LIFE CHANGERS

 I was on a 15-day cruise on the Rhine-Main-Danube Rivers last year in late September. The trip was booked through Viking River Cruises, a company that sponsored several public television programs on my local station back in California. Our ship was the newly commissioned Viking Longship “Vidar” -- a four-deck, 443’ nautical beauty with 95 deluxe outside cabins for its 190 fortunate passengers. Our journey left from Amsterdam, and cruised to Cologne, Bamberg, Regensberg, Vienna, and a few other cities in between before concluding in Budapest. My name is Sean. I’m a retired technical engineer from Los Gatos, recently widowed. I needed a change of scene and a break from mourning after my wife died from complications shortly after suffering a crippling stroke in May, 2014.

 This particular trip to Europe did the trick, for it offered me just enough diversion, relaxation, and surprises to help me get my mind off my troubles. As any traveler who has ever taken a tour with a group or has taken a cruise knows, one meets an interesting assortment of characters who temporarily become close confidants -- almost like old friends or intimate relatives. You can freely risk being totally honest in conversation, with both sides aware that in all probability you will never meet again once the trip ends. It is an oddly comfortable type of temporary relationship. Of course, one also meets the rare obnoxious oddball, or the whiner-complainer, or the political zealot, or the chronic yacker who never shuts up! But most fellow travelers in my experience are cheery, well-educated, worldly, and interested in everything and everyone – even if only when on vacation.

 On this particular voyage, I found myself routinely dining with the same seven people -- three women and four men, all in their 60’s -- with myself as the eighth person at table. Michaela and Ivan were a couple, as were Gillian and Ray. Hans, Percy, and Helen were singles like me.

 On our fifth night -- after we finished touring Wurzburg and were back on the Vidar and had changed for dinner -- we met at our usual table, as was our now-accustomed routine. We ordered our meals, and were sipping various cocktails or sampling the fine local wine while waiting for our food to be served. We had covered the typical meal banter and the “getting-to-know-you” back and forth conversations the previous four evenings. Now, I felt it was time to plunge into a more in-depth conversation, so I offered the topic question: “What would you say was your most unusual life experience thus far?”

 My companions smiled and looked up or down as they pondered the question. “While you are thinking, I’ll be happy to start the ball rolling and share my story if you like,” I remarked as our trusty waiter, Orlov, arrived with the mushroom soup and fresh, warm bread rolls and butter. I ate a little and then began.

 “As you all know, I was a technical engineer in Silicon Valley before I retired. In my spare time, however, I liked to dabble -- trying to invent things, using both my garage and my basement as makeshift laboratories. My childhood heroes were men like Edison, Tesla, Marconi, and Farnsworth. One thing about contemporary life that particularly annoyed me was the constant barrage of commercial advertisements on television and radio. I sought to invent a kind of “commercial jammer” that would blank out broadcasted commercials so as to permit watching TV or listening to the radio without any interruptions. My wife and my friends were very supportive in my endeavors. I worked on the concept for about three years. Finally, in 2009, I had a working prototype. It detected the frequency band “blip” that preceded both the beginning and the end of any commercial signal. I set up rotated classical music clips which usually lasted from 30 seconds up to 4 minutes, depending on the commercial stream. A microsecond before the commercial began, my electronic device kicked in, having, for example, a talk radio station going into solely classical music for the duration of the advertisements, then going immediately back to the talk show host a microsecond after the ads stopped. As for television, I additionally rigged a visual display of timed beautiful nature landscapes on the monitor to accompany the classical music breaks. My invention worked flawlessly. I was simply overjoyed! After discussing my break-through with my family and friends -- and with a specialized lawyer who assured me that my invention was not breaking any current laws -- everyone encouraged me to register my device at the U.S. Patent Office, then go into mass production for sale to the public. I figured the Jammer could be made in America and sold for under $200, making me a tidy profit of almost $100 for each unit purchased.”

 Our waiter came and cleared our soup bowls, and then brought the main courses. I would soon enjoy a deliciously prepared, finely marbled 8-ounce steak, with Dutchess potatoes, baby carrots, and fresh asparagus, for I was approaching the culmination of my story.

 “Well, the lawyer turned out to be a crook, sad to say. He offered to legally file my invention for a patent in Washington, DC for a nominal fee. I trusted him with all of my original documents, drawings, and even a working prototype of the Jammer. He vanished with everything. Frantic, I hired a private investigator, and she discovered that he took my invention to the Clear Channel radio corporation and to each of the major television networks. They each, in turn, paid him handsomely and made him sign elaborate legal documents promising to never manufacture my invention. Finally, he was given 30 days by the media corporations to completely destroy my notes, diagrams and prototype, which he did. He later fled to Costa Rica with a windfall fortune, where he filed for citizenship so he could never be extradited back to the U.S. for theft and fraud. I thought I could recover from this shock and rebuild my device from scratch and try all over again, but the radio and television companies meanwhile paid off influential politicians to quickly pass legislation preventing any invention from ever blocking the broadcasting of commercial advertisements, purportedly ‘in the interest of the public good.’ What a farce! So my idea was derailed, probably forever…” I stopped, answered a few questions from sympathetic faces, and then hungrily tore into my steak, which thankfully was still warm.

 “Sean, what a terrible turn of events!” added Gillian. “I feel so very sorry for you. Your late wife must have likewise been appalled. Damn all lawyers, I say! Blood-sucking leeches, if you ask me. My story is quite different, but life-changing all the same. Would you like to hear it?” The diners around the table nodded in agreement, and all perked up politely while they continued to eat and drink. “Before I met and married Ray, I was traveling in Tanzania on a photo safari. I was thirty years old, so this was in 1982. I was in a group of six. In order to access the more remote wildlife areas, we needed the use of two small airplanes. Each Cessna had room for the pilot and three passengers. One day, we were going southwest from the Serengeti Plain to Katavi National Park. I sat in the front of our plane next to the pilot, with our two traveling companions seated behind us. The other plane had taken off shortly before us. Well, unfortunately, we hit a bad sand/dust storm. Our bush pilot was experienced, but our engine air filter clogged up and stalled the engine. He radioed in the emergency and our current position, but we went down. When we crashed, the Cessna flipped on its back. The pilot died when a broken metal rod rammed through his eye socket and went into his brain on impact. The two passengers in the rear seats both died of broken necks. I was able to crawl out from under the wreckage, but my right leg was crushed below the knee and oozing blood. The radio was inoperable. I prayed that the Cessna had some kind of GPS tracking device, so that the point of impact could be located. I was alone in the wilderness, who knew where, and nightfall was approaching. Would predators smell the fresh blood and attack?” Gillian paused to sip some Mosel, then continued.

 “I made a tourniquet out of my scarf to slow the bleeding. Gradually, the high winds and blowing sands subsided. Next, I crawled and gathered up some nearby brush and built a fire. I hoped this would keep any meat-eaters away until morning. I prayed, hard and humbly. I sipped some water from my canteen and dozed on and off. The night was scary and long, but dawn finally arrived without incident, followed by a helicopter rescue. I was flown to a hospital in Tabora, the closest major city. I was there for sixteen days. Yes, I survived and I was the only lucky one, but I paid a lasting price.” Gillian stood up from the table and dramatically lifted her right pant leg, revealing a flesh-colored artificial limb. She tapped the plastic appendage with her fork. “As you can see, they couldn’t save my lower leg. And now you know my story.”

 Gillian’s husband, Ray, spoke up. “As you can see, her accident didn’t slow her down one bit. We even returned to Africa after we were married and climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro. Gillian inspires me every day with her positive attitude and her good spirits over these last thirty-one years.” The rest of the table raised their glasses in acknowledgement and salute. “To Gillian!” Gillian blushed and with moist eyes resumed her seat.

 “Well, I suppose I should go next,” Ray began. “My event is not as noteworthy as the two experiences we just listened to, perhaps. But it did indeed change my life significantly. I was a young man of twenty-four, in the prime of life. We were living in Durban at the time. My father was a sailor, and from an early age, I loved the sea. Dad taught me enough skills for me to try sailing from Madagascar to Reunion Island, a distance of about 775 nautical miles, supposedly taking about three days if moving at around 10 knots. I had previously sailed solo trips of 200 and 500 miles, so this would be a further challenge. I had a seasoned 1968 Lapworth 24, the same basic model that 16-year-old Robin Lee Graham began his famous around-the-world sail with in 1965. Anyway, off I went. At first, it was favorable weather and consistent winds. But by day two, a fierce, unexpected gale roared out of the northeast and lashed the boat. I fought the ocean swells for hours and finally radioed a distress call, but it was too late. The Lapworth capsized, throwing me into the churning Indian Ocean wearing only my life vest and my swimsuit. I had to untether my safety harness in order to reach and inflate and finally eject my emergency orange life raft with its basic survival gear. I was glad I did -- just in time -- because my sailboat then went under and sank fast. I carefully pulled myself into the raft. I was so afraid that I couldn’t even cry or curse. My emotions were paralyzed. I felt for certain that I was a dead man. ” Ray paused for a quick drink of water from his crystal goblet, while our waiter cleared the table and made ready for dessert. I and my fellow tablemates were in complete suspense, visualizing the horror in our imaginations. “By now, the sun had set and darkness had come. I was utterly alone with my thoughts. I prayed with all my heart to be allowed to live, to just survive, to be rescued in time. I wanted so badly to fulfill my dreams --to get a good job, get married to a beautiful lady, start a happy family. Mercifully, the storm moved on and then the stars came out. The hours dragged on. I was too wound up to sleep, but maybe I blacked out for a while in pure exhaustion, I don’t remember. Finally, the sky turned purple-pink in the east with the dawn. In the dim light, however, I saw to my horror that there were three sharks circling my raft, their menacing dorsal fins slicing the water. When they came close enough, I whacked their backs hard with my emergency metal paddle, and they went away. That was when I spied a boat in the distance speeding toward me, the sound of its engines unmistakable. It was a French Coast Guard cutter from Reunion Island. I was saved! My life was allowed to resume. I ultimately got that great job, that wonderful wife, those fine kids. I have sailed again many times since then, but never by myself. I won’t tempt fate twice. Gillian has gone out with me in The Bahamas, Hawaii, and the South Pacific. I taught our two sons to sail too. I still love the freedom of the seas, but I know her terrors as well as her joys. Yet not a day goes by without me asking myself the fundamental question: why was I allowed to live and not die out there in the middle of nowhere?” Ray made eye contact with each person at the table for emphasis, and Gillian proudly squeezed his hand. Our waiter returned next with our desserts and coffee. I enjoyed a delicious crème brulee and a steaming pot of rooibos tea.

 Michaela suddenly cleared her throat. “Does anyone mind if I share next?” We all turned our attention to her. “When I was about six years old, my family was living in an old manor house in a suburb of London. I had contracted scarlet fever after repeated bouts of strep throat and enflamed tonsils. I had the awful body rash and high fever indicative of the disease. I was treated with penicillin, which was the usual procedure back then, but for some reason it failed to curb my infection. I got weaker and weaker, and my fever stayed dangerously high. My parents were frantic as day by day nothing changed. The doctors were baffled when my heart and lungs began to get congested. I slipped into kind of a daze, with no appetite or energy.” Michaela stopped for a sip of her coffee, then continued. “Now here’s where the story gets rather strange. Our family was not what you would call religious at all. My father especially prided himself on being what was then referred to as a ‘free-thinker’ – one who even doubted the existence of God. Anyway, one night after I was left alone in my bedroom for a short while -- when my exhausted mother went briefly to her room for a few hours of fitful sleep – a ghostly apparition appeared at the foot of my bed. It was a young woman dressed sort of like a nun but in all white, glowing with I guess you could say was an almost heavenly light in my otherwise darkened room. Her presence was very calming and peaceful. She spoke to me either softly yet clearly aloud, or just in my head -- who could say? She said my name, which totally surprised me, and then she said that I would get better soon and not to worry. Her eyes were a shimmering blue color the likes of which I have never seen since -- so kind and loving and convincing. I instantly trusted her and believed her. Just then, she suddenly extended her hand toward me. I felt a brief burning sensation from head to toe, but it was not painful at all, just kind of tingly. The lady then smiled and vanished. I eagerly told my parents and the doctor about my encounter the very first thing next morning. No one could explain it, although the doctor hinted that I had probably hallucinated the apparition or whatever in my fevered and weakened condition. But sure enough, within 36 hours I was completely cured.” The rapt table assembly raised their eyebrows and stared in amazement. As a lapsed Catholic, I had to venture the obvious question: “Michaela, do you think the lady could have been…the Virgin Mary?”

 “To this day, I am not sure, Sean. My husband, Ivan, here believes that it was.” She gestured to him seated next to her. “He is devout Russian Orthodox. We have studied many, many icons of Mary, trying to find a match up with what I saw. Some came close, but none were exact. I even went to Fatima and Lourdes to talk with priests and ask their opinions. I have read books on psychology, the paranormal, medicine, and of course religion. I have replayed the memory of this mysterious appearance almost daily in my mind. Like Ray, I ask myself: why me? And if it was truly the Virgin Mary, why didn’t she appear to someone more important like the Pope? But I am convinced that whoever it was really did come to me, and that the vision alone produced a miracle that saved my life. And I have come to realize that the spiritual aspect of life is just as real as the physical, the mental, and the emotional.” Michaela smiled and looked around the table, then clutched her husband’s hand and lifted it to her lips and gave it a kiss.

 “Maybe we should call it a night and continue this fascinating topic tomorrow night,” Ivan suggested. “Let those who wish enjoy some brandy or cognac, then turn in.” The group agreed this was a wise suggestion, for our attention would be fresh and keen after we continued down the river and toured Bamburg the following day. Some members ordered a nightcap from our waiter, while others went directly back to their staterooms for a good night’s sleep. I noticed the full moon in the sky from the deck of the Vidar as I headed for my bed. What an interesting evening! I thought, as I drifted off to sleep, lulled by the rhythm of the Vidar’s engines and the comforting sounds of the flowing river…

 At the dinner table the following night, after we enjoyed our stop at and tour of Bamberg, Ivan started us off immediately after Orlov wrote down our various menu orders. “About fifteen years ago, just before I first met Michaela, I traveled to the remote Siberian town of Yakutsk. I badly needed to earn some money, and quickly. My goal was to travel near the Lena River and hunt wolves, minks, and sables for their fur. This had to be done during the winter because the animals’ pelts were at their thickest during that time of the year and brought the highest prices. Did you know that Yakutsk is the coldest major city in the world? Its average winter temperature is -34 C., which is -30 F. As a Russian growing up in Novgorod, I thought I knew cold -- but even that town in winter seemed like balmy Odessa compared to Yakutsk!” Ivan laughed. “Anyway, because I was not a native Yakut, I had to purchase a temporary hunting license to get any furs legally, which I did. Next, I hired local transportation north on the frozen Lena to the small town of Bulus, then turned east on the Aldan River on my own and hiked – first on that frozen river, then inland when the hunting became rich and profitable. I took nine pelts over three days. I had an aluminium sled which I pulled with my tent, some necessary clothing and gear, food, and cooking fuel. I had plenty of ammunition too. The taiga forest land was mostly flat, easily traversed, with grey mountains in the distance. I had planned hunting for four days, then I would double back to Bulus and eventually return home.” Ivan paused and ate some of his smoked salmon appetizer and took a sip of his mineral water, cleared his throat, then resumed. “Well, a fierce blizzard roared in like a demon the third night. The relentless winds destroyed my tent first – actually ripped it from its moorings and blew it away as I stumbled out of the tent entrance. You wouldn’t believe how bad that storm was. In the darkness, I packed up my sled as best I could with my remaining belongings and headed back in the direction of the Aldan. But I soon stepped into an unseen large deep stream which was covered by snow. The ice wasn’t thick enough to hold all of my weight combined with the weight of my sled. I was still attached to my leather pulling harness, so in and under I went. I struggled out of my harness underwater, but all of my gear was lost – sinking while still lashed with my pelt bundle to my sled. I was left soaked and freezing to death in the dark once I pulled myself gasping out of the water and onto the stream bank. Of course my worst mistake was being foolhardy enough to think that I should hunt alone. If only I had a partner with me! I pathetically resigned myself to meeting my Maker, oddly imagining how stray wolves would soon devour my corpse until only bones would remain.” Orlov deftly arrived with our meal entrees instantly once Ivan paused. We began eating while Ivan continued.

 “It was a native Yakut reindeer hunter who found me by chance the next morning. I was frozen, nearly dead. The blizzard and winds had mercifully stopped, but the sky was sunless. The Yakut quickly built a fire, pulled off my stiffened clothing with some difficulty, and wrapped me in his fur-lined reindeer hide sleeping bag while he first thawed, then dried my clothes and boots. Fortunately, he had a dog-sled, so we mushed back to Bulus, where the authorities immediately rushed me to their simple rural clinic. I had some frostbite and residual hypothermia, but the town doctor said that I had been rescued just in time and that I was strong and would recover. Unfortunately, I lost the end joints of three toes as a result of my misfortune – they were amputated back at the hospital in Yakutsk. By the way, my rescuer was named Ayhal. I went back to Bulus the following year during the summer to inquire about his whereabouts and to thank him with a gift of a new hunting rifle. He spoke enough Russian over a welcome dinner feast at his village to introduce me to his family and to the local shaman. The shaman went on to explain that my spirit was not yet ready to leave this world when I fell into the freezing stream waters, and that Ayhal was only fulfilling that pre-ordained destiny. All I can say in closing is that I am so happy that Ayhal saved me, and that I lived – especially so that I could meet and marry Michaela, the one true love of my life. We moved to Tuscany after our wedding because I couldn’t face cold winters anymore.” He chuckled.

 While the tablemates thanked Ivan for sharing his frightening tale and continued eating, Hans asked to speak next.

 “My life-changing story is not about risking life and limb, or about a close call cheating The Grim Reaper,” he smiled and began good humoredly. “But it was a profound life-changer nonetheless. You might recall that I was once a primary school teacher in Amsterdam. I really enjoyed my job, and got a lot of respect from both my colleagues and our community. I had worked under several different school principals, male and female, for twenty-eight years -- some were quite good, while others were rather mediocre. Anyway, one year -- as we were starting a new school term – we were introduced to our newest administrator, a Ms. Zurn. She was a clipped-haired spinster in her mid-40’s, with a permanently sour, unsmiling demeanor. She had been moved around from school to school within the district for about a decade. Once her unpopularity and incompetence was discovered and covertly leaked to the district superintendent, she was quietly transferred to yet another building. Yet somehow she always avoided being fired. Well, Zurn’s reputation had preceded her, so our staff was appalled when she first strode into our annual ‘welcome back’ meeting. Zurn was not a ‘people person’ in the least – not to students and certainly not to teachers. I soon found out that she particularly hated men teachers. She was a jealous, petty, friendless sort. But she was slickly competent in dealing with the public, always aiming to please them yet never defending her staff in any disputed situations. Maybe that was how she had held on to her job, who knows? After doing a little digging, I discovered that Ms. Zurn had once been a classroom teacher, but she disliked the daily hard job of teaching and lasted only a year, so naturally she took more certifying university classes and moved into administration.” Hans paused briefly to eat a few forkfuls of his grilled sole with some buttered Brussel sprouts and swallowed a mouthful of white wine before continuing. “In the months after she arrived, Zurn made my life a living hell. She stacked my classroom with the most disruptive transfer students. She berated me in front of problem parents and students. She asked me, with a smirk -- every other day, it seemed -- if I was looking forward to retiring from teaching soon. She dropped into my classroom unannounced for purposes of “observation,” which were just thinly designed excuses for harassment and imagined fault-finding. I naturally complained to our building teacher’s union representative, and documented all of her negative actions towards me -- but he was ultimately unable to help. My colleagues were likewise understanding and sympathetic, but powerless. Meanwhile, wider staff morale was plummeting. Furthermore, I soon realized that it was a war of wills: me vs. Zurn! Anyway, one day -- during yet another tedious and sullen afterschool staff meeting -- Zurn finally crossed the line. During the end of the meeting, when the inevitable question: ‘Does anyone else have something to add?’ was asked, I stood up with a concise manifesto of sorts – compiled and signed by myself and most of my fellow teachers – and read it aloud. It outlined all of the abuses that I and others had endured over the last few months under the Zurn regime. It also listed ‘concerns’ over her competence as a principal in a leadership role. I announced after reading it that I was headed to the superintendent’s office in an hour and that I would be presenting a copy of it to him. But before I could resume my seat, a purple-faced, enraged Ms. Zurn rushed over to me, and screamed mere inches from my face with her foul breath: ‘How dare you defy me! I’ll get you fired if it’s the last thing I ever do!’ Then she lost further control and hurled the remaining contents of her coffee mug – which she still had clutched in her hand – into my face. Luckily, the stale black coffee was cold,” Hans remarked as he grinned and looked around the dining table, “but that action finally cost her job. She was escorted out of her office the following morning, and put on administrative leave pending an inquiry. She was soon relieved of her position. But she unexpectedly came to my house a month later, with her beady eyes blazing with hatred, and swore an oath that she would one day kill me for what I did to her. After she stomped away, I notified the police, the teacher’s union, and my superintendent over her surprising threat. The Amsterdam police wrote out a restraining order on her, but when they went to her residence to serve the summons, they discovered that Zurn had vanished, leaving no forwarding address. Our school quickly got a new, normal principal, and I taught for two more happy years in peace before retiring. Yet somewhere, Zurn is still at large…will she one day make good on her demented threat? How crazy and serious do you think she is?” Hans looked pleadingly into the faces of his traveling comrades. “And I suppose that that is what I have to watch and wait for. At least on a ship like the Vidar, I am completely safe,” Hans noted ruefully.

 The table guests released their tension from Hans’ remarkable story with exhaled breaths, and expressed their sympathy to him as Orlov gracefully cleared the dining table and then served dessert. Ray then spoke up and even went so far as to recommend that Hans get a “concealed carry” weapon’s permit, but Hans informed him that that option was unavailable in the Netherlands. I was just about to enjoy my Sacher torte “mit schlag” and coffee when Percy spoke up.

 “These stories are all really remarkable and fascinating,” he began. “But my tale is basically about money. Now I know that that is often considered a rather vulgar topic to discuss in polite society, but first hear my out…then you be the judge on whether my life changer was worth your attention. To begin, I was living in Atlanta back in 2007. I was flipping houses for a well-known real firm during the nationwide real estate boom. I was living in a beautiful house with my wife of ten years. We never had children, but it was a very good life. The profits came in like no tomorrow. But then the Great Recession hit the following year, and suddenly I found myself out of a job. My wife and I had foolishly lived beyond our means, and before long all the bills came due, depleting our savings in about six months. We argued and blamed each other, and then she shocked me one day by filing for divorce. I lost what little I had left in the settlement, other than half the value of our house. When that property was sold, I had a bit more than $180k left to my name. True, I was still better off than some other people, but now I was out of work and alone, and living in a motel. I got very depressed and started drinking to pass the time. My life spiraled further downward day after day. After eight months, I couldn’t stand myself anymore. I wanted to end my life. At first, I thought I would take an around-the-world cruise and simply slip overboard one night and vanish forever beneath the waves. Then a new idea popped into my head. I had always been kind of a gambler, even as a young man. Cards, horses, you know. So instead of ‘suicide by ship’, I decided that I would go to Las Vegas and bet all of my money on one turn of a roulette wheel. If I won, I would live and try to get professional help and try to re-build my life. If I -- more likely -- lost, I would simply buy a handgun and blow my brains out back in my hotel room. It was a easy choice, because at that point, I just didn’t care anymore.”

 Percy paused to enjoy a sip of coffee before continuing. “I flew to Vegas the next day and checked into The Mirage. I had all my cash in a briefcase -- $180k. I exchanged all of my money for blue-colored thousand dollar gambling chips, which were given to me in a hefty slotted mahogany container box. I went directly to the roulette table, accompanied by a casino security guard. I decided on a whim to divide the chips into three equal portions of $60k each, giving myself three chances to either win or lose. What the hell, I really didn’t care. I was the world’s biggest reject, and felt numb and resigned. The casino manager was called over when I tried to place my first bet. He OK’d me, but he made me read and sign a disclaimer document affirming that I was in my right mind and that I was aware of the risk and that I was also cold sober. Then I casually placed the first $60k in blue chips on black. Round and round the ball went, until it landed on red. I had just lost $60k. I simply made a face and shrugged my shoulders, to the shock of the bystanders and the manager. Then I put another $60k in chips on black. The ball traveled its course, then hopped and dropped on red again. Goodbye, another $60k. Internally, I wondered if it hurt when you put a gun barrel in your mouth and pulled the trigger. What would be my last thoughts? I mused in a detached manner. I placed my final $60k on black a third time. A huge crowd had hurried over to witness the drama of a strange, emotionless man risking everything like an idiot. But incredibly, the ball ended up on black. My money was doubled in an instant, to $120k. Like a zombie in a daze, I casually moved the entire amount to red and let it ride, and the wheel of fate spun dizzily. It -- almost unbelievably -- hit red. Suddenly, I had $240k in the space of five minutes, $60k more than what I had walked in the door with. I shoved all the chips onto black, letting everything ride on one last spin. The casino manager paged The Mirage’s owner and asked for special permission to take my staggering bet. Because the odds were against three wins in a row, my bet was approved. The crush of the crowd around the table was such that more security was called in to help control it.”

 Percy paused again, maybe for dramatic effect, or maybe just to enjoy another sip of coffee. The travel companions around the table were clearly enthralled, along with yours truly.

 “Well, you may have guessed that I hit black. I had won $480, 000. The roulette table crowd erupted in loud cheers and applause. The manager said ‘that was it’ for me today, and he swiftly led me to the cashier’s window, where a certified check was issued in my name, along with an IRS tax form. The casino manager wished me good health and a long life to enjoy my winnings, but he added under his breath that he hoped he wouldn’t see me again for a long time, ‘nothing personal’. That was when the whole bizarre drama finally hit me. I robotically marched back to my room, where a complimentary bottle of chilled champagne had been sent up by way of congratulations from the hotel management. I fell on my bed and began to cry. I knew I would live. I would start my life over. I had been given a second chance. Was it fate, God, destiny, luck, or something else? I didn’t know. I still don’t know. I fell into a deep sleep, having never opened the champagne. I haven’t had a drink since that time either, by the way. When I woke up ten hours later, I flung open the blackout curtains, ordered an enormous room service breakfast, and plotted out my new life on a single piece of Mirage hotel stationary. To cut to the chase, I wound up moving to London and got into their real estate market. I bought in carefully and selectively while prices were still low. Now, after five years of serious dealing, I have accumulated a small fortune, which continues to grow daily with minimal effort on my part. By the way, I became a U.K. citizen, and although I have enjoyed several successful female relationships thus far, I frankly doubt whether I will ever re-marry. This cruise on the Vidar with all of you nice folks is just a relaxing vacation for me. Thanks for listening to my story. I hope you found it interesting… Now, I think it is our friend Helen’s turn to share,” Percy noted, smiling, turning to his left and kindly patting her hand. Helen was our final participant. Fortunately, our table mates still had their attention and curiosity piqued, so we were ready for one more. Orlov skillfully refilled our cups with tea or coffee, or our glasses with mineral water, wine, brandy, or cognac.

 “I know it’s getting late, so I’ll be brief,” Helen began. “When I was in my early 20’s, I was pregnant with twin boys. But they were rare Siamese twin boys, joined at the head. The doctors ultimately decided that – due to the complicated and dangerous surgery – only one boy would be able to survive. After my lengthy C-section delivery, I saw both children presented alive to me but still connected. My husband was unfortunately away on emergency business, so I alone had to make an emotional, legal and moral choice: who would live and who would die? Would I make a mistake and possibly kill the more ‘promising’ of the two boys? Or was it just a not-so-simple case of random choice? It was horrible trying to decide, and time was of the essence. Ultimately, I looked at the two boys and chose the one that looked the strongest and the most likely to survive. Obviously, the boys were unnamed at this point, so I indicated to the surgeons: ‘save the one on the left.’ Then I turned away and burst into tears. The baby who was saved and whom we later named Miles grew up to be a successful stock market analyst in New York City, and he has given us four beautiful grandchildren along with his lovely wife, Denise. As you already know, I was divorced in 2005, so I am still single at this time. Yet not a day goes by without my thinking about my other baby boy. We never named him, but sometimes I think I sense his presence whenever I wake up alone in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I still cry about it. Miles tells me to stop focusing on past events and let the hurt go, but any mother couldn’t help it. I think it will continue to haunt me for the rest of my life.” Helen looked around the table at the sympathetic faces, and the other two women slowly rose from their seats and compassionately approached Helen and hugged her, their own eyes moist.

 Just then a trim, smartly dressed, perky woman in her mid-60’s approached our table. “Hello! Sorry to interrupt everyone, but I wanted to quickly go over the itinerary for our stop in Nuremberg tomorrow.” It was our tour director, Chloe. “Orlov mentioned that you were all sharing some deep personal stories these last two evenings around the dinner table. Too bad I had to miss those. People have the most amazing and unexpected stories to share, don’t you think? Did I ever tell you about the time I had lunch with Paul and Linda McCartney in Stockholm during their ‘Wings Over Europe’ tour? Or maybe you’d like to hear about my father working for Howard Hughes? You simply wouldn’t believe some of the stories he told me!”

 The End

 By Jack Karolewski

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