

Feet In Smoke: A Story About Electrified Near-Death

The following is excerpted from John Jeremiah Sullivan's collection of essays: Pulphead.

On the morning of April 21, 1995, my elder brother, Worth (short for Ellsworth), put his mouth to a microphone in a garage in Lexington, Kentucky, and in the strict sense of having been "shocked to death," was electrocuted. He and his band, the Moviegoers, had stopped for a day to rehearse on their way from Chicago to a concert in Tennessee, where I was in school. Just a couple of days earlier, he had called to ask if there were any songs I wanted to hear at the show. I asked for something new, a song he'd written and played for me the last time I'd seen him, on Christmas Day. Our holidays always end the same way, with the two of us up late drinking and trying out our new "tunes" on each other. There's something biologically satisfying about harmonizing with a sibling. We've gotten to where we communicate through music, using guitars the way fathers and sons use baseball, as a kind of emotional code. Worth is seven years older than I am, an age difference that can make brothers strangers. I'm fairly sure the first time he ever felt we had anything to talk about was the day he caught me in his basement bedroom at our old house in Indiana, trying to teach myself how to play "Radio Free Europe" on a black Telecaster he'd forbidden me to touch.

The song I had asked for, "Is It All Over," was not a typical Moviegoers song. It was simpler and more earnest than the infectious power-pop they made their specialty. The changes were

still unfamiliar to the rest of the band, and Worth had been about to lead them through the first verse, had just leaned forward to sing the opening lines—"Is it all over? I'm scanning the paper / For someone to replace her"—when a surge of electricity arced through his body, magnetizing the mike to his chest like a tiny but obstinate missile, searing the first string and fret into his palm, and stopping his heart. He fell backward and crashed, already dying.

Possibly you know most of this already. I got many of my details from a common source, an episode of *Rescue 911* (the show hosted by William Shatner) that aired about six months after the accident. My brother played himself in the dramatization, which was amusing for him, since he has no memory whatsoever of the real event. For the rest of us, his family and friends, the segment is hard to watch.

The story Shatner tells, which ends at the moment we learned that my brother would live, is different from the story I know. But his version offers a useful reminder of the danger, where medical emergencies are involved, of talking too much about "miracles." Not to knock the word—the staff at Humana Hospital in Lexington called my brother's case "miraculous," and they've seen any number of horrifying accidents and inexplicable recoveries—but it tends to obscure the human skill and coolheadedness that go into saving somebody's life. I think of Liam, my brother's best friend and bandmate, who managed not to fall apart while he cradled Worth in his arms until help arrived, and who'd warned him when the band first started practicing to put on his Chuck Taylors, the rubber soles of which were the only thing that kept him from being zapped into a more permanent fate than the one he did endure. I think of Captain Clarence Jones, the fireman and paramedic who brought Worth back to life, strangely with two hundred joules of pure

electric shock (and who later responded to my grandmother's effusive thanks by giving all the credit to the Lord). Without people like these and doubtless others whom I never met and Shatner didn't mention, there would have been no miracle.

It was afternoon when I heard about the accident from my father, who called and told me flatly that my brother had been "hurt." I asked if Worth would live, and there was a nauseating pause before his "I don't know." I got in the car and drove from Tennessee to Lexington, making the five-hour trip in about three and a half hours. In the hospital parking lot I was met by two of my uncles on my mother's side, fraternal twins, both of them Lexington businessmen. They escorted me up to the ICU and, in the elevator, filled me in on Worth's condition, explaining that he'd flatlined five times in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, his heart locked in something that Captain Jones, in his interview for *Rescue 911*, diagnosed as "asystole," which Jones described as "just another death-producing rhythm." As I took him to mean, my brother's pulse had been almost one continuous beat, like a drumroll, but feeble, not actually sending the blood anywhere. By the time I showed up, his heart was at least beating on its own power, but a machine was doing all his breathing for him. The worst news had to do with his brain, which we were told displayed 1 percent activity, vegetable status.

In the waiting room, a heavysset nurse who looked to be in her sixties came up and introduced herself as Nancy. She took me by the hand and led me through two silent, automatic glass doors into Intensive Care. My brother was a nightmare of tubes and wires, dark machines silently measuring every internal event, a pump filling and emptying his useless lungs. The stench of dried spit was everywhere in the room. His eyes were closed, his every muscle

slack. It seemed that only the machines were still alive, possessed of some perverse will that wouldn't let them give up on this body.

I stood frozen, staring at him. The nurse spoke to me from the corner of the room in an unexpected tone of admonishment, which stung me at the time and even in retrospect seems hard to account for. "It ain't like big brother's gonna wake up tomorrow and be all better," she said. I looked at her stupidly. Had I not seemed shocked enough?

"Yes, I realize that," I said, and asked to be alone. When the door closed behind me, I went up to the side of the bed. Worth and I have different fathers, making us half brothers, technically, though he was already living with my dad when I was born, which means that I've never known life without him. Nonetheless we look nothing alike. He has thick dark hair and olive skin and was probably the only member of our family in the hospital that night with green as opposed to blue eyes. I leaned over into his face. The normal flush of his cheeks had gone white, and his lips were parted to admit the breathing tube. There was no sign of anything, of life or struggle or crisis, only the gruesomely robotic sounds of the oxygen machine pumping air into his chest and drawing it out again. I heard my uncles, their voices composed with strain, telling me about the 1 percent brain activity. I leaned closer, putting my mouth next to my brother's right ear. "Worth," I said, "it's John."

Without warning all six feet and four inches of his body came to life, writhing against the restraints and what looked like a thousand invasions of his orifices and skin. His head reared back, and his eyes swung open on me. The pupils were almost nonexistent. They stayed open only for the briefest instant, focusing loosely on mine before falling shut. But what an instant! As a volunteer fireman in

college, I had once helped to pull a dead man out of an overturned truck, and I remember the look of his open eyes as I handed him to the next person in line—I'd been expecting pathos, some shadow of whatever had been the last thought to cross his mind, but his eyes were just marbles, mere things. My brother's eyes had been nothing like that. They were, if anything, the terrified eyes of a man who was trying to climb out of a well: the second he moves, he slips back to the bottom. Worth's head fell back onto the pillow motionless, his body exhausted from that brief effort at reentering the world. I put down his hand, which I'd taken without knowing it, and stepped back into the hallway.

* * *

Worth spent that night, and the second day and night, in a coma. There were no outward signs of change, but the machines began to pick up indications of increased brain function. The neurosurgeon, an Irishman, explained to us (in what must have been, for him, child's language) that the brain is itself an electrical machine, and that the volts that had flowed from my brother's vintage Gibson amplifier and traumatized his body were in some sense still racing around in his skull. There was a decent chance, the doctor said, that he would emerge from the coma, but no one could say what would be left; no one could say who would emerge. The period of waiting comes back to me as a collage of awful food, nurses' cautious encouragement, and the disquieting presence of my brother supine in his bed, an oracle who could answer all our questions but refused to speak. We rotated in and out of his room like tourists circulating through a museum.

"On the third day" (I would never have said it myself, but Shatner does it for me on the show), Worth woke up. The nurses led us into

his room, their faces almost proud, and we found him sitting up—gingerly resting on his elbows, with heavy-lidded eyes, as if at any moment he might decide he liked the coma better and slip back into it. His face lit up like a simpleton's whenever one of us entered the room, and he greeted each of us by our names in a barely audible rasp. He seemed to know us, but hadn't the slightest idea what we were all doing there, or where "there" might be—though he did come up with theories on the last point over the next two weeks, chief among them a wedding reception, a high school poker game, and at one point some kind of holding cell.

I've tried many times over the years to describe for people the person who woke up from that electrified near-death, the one who remained with us for about a month before he went back to being the person we'd known and know now. It would save one a lot of trouble to be able to say "it was like he was on acid," but that wouldn't be quite true. Instead, he seemed to be living one of those imaginary acid trips we used to pretend to be on in junior high, before we tried the real thing and found out it was slightly less magical—"Hey, man, your nose is like a star or something, man." He had gone there. My father and I kept notes, neither of us aware that the other was doing it, trying to get down all of Worth's little disclosures before they faded. I have my own list here in front of me. There's no best place to begin. I'll just transcribe a few things:

Squeezed my hand late on the night of the 23rd. Whispered, "That's the human experience."

While eating lunch on the 24th, suddenly became convinced that I was impersonating his brother. Demanded to see my ID. Asked me, "Why would you want to impersonate John?" When I protested,

"But, Worth, don't I look like John?" he replied, "You look exactly like him. No wonder you can get away with it."

On the day of the 25th, stood up from his lunch, despite my attempts to restrain him, spilling the contents of his tray everywhere. Glanced at my hands, tight around his shoulders, and said, "I am not ... repulsed ... by man-to-man love. But I'm not into it."

Evening of the 25th. Gazing at own toes at end of bed, remarked, "That'd make a nice picture: Feet in Smoke."

Day of the 26th. Referred to heart monitor as "a solid, congealed bag of nutrients."