop, me just smiling and waving.

It was 1989. It was as though my entire life had been leading to this summit. I felt good. I looked good. I was good. I owned a house with a central vacuum and a pier with a gazebo built out on the lake. Everything for me had come up roses.

I remember returning after a perfectly successful week-long mission. It was always good to be home, my private empire and sanctuary. I poured myself a scotch and, still in my flight suit, walked out onto the back porch, from where I had a lovely view of the lake and trees. I still recall every detail as if it was yesterday. I stood there leaning on the rail as a warm breeze tousled my hair and a curious quake began to erupt in my gut. For the first time in my adult life, I cried like a baby. These were deep, heaving sobs, so violent and unexpected only the handrail kept me from falling. I wept because somehow I knew it was finished. A storm was coming. The beautiful dream would soon end. I didn’t know what would happen, but I knew that nothing would ever be the same, that very soon, a new chapter would begin, and there was nothing I could do about it. As if it was yesterday, I can still see the



dropped glass, spilled scotch darkening the pale gray of the wooden deck, four solitary ice cubes on weathered grain.

I've often wondered what part of me sensed the coming catastrophe. In hindsight it's always easy to dismiss that kind of psychic connection as so much self-fulfilling prophecy. But for me, it wasn't prophecy so much as an eerie, nondescript sense of dread, absolutely out of place in the context of my always-optimistic outlook. Gurgling up heaving sobs, I had no idea where the feelings were coming from, and this *not knowing* only added fear to the already overwhelming sense of gloom.

My world was brought down when the Air Force arrested me in 1992 for being gay. I lost most of my self-confidence during that first grueling six-hour interrogation. Over the following two insufferable years, while the Air Force attorney tried to build a case against me, I gradually lost most everything else. By the time it was over, there was nothing left from my former life. I no longer wore flight suits, because I no longer flew. All the aspects of life that I thought were important then had been removed, like so many layers of skin being peeled away with tweezers, until nothing was left but raw, bleeding nakedness. I was haunted by the hate that seemed to come from every direction, by the abandonment of my peers, by the cruel betrayals, and perhaps mostly by my own fear to confess I was, in fact, a gay man. It would be many years before I would be able to forgive myself, before I no longer wanted to die. The person who gradually emerged from that soul-murder would bear little resemblance to the person I was before. He would have a new self-confidence, forged from the white-hot knowledge that justice is fiction. Yet he would be a kinder person, one whose certainties had been forever uprooted and replaced by hope, however tenuous.

Now I can look back and see that it all started in 1989, that the child I was then somehow sensed the time had come to grow up – to abandon false comforts, since certainty itself is surely the greatest of these. To no longer look the other way, but to stare misery in the face, and provide comfort, since I would soon *understand* misery. The time had come to reach up to my elbows in the ashes of old inequities and take an active role in the creation of a new fairness. To ditch fear. To preach hope. These are the values of the phoenix that would rise from those ashes. Did I understand all of that in 1989? I'd like to think that part of me suspected as much.

Some people believe we choose our lives well before we're born in order to grow; that our lives are some sort of spiritual journey. Those same people often tell us we should therefore take all of life's lessons as divine gifts. All I know for sure is that I'm a better person now than that kid twenty years ago - that kid who only *thought* he had the world by the tail. I can't imagine being other than I am. Even if I could, I wouldn't have it any other way. I could never go back to that pleasant dream. Better to be uncomfortably awake, I think, and to make small differences, than to be comfortably asleep and make none at all.

Troy Carlyle