MAYDAY

Captain Lerro and the Skyway Bridge

@2021 2nd revision

(*The stage is dark*).

VIDEO (two voices, lightning, brief disaster images):

Mayday mayday mayday Coast Guard! Mayday mayday mayday Coast Guard!

Vessel calling Mayday, vessel in distress. This is United States Coast Guard, St. Petersburg Florida. Request your position, nature of distress and number of persons on board, over.

Get all the emergency equipment out to the Skyway Bridge. Vessel just hit the Skyway Bridge. The Skyway Bridge is down! Get all emergency equipment out to the Skyway Bridge. The Skyway Bridge is down! This is a Mayday. Emergency situation. Stop the traffic on that Skyway Bridge!

This is Coast Guard St. Petersburg, roger. What size is the vessel that hit the bridge, over?

It's a large vessel. Stop the traffic on the Skyway Bridge! There are some people in the water! Get emergency equipment out to the Skyway Bridge, now!

Roger, what vessel are you on, over?

Summit Venture, Summit Venture.

Roger, Summit Venture – what is the size of your vessel, and can you assist, over?

Cannot assist, we're six hundred and six feet long and light draft. We cannot assist, we are in on abutments – stop all the traffic on the bridge, send some vessels out here to render assistance. People are in the water!

This is Coast Guard St. Petersburg, roger.

(pause)

All stations, this is United States Coast Guard, St. Petersburg, Florida. The vessel Summit Venture, six hundred and six foot, has hit the Skyway Bridge. Any vessels in Tampa Bay area, Skyway vicinity, proceed and assist, there are reports of people in the water. Break, this is United States Coast Guard, St. Petersburg Florida. Out!

(A few seconds of silence. Slowly, a single shaft of downstage light grows stronger, revealing a man seated in a wheelchair. He has a scruffy look, several days without a shave, and tired eyes. As the light comes up, his head is buried in his hands. At full light, he raises his head and begins speaking to the audience.)

I can tell you what it looked like.

I can tell you what it sounded like.

I can even tell you what it *smelled* like.

But don't ask me what it felt like. There aren't words in the dictionary.

Cars flying through the air, free-falling for a second or two and then nosing straight downward from the weight of the engine, once gravity took over. Cars with headlights on, those twin beams broadcasting on a vertical highway of nothing, searching for focus until they met the water, 150 feet straight down, and went out. I saw the splashes.

It didn't sound like anything. Nothing. I was so far away, more than 500 feet away and up in the ship's wheelhouse, I didn't hear

the collision, I didn't hear the bridge falling, I didn't hear anything but the static on our radio and my own shallow breathing.

If I'd been able to hear those poor people screaming as they fell, I don't think I'd be here today.

And the smell? It's funny the things you remember. All the wheelhouse doors and windows were closed, on account of the rain and the wind, and so the air was stale and close. Cigarettes and hair tonic and, well, the B.O. from the crew guys, I don't know, the coffee from Bruce's Thermos?

(the joke blows away in the wind as he thinks for a moment. A bitter memory hits him, hard)

The helplessness as another car, another set of headlights, appeared at the top of the bridge. All of us on the bridge of that ship willing it to slow down and come to a stop before that ugly black break. *Couldn't they see it?* The sun was starting to come up, finally. One after another, sometimes in groups of two or three, the cars would just sail off into nothing. Twelve hundred feet of bridge, down, gone, because its legs were kicked out from under it.

Then there was a bus. I recognized the paint job and the dog logo, it was a Greyhound. And it didn't fly, it nosed off the end, went vertical, and before it hit the water it flipped belly-up, landing on its roof.

After an impact like that, there wasn't much left to sink, but it disappeared soon enough. There were 26 people on that bus, I found out later, including a young mother with a six-month-old baby in her lap.

So what did it feel like? How could I possibly explain that?

(He stands up and moves away from the wheelchair. He is almost sprightly now. He holds out his hand and shakes an invisible hand at a party. It's an introduction.)

John Lerro. Nice to meet you. Yeah, it's a great party – Steve's wife makes her own guacamole, and it is incredible. That's the

only reason I come to their parties! You've gotta have some - it's in a bowl over there on the counter, next to the chips.

Yeah, I've got a Coke here, I'm good. Hey – let me ask you something. Do you know who I am? John Lerro, yeah. I'm the guy who knocked down the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Yeah, remember? The whole thing came down? That was me. I was the pilot on that ship. I killed 35 people.

(*thoughtful*) And even though it was an accident – I sure as hell didn't do it on purpose – to some, I'm the worst mass murderer in Tampa Bay history. The truth is that it happened, and it happened because of something I did, or didn't do. So maybe they're right, those people.

(the person has walked away. Lerro's eyes follow; he is clearly disappointed, again. He calls feebly after them:)

Uh – nice meeting you.

(To the audience)

I must've had that conversation 50 times over the years. When I'm introduced to someone new, I tell them about the day I checked into hell. My friend John Hayes thinks I'm trying to gauge whether this new person has already pre-judged me. My attorney, Steve Yerrid, tells me I have a deep-seated need to unburden myself. To start off with a clean slate every time. To confess.

I kind of agree with Steve, in a way – I was raised in a strict Catholic family, and you learn early on about confessing your sins and seeking forgiveness. Absolution. But all the Hail Marys and Our Fathers in the world could not absolve me of this.

We went to Blessed Sacrament for mass every Sunday morning. Without fail. My parents both came from big Italian families, and in the part of Queens, where we lived, there were probably a dozen Catholic churches – Saint Joan of Arc, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Mercy, Our Lady of Fatima – that one was the Spanish-speaking church. I guess there's a lot of guilt and confession up in those neighborhoods, no matter how you talk.

I was kind of a street urchin, and didn't have serious thoughts at first. Where I grew up, it wasn't an Italian neighborhood. The kids

– there were me - the Wop – two Irish kids and two German kids. And it was the Wop who got his nose bloodied most of the time.

I liked the water. In the Sea Scouts, we would take these old whaleboats and row them around in Flushing Bay – and my dad finally convinced me, his aimless son, that I could have some kind of a future in the Merchant Marine.

At least it would get me out of the boroughs, out of our working-class routine. The State University of New York had a school, the oldest non-military maritime school in the country, at **Throg's** Neck, on the East River just a few miles from where I grew up.

OK, so it would get me out of the boroughs *eventually.*

The idea was that I'd ship out, make a bunch of friends, and see the world. Make something of myself.

(he pauses, thinks, and changes direction)

I used to dance – did I ever tell you that? And man, I loved it.

Not the waltz, or the tango or the cha-cha-cha, although I WAS pretty good on my feet and always managed to impress the ladies. Ballroom dancing didn't interest me – too formal. That was from my mom and dad's time.

No, I was obsessed with ballet. My parents used to take me and my sister Julie to City Center to see George Balanchine's New York City Ballet. By the time the company moved to Lincoln Center in 1964, I was in my senior year at the SUNY Maritime Academy, and still I could not get enough.

(he closes his eyes, in a trance, swaying around the stage as if in a pas de deux with an invisible partner)

And get this: Edward Villella, who was principal dancer under Balanchine, had also been an athletic kid with a passion for the arts. His father worked in the garment district, and he told him "No son of mine is going to be a faggot ballet dancer." Anyway, dad sent Eddie – who wasn't gay, by the way - off to Maritime to make a man out of him.

And he did all right for himself. He lettered in baseball and was the campus boxing champion. But in his spare time, he would go into the city and dance. God, his form was amazing. He auditioned for Balanchine even before he graduated from Maritime, with a degree in Marine Science.

So when I started up there, I wanted to be Eddie Villella. I took to the place, too. They ran it like a military school, which was good for me. I needed the discipline. And hell, that's where I learned to sail. I learned to crew during our annual summer trip over to Europe aboard the old Liberty Ship the college owned. The Empire State. Once my dad flew over to meet me in Rome, where my sister was living, and I got to introduce them both to my classmates. My shipmates.

Back at home, we would always go into the city during furloughs. My buddy Bob House liked to work out at Gold's Gym – like Eddie, Bob was a boxer – and I enrolled in beginning ballet classes at the Martha Graham School, which in those days was part of the Carnegie Hall complex.

We didn't see old Martha too often. She was tough, though, I gotta tell ya. One afternoon she was watching us, and she moved down the line, like one of the inspections at Maritime. She stood looking at me for a cold minute, and then – she punched me in the stomach! Didn't say a word, just gave me a good one! Then she moved down the line to the other dancers and gave them more of the same.

(he is dancing) video

All ships move gracefully, slowly. A ballet dancer moves gracefully, always with follow-through motion. They have the same effect on me.

I loved ballet. My teacher was a pretty little Jewish girl from Brooklyn named Stella King. We began dating in my second year, and in 1965, we got married. Just a few months after I graduated from Maritime, with a third mate's license. That's how they start you off.

Not too long after that, I messed up my knee in a car accident, and that was it for my career as a dancer. So I joined the Merchant Marine.

There's a certain romance to life on the sea – the idea of watching the sun come up in the sky and on the water, the way the light just seems to materialize in red and orange and white, a cup of steaming coffee in your hand, thinking about what's going to be just past the horizon. Your shipmates become your family. It helps if you like the guys, I'll tell you that.

My first couple of years, I worked supply ships going in and out of the war zones in Viet Nam. Never got shot at; we weren't hauling munitions, and we weren't carrying soldiers, just food and clean water and other essentials. So the enemy left us alone.

I worked my way up the ladder until I had a master's license. There was no limit to the size of the vessels I could take around the world. I was very much like a long-distance truck driver. No wheels!

The thing was, I had a wife and a very young son at home. A real family. On a couple of occasions, I was gone for almost a year.

So I started to think about training to become a harbor pilot. You're responsible for one territory, and one territory only. Your job is to bring ships into port, and bring them out of port. And that's it! For the most part, you get to sleep in your own bed at night.

That appealed to me enormously. I'd pretty much had it with wanderlust. Fuck the allure of the sea, you know?

In January of 1976, I was hired as a pilot-in-training by the Panama Canal Company. The three of us lived in Colon, Panama, on the Coco Solo compound – it was a former U.S. Navy submarine base, used for civilian housing. Stella taught ballet classes in the rec center.

Eleven months in Panama taught me everything I needed to know about moving ships through tight spaces. And while I was there, I studied the charts for every port in Florida – we'd lived in Miami for a while, during my merch days, and a few of my buddies had already made the move into piloting in Florida. I knew that's where I wanted my family to settle.

I aced the piloting exams and on October 18, 1976, the Board of Professional Regulation hired me and gave me the assignment I wanted – Tampa Bay.

So we moved again. And I got right to work.

A busy port like Tampa has to have harbor pilots. The idea is, we know that bay, we're trained to know every shoal, every marker and every passage of that bay, from the Gulf of Mexico to the docks – that's about 40 miles, 40 miles of bad road, I call it. If you're the master of an incoming ship from China, or Greece or Timbuktu, you can't be expected to read the charts and safely get your vessel from the wide open sea, through this little labyrinth of

channels into the port and safely to the dock, in a place you've probably never seen before. Hell, some of those foreign guys never learned how to dock a ship, anyway.

The weather can come out of nowhere and swallow you whole. There are so many factors. In the first place, Egmont Channel, that's the main drag that gets you from open water into the bay, is dredged to 40 feet deep. You've got to stay between the buoys and follow that invisible highway precisely, and the next one, Mullet Key Channel, because the bay bottom everywhere else is like 12 or 13 feet.

So if you're riding heavy with cargo and you're carrying a draft of 20 or 30 feet, that's what's under the waterline, stray off either side of those main channels and you'll ground in the shallows. Then you get emergency calls, and tugboats, and pissed-off people at the shipping company. Because you're wasting their time and you're wasting their money. So you don't want that.

So that's what we do, harbor pilots. At the Port of Tampa, I go aboard and the captain relinquishes command of the outgoing vessel. It's up to me to judge the weather, judge the tides and the currents and the other traffic on the bay, and steer the big bastard out and across the bay. Sometimes the vessel has taken on a load of something – in Tampa, it's usually oranges or grapefruits or crushed phosphate, which is used to make fertilizer – and sometimes the vessel has come in carrying cargo and been unloaded in Tampa. Either way, when it leaves port, there's a harbor pilot on board to get it safely on its way. There has to be.

After I've cleared the Skyway Bridge, I'll radio the pilot boat, and it'll shoot out from the dock at Egmont Key and pick me up. I climb down a rope ladder, down the broadside of the ship, to jump onto the pilot boat. The ship never slows down. Then, with the master back at the conn, it continues to whatever part of the world it's due next. And I either go home, or back to the pilot station on Egmont to wait for my next assignment.

I had just finished a transit like that in the late afternoon of May 8, 1980, and was back in my cabin at Egmont, expecting to hear from a shipping agent in Tampa. I'd stayed on the island because I was due to bring another ship inbound that evening. Motor Vessel Summit Venture was a "bulker," a 600-foot bulk-loading freighter bound for – what else - the phosphate docks. I was to bring in the

empty ship, which weighed just under 20,000 tons, so the crew could fill its holds for a trip to the Port of Pusan in Korea. Piece of cake.

Once I disembarked at the port, I'd get in my car and drive back home, and Friday afternoon, I was going to close on a bank loan. I finally felt like the Pilots Association had accepted me – I was going to become a senior pilot, and allowed to buy shares in the organization, and share in the profits. Pretty quickly, I was going to more than double my salary.

Everything changed when the agent decided to postpone Summit Venture's transit until early Friday morning. He didn't give a reason – really, he wasn't required to – and so I didn't give it a lot of thought one way or the other. I had dinner, settled in with a book and fell asleep pretty quickly.

Friday, May the 9th. I received my wake-up call at 4:20 a.m., and a few minutes later I was outside, looking across the channel to Mullet Key, where old Fort DeSoto is. That's two miles distant. I figure if I can clearly see the lights on the channel markers over there, that means good visibility. It wasn't foggy that morning, and it was warm.

On the rotation board in the office, my assignment was on the top line. I don't drink coffee, so I fixed a cup of strong tea and sat down with a copy of Lloyd's Registry to get all the details on Summit Venture. Then I got on the radio and called the captain, to ask what his visibility was – he was anchored at what we call the Sea Buoy, outside of Egmont Channel, about six miles offshore. A Taiwanese guy, Captain Liu. He'd loaded up in Tampa quite a few times, but we hadn't worked together before. I mean, not that it mattered. He told me he had blown his ballast tanks in order to make his ship ride higher and faster on its transit into port.

Oh, "blowing his ballast tanks"? That's like flushing the water out of a toilet bowl. You keep water in the tanks on a ship to give it weight and stability. When you want to move faster, you blow the tanks.

I listened in on the pilots' channels to see what they were talking about – the weather on the bay, vessel traffic on the bay, any problems, anything unusual. Channel sixteen is the Coast Guard channel, which is where they'd tell you about severe weather. There was nothing there. And the NOAA Channel – that's the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – hadn't issued

any warnings, either. The last report was four hours old, and it just said to watch out for moderate winds.

So I instructed the captain that I'd be at the rendezvous point in approximately 45 minutes. That's usually how long it took the pilot boat, going at 12 knots, to get there. Bruce Atkins was another merchant mariner looking to make the switch to piloting; he was to ride along with me as a pilot-trainee. What a stupid word, especially for a grown man who had a master's license and had been sailing the world with Gulf Oil for years. "Trainee" made it sound like he was learning to work the cash register at Burger King.

I remember when Summit Venture, all six hundred and six feet of her, appeared in the distance, chugging along at slow ahead towards our little pilot boat. Pushing a wall of white water, the bow wake. Her holds were empty and she was riding high. She was just another big steel bulker taking a bite out of the horizon, and this was going to be just another ride up the bay.

She never stopped, never even slowed down, as the pilot boat pulled along her port side. Time is money in the shipping business, so this was standard procedure – the crew dropped a rope ladder, with wooden planks, and Bruce and I crawled up the side of that ship, like Batman and Robin scaling a skyscraper. Only the skyscraper was in motion, and so we were too. I was glad I was in good physical shape; in fact, I worked out at home, and took pride in my physical abilities.

You climb aboard, the first mate welcomes you and you follow him up the stairs of the superstructure at the stern of the vessel, five levels up to the wheelhouse.

I was introduced to Captain Liu, who filled me in on the vessel's handling characteristics, and I instructed the man at the wheel – he spoke rudimentary English, and of course he understood commands – to bring us into Egmont Channel.

The first hour was uneventful. We had some rain, nothing heavy, and the wind was moderate.

(*He picks up his binoculars. Now he's in the wheelhouse, watching, and explaining).*

The thing is, with boats that big and heavy, the ride is pretty much always the same. Unless you're trapped in a fucking cyclone, with swells 20 feet high, and you're bobbing up and down in those troughs like a kid on a Jet Ski, a 20,000 ton ship is going to slice through the water evenly, like it's on a track, like nothing in the world is going to slow it down or cause it to bounce or rock. It's a smooth glide. It's pudding. I was on a ship once, hit a right whale 25 miles off the coast of Newfoundland. We didn't feel it. Not a bump. If the bosun's mate hadn't noticed the bright crimson wake churning behind us, I don't think we ever would have known. Then we saw the whale, or what was left of it, blowing red, maybe 200 yards off midships on the starboard side. I felt bad, but that sort of thing comes with the territory. God made the creatures of the sea, but He also created Man – and He made Man smart enough to build ships that could sail around the planet. If the whales can't get out of the way, that's too fucking bad. Survival of the fittest.

Captain Shiffmacher, his first name was Jack, and I didn't like him much – hailed me on the pilot frequency. He was bringing an empty gasoline tanker, Pure Oil, out of port. About the same size as Summit Venture. We each looked at our course trajectories, and our expected speed, and together we concluded that we'd probably pass, port side to port side, just after he'd sailed under the Skyway. I was still at least two miles from the bridge. The channel was 800 feet wide, which gives passing vessels way more than enough room to avoid each other.

I mentioned this to Captain Liu, who was standing a few feet away with his nervous-looking First Mate, who kept scribbling on a clipboard. Liu just smiled and nodded at what I said. I was in charge, after all. He knew I could handle it. He said something to the other guy in Chinese.

Nobody on the bay had been talking about bad weather over the radio, and of course there was no squall advisory from the Coast Guard or the NOAA. They've got eyes that see all the way across the Gulf. There was nothing of concern on Summit Venture's radar … until there was.

I had never seen weather move that fast. I was standing at the window, raising my binoculars and watching out for the first sign of the rising sun off to the east. The Skyway Bridge would be right in front of us soon enough.

The ship had two radars, adjustable, so you could monitor different distances at the same time. One of them was broken.

Bruce was manning the working radar station, on the starboard side. He never left it, while I paced back and forth between the radar screen and the windows. The helmsman was to his left, turning the wheel in accordance with the courses I was calling out. We were in the channel, on a straight line up to the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, at full ahead. The final stretch. It was drizzling, we were starting to see whitecaps on the water, but as I said, you wouldn't notice by the steadiness of the vessel. Drizzle and whitecaps didn't matter.

Then Bruce called out that he had a front moving in, a big one - it was coming out of the southwest and it was moving at a terrible clip. I went out on the starboard wing. The wind was picking up, and the rain stung my face. I didn't need my binoculars – I saw it. A black sky. An angry sky. Dark clouds, roiling and black, like a vengeful God in a Renaissance painting.

And I knew – it was coming for me.

What the fuck was I going to do? I couldn't outrun it.

Then it was right on top of us. An explosion of wind and water, and darkness, and danger. The blackness was so thick that everything in front of us, through the forward windows, was just obliterated. The only light was coming from the puny tungsten bulbs inside the wheelhouse, so all I saw was my own reflection in the glass, looking back at myself with a blank, stupid stare. I felt my sphincter muscles tighten.

Then Bruce called out – calmly, I thought – that he had lost all radar. His screen had gone to all clutter. At seven-tenths of a mile from the bridge. I called half ahead, and ordered a pair of lookouts be sent up to the bow.

You see, our course was true – we were still in the channel, keeping to the southern edge, what you'd call the right-hand traffic lane, and still making for the Skyway. But there was a bastard turn in the channel coming up, an 18-degree port turn, and I had to know where it was. To go though the 800-foot hole under the Skyway, I absolutely had to make that turn. Since the storm had killed the one functioning radar, those lookouts were told to report – over the shipboard telephone – when they saw the buoys that marked the turn. One-A and Two-A.

Think, Lerro, think.

If I ordered hard aport, we could come around in the channel and sail away from the bridge, back in the direction we were coming from. And let the storm move past us, across the other side of the bay and over Tampa.

But Captain Shiffmacher was headed out on the Pure Oil, and from our last conversation I knew that he was probably going to pass me somewhere around the Skyway. There was, at that moment, no way to tell exactly where he was. The radio was nothing but squeal and static. If I came hard aport, there was a really good chance our vessels would collide. And a tanker – even an empty one – would most likely explode.

So that wasn't an option.

I told Liu to have his man sing out when he saw a turn buoy on his starboard side. At the same time I told him to make the anchors ready. I thought that I would pull the vessel over to hard starboard and drop both hooks. Of course, it would be shallow when we left the channel, and the vessel would most likely ground. But since we were light and riding so high, there was also the possibility that we'd present a broadside to that wind from aft, and get blown sideways into the Skyway.

Everything happened so fast.

I heard Bruce say he had the buoys on radar – it had cleared for just one sweep, and then obscured again – but he said he saw them, at point seven five miles, and that we were OK.

(Left hand on the bible, right hand raised. He is testifying.)

I didn't take the ship hard right because also at the same moment the lookout said – and I know the exact words – "Buoy starboard bow." That may have been the captain relaying it to me. It may have been somebody else. But I heard somebody say "Buoy starboard bow," and I decided it's the turning buoy. I've got a visual sighting.

I ordered Captain Atkins to change course, port 10, a standard order on that turn. That's a turn from zero eight one to zero six three, and it's eighteen degrees. It's not enough for any more.

The best thing to do, now that I had a position, was to shoot for that eight hundred foot hole.

I heard Captain Atkins say "Midships," and tell the helmsman to steer zero six three. I ordered speed reduced to slow ahead. I didn't like the idea of slow ahead with the wind aft, but there was a bridge in front. I didn't just want to go barreling through heavy rain. So at slow ahead I thought I would have a slight edge, a little more time to find that bridge.

And the next thing I saw after that slow ahead bell was the bridge. I heard no other reports. I saw the Skyway in front of me, and it was clearing from the starboard side. It took me a second or two after seeing the bridge to determine that it was not the center of the bridge.

I remember I didn't put the binoculars down. I just grabbed at the engine telegraph and threw it astern twice, which everybody understands is emergency full astern. I told the captain "Drop Both Anchors, Come Hard Port." And then the vessel hit the bridge.

(To the audience, again)

Our son, Eric – we've always called him Chauncy – was in the eighth grade. When he got on his bus that morning, the other kids were talking about the accident. I guess the news was already on the radio. So even before he sat down, somebody says "Hey, Lerro, do you think that was your dad?" and shit like that. And worse. They wheeled in one of those big black and white school TVs on a cart and watched the coverage all morning. And eventually, he heard my name. And he knew. And the kids knew enough to leave him alone.

When Chauncy got home that afternoon, he let himself in – Stella was at work, too, and he was a latchkey kid. So he was used to it. The phone was ringing as he closed the door behind him. He answered it – 'hello?' – and a woman's voice said "How does it feel to have a murderer for a father?"

Can you imagine? Thirteen years old. He slammed the phone down, and almost immediately it started ringing again. He let it ring for a while, and then – because he thought it might be me or

his mom calling – he answered it again. It was a reporter, firing questions at him. So he hung up, and decided not to answer again. The phone never stopped ringing, for the rest of the day. He made himself a peanut butter sandwich and sat there, eating it and staring at the phone.

The pilot association attorneys put the three of us – me, Stella and Chauncy – at a motel across town, under assumed names. The phone literally never stopped ringing, and reporters were camped out on our front lawn.

They all took their shots at me – the newspapers, the TV people, especially the talk radio guys. There was no internet then, so this was the court of public opinion. The letters to the editor were brutal. They called me a drunk – well, I don't drink, and never have, so they could go fuck themselves. And when it got out that I had been a ballet dancer at one time in my life, they insisted I was … well, a faggot. That was the word they used in those days.

How could any rational, intelligent, sober man drive a twenty-thousand ton ship straight into a fixed bridge in the middle of a bay?

There had been a lot of accidents, dozens every year, involving piloted ships on Tampa Bay. Most of them minor – you push over a port piling when you have to dock in high winds, or you might juuuust scrape a tugboat if you pass too close in a tight channel. Cranes get bent, antennas fall off. Or you ground out. It's an inexact science.

The thing is, every single incident is reported – by the pilots – and the paperwork goes to Tallahassee for review. Now, I'd been working in Tampa for four years, and I had seven incident reports, all of them minor, and all on file. OK, once, the stern of my vessel swung around during a turn through a temporary channel and clipped – just clipped – the edge of one of the concrete Skyway piers. Minor damage, easily repaired, no interruption in vessel or vehicular traffic.

I had made nearly 900 safe passages under the Skyway Bridge in my career.

After Summit Venture, the media got hold of every single accident report from Tampa, and never mind that I had one of the best records in the company – other guys had filed eleven, twelve – one pilot had seventeen – here was evidence that JOHN LERRO HAD HIT THE SKYWAY BRIDGE BEFORE! I heard Jane Pauley say it on the NBC Nightly News. It was a "revelation." Of course, they never mentioned anyone else's incident record.

The Florida House of Representatives put an investigative committee together; right off the bat, one of them told the media that "John Lerro should have been disciplined and pulled off a long time before this. I'm concerned that the pilots are being regulated substantially by the profession itself. This isn't the only pilot or the only incident that needs investigating."

Thanks, pal.

I felt like a rotisserie chicken on a spit, naked and exposed, singed, dry and crackling. I turned and turned while everybody stared at me and licked their lips, wondering when I'd be fully and finally cooked.

Together, the Coast Guard and the National Transportation Safety Board conducted an official Marine Board of Inquiry. Over 18 days, everyone testified – me, Bruce, Captain Liu, the senior crew members, the first Coast Guard investigators on the scene, the other pilots who'd been on the bay that morning.

God, there were so many lawyers.

Every one of the pilots called to testify supported me. Time and again, they'd look over the data from that morning and then say that had they been in my position, they would have done the same thing.

I was asked why, when the weather started to turn, didn't I come around hard aport in the main channel and avoid the Skyway Bridge completely?

I told them about the Pure Oil, that tanker that was headed my way from Tampa, and how I wasn't sure of her exact location and did not want to risk a collision.

On the stand Captain Shiffmacher said he HAD radioed me as the storm was peaking, to tell me he'd purposely grounded himself on the other side of the Skyway to wait till it blew over. So I could have easily made that 180-degree turn and avoided the disaster altogether.

Of course, I never heard that radio call.

Later, the president of the pilot organization told me, privately, that he believed Shiffmacher lied on the stand, that he never bothered to let me know he was taking his ship out of harm's way and out of my path. The boss thought Shiffmacher, one of the veteran pilots, probably turned his radio off to save the battery! He never liked Shiffmacher much, and apparently Shiffmacher didn't like ME at all.

As it turned out, a good number of my fellow pilots had a problem with me. Back in '76, I was the first outside hire, the first guy brought in under a new state anti-nepotism law. There was that, and while only one pilot – a leather-skinned good old boy named Dave Robinson – made disparaging remarks about me in the media, there were other who thought I was kind of a whining, New York pussy-boy. The thing is, I'm not stoic at all. If I got in a jam, docking, say, or with some sort of engine or rudder trouble, I'd get on the radio and ask for … well, not help. Advice.

And that just didn't sit well with some of these tough old guys. Even Bruce, my co-pilot that day on Summit Venture, confided to me that during his years as the master of a Gulf Oil ship, coming into Tampa Bay, he always kinda hoped I wouldn't be his assigned pilot. He didn't have a lot of confidence in me.

That stung.

But I'll tell ya, Bruce's closing statement during the hearings made my heart soar:

(As Bruce Atkins).

"I have never been engulfed by a storm or a weather system that had such accelerated intensity that this storm had. I don't know of

one mariner that would have performed in a more professional manner than I saw Captain Lerro perform.

“The elements had control of that vessel at that time, Sir. There was just nothing that Captain Lerro or anybody could have done at that time.”

Bruce quit the Tampa Bay Pilots Association the next day, and went back to Massachusetts. I never saw or spoke to him again.

While we waited for the results of the Marine Board of Inquiry – that was a lot of information, and it took three-quarters of a year before a specially-appointed judge would rule on the final, legal cause of the accident – I was due to go back to work.

So what did the Board of Professional Regulation do? They suspended my license.

(As DPR secretary Nancy Wittenberg)

“Captain Lerro lacks the necessary skill, judgment and presence of mind to pilot a vessel in a trustworthy manner.”

(To the audience)

And then, my wife left me. Stella and I were probably headed for the divorce courts already, because things between us had – well, sucked - for quite a while. But the stress of the accusations, the public beatings I was taking and the unwanted media attention our family was getting, that pushed her over the edge. She walked. I wasn’t surprised, but man, if ever I needed somebody for emotional support, it was then.

As the Italians say, *com si com sa.*

You know, I think that was the toughest time, living alone and not working. I had nothing to do but sit on my couch and think about the accident, going over and over and over everything in my mind. I’ve always been good with electronics, and I had a little work area in the garage where I had a couple of radios in various stages of repair. I tinkered with those fucking things until my hands bled, and I’m telling you, every time I soldered the last wire in place, switched on the power and heard the speaker crackle to life, I half expected to hear Jack Shiffmacher’s voice telling me he’d

grounded his ship, and I could turn mine around. And the whole thing had never happened.

I thought a lot about the folks who died in their cars, people just going to work on the other side of the bay. The old couple going to Bradenton – he had a business meeting, she was going to get her hair done.

There were 26 people on that Greyhound bus. A 92-year-old woman. Two sisters from Canada taking a vacation together. Four students from Tuskegee College up in Alabama, coming home to Florida for Mother's Day Weekend.

Mother's Day. A young mother from Tallahassee with her six-month-old daughter in her lap.

MANESHA MCGARRAH. That little girl's name was MANESHA MCGARRAH.

So I would think about MaNesha, and her mother Wanda, and Gerta Hedquist and John Callaway, and Hildreth and Harry Dietch, and Michael Curtin, the poor shmuck from Apollo Beach who was driving the bus that morning …

When you sit, idle, your mind wanders, and mine had nowhere else to wander to. My career was over, my wife was gone and my son was barely speaking to me. I was a pariah in my community. I kept guns in the house and I gave serious thought to killing myself.

(long, thoughtful pause)

You know that scene in "The Godfather," where Michael comes out of the men's room at the Italian restaurant – y'know, (*exaggerated New York accent*) "Jack Dempsey's joint" – and he's got the gun, and he's going to kill the Turk and the police captain?

He comes out and he's standing there, and the two of them are sitting at the table chattering away, you know, but Michael just stays quiet and stares straight ahead. But you hear this … sound, this whooshing, running sound, like a herd of fast and dead horses, a subway car picking up speed, faster and faster until it's so loud it turns everything else out. It's the blood racing like a flash flood through the veins in his brain – "do it, do it, do it."

All at once, the sound stops, at the same instant Michael raises the pistol and gives each of 'em two in the forehead. Well, the cop, McClosky, takes one in the throat … it's a pretty gory scene, but …

Anyway, that sound. That horrible speed-racing, endurance, eclipsing inevitability. That's what the edge of suicide feels like.

The thing was, my father had always stressed the importance of not giving up, no matter what life throws at you. What God throws at you. Mother had passed away when I was 20 and still going to the Maritime Academy; Dad eventually remarried, and stayed the course. He held on. In fact, after he and his new wife moved to Virginia, he helped build the new Richmond Airport. I took comfort and solace in watching him re-build his life, and come out strong on the other end of tragedy.

So he told me to keep my head high, take the high road and all the other father-son clichés. "God has a plan for you, son," he told me.

God has a plan.

Apparently God's plan was to turn me into Job, to test my faith – and my nerves – and see how fuckin' far he could push me. Because from the moment it happened, I never went for an hour without thinking about the accident, what I could have or SHOULD HAVE done differently.

The hearing – it wasn't really a trial – finally came up in October. My lawyer, the esteemed Counselor Yerrid, argued in court that the state should reinstate my piloting license. To make that happen, he had to prove that I was not responsible for hitting the Skyway, that outside forces – namely, that wicked-ass weather – had driven Summit Venture into the bridge.

Oh, Steve was great. This was his first big case, and he was all over it, like a dog with a bone. There were times when I thought the counsel for the State of Florida was a bigger dog, with a bigger bone, but Steve had prepared a defense case with absolutely zero holes in it.

Florida had a state flag, a state tree, a state bird, a state song … and I was lining up to be the state fall guy. The Florida State

Scapegoat. You'd look up the word scapegoat in the dictionary, and there'd be my picture.

They brought out all the big guns to prove my incompetence. Master mariners, scientists, a whole conga line of guys who'd worked out, mathematically, how I'd had enough time to turn the ship, how that blow that day was just some regular little spring storm.

Of course, none of them were there, not a one.

In the end, Steve proved that the state's timeline was off by a full two minutes. They had to admit that they'd screwed up, because two minutes was all that mattered. Two minutes was all it took.

See, the local TV weather guy was able to show that the squall line had a monster hiding inside it. It was an intense little mini-storm called a microburst, which exploded with winds that reached 70 to 75 miles per hour, changing direction every other minute.

Summit Venture, remember, was riding light. And that microburst, which was right over my head as I was approaching the bridge, literally blew the vessel laterally.

It was all over in two minutes.

So Judge Bentley ruled that it was an Act of God, and not an Act of Lerro, that brought down the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. I was fully exonerated, and he recommended they reinstate my license.

Next, the Coast Guard report came out. They pretty much concurred, but they also reprimanded me for not turning or grounding the vessel as soon as the weather turned bad.

I could live with that. Again, they weren't there. This was all what you call Monday morning quarterbacking. They didn't have any disciplinary power, anyway.

I got my license back in March. Because of the judge's ruling they had to. But man, they still wanted to string me up.

Anyway, I went back to work, and the first time I took a ship under the Skyway, they were all there, the local newspapers, the TV stations, with their cameras pointed. Waiting for this incompetent drunk - possibly homosexual, mind you - who got away with murder, to knock it down the rest of the way.

Here's the thing. Although the collision with the bridge, and the deaths of those 35 people were understandably major headlines all around the world, by the time John Lerro got his piloting license back, and returned to work, fully exonerated, only the local media people were paying attention. And even then, it was treated as more of a curiosity than anything else – "hey folks, remember THIS guy?" They wrote about me that first trip, and after that never mentioned me again.

Any time the Skyway was in the news after that, it was about the replacement bridge the state was building, which would ultimately cost two-hundred and forty-four million dollars. It opened seven years after I knocked the other one to shit and killed all those people …

Where was I? Oh yeah … As far as the national news, after they vilified me, and made sure everyone in the country – shit, everybody in the world – knew that I was incompetent, I ceased to exist. So much terrible stuff was happening in that period, in 980 and '81 – the eruption of Mount St. Helens, the Mariel Boatlift, the Liberty City Riots, the murder of John Lennon, the election of Ronald Reagan … if they wrote about it again, it was a paragraph deep inside with a tiny headline. I don't think the news that the courts had exonerated me ever went past the grocery-ad pages in the *St. Petersburg Times.*

Of course, it gnawed at me, my role in the deaths of those innocent people, and my dreams were ugly and dark … but I was still alive, and I had a job to do. I was glad to be on the water again. I saw my return to piloting as a door that God was opening for me, after he'd slammed so many of them in my face.

I started to read up on Buddhism, to see if I had maybe just been talking to the WRONG God. I was newly single, and trying to eat healthy and exercise, and once I felt like I could hold my head up in public again, I began to date. There are some pretty women in Tampa, let me tell you, and some pretty wonderful women.

For the first time in a long time, things were going my way.

(lighting change)

(Bible text. Pronouncing like the voice of Charlton Heston in The Ten Commandments.)

The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.”

Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face.”

(As John Lerro.)

So God made a deal with Satan. God said “all righty then, you think you can turn Job? Go ahead, do what you will, make him suffer, take away everything he has – just don’t kill him.” God was convinced that Job would steadfastly remain his humble servant. And they shook on it.

And Satan fucked with Job, with boils and pestilence and death and pain and great sorrow. You know the story.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

(As John Lerro.)

I worked hard all through that summer of ‘81. Every day, I’d have to bring another ship under what was left of the Skyway Bridge. As if I needed a reminder.

It was probably the middle of July, the pilot boat was bringing me out to an inbound container ship. About eleven-hundred feet. Yeah, they were just starting to come into the Tampa port around this time.

I was halfway up the ladder, doing that crawl up 40 feet of freeboard, when my head began to swim. God, it came over me like a smack from a 2x4. I had never felt dizziness like that before.

For a few seconds, I thought I was going to pass out. Then it stopped, and I shook it off. I finished the climb, and I finished the job.

I had noticed this tingling in my left foot, too. Like I'd slept on it funny, and cut off the blood flow. Some mornings, I'd wake up and my whole leg felt like it was covered in fire ants.

On another transit, I got so dizzy in the wheelhouse, I stumbled a little bit and had to grab for a support rail. I know the captain saw it. He gave me a quizzical look.

Anyway, the episodes of dizziness continued, and the tingling got worse, even though it was intermittent. God damn it, I needed good hand-to-eye coordination! My eyes were starting to bother me, too. Peripherally, I had developed double vision.

Now, my friends always liked to call me a hypochondriac. If I developed a dark spot on my arm, I'd ask everybody, one at a time, 'What do you think this could be?' Well, I tried to tell them about these new symptoms, but they all laughed, like I was the boy who cried wolf once too often. I was the boy who cried cancer.

So I went to see my doctor, Herman Babcock. He looked into my eyes with that penlight thing they have, tracked the way they moved, and then he had me take off my shoes and socks. He ran a pen along the bottoms of my feet and watched my toes curl. I swear I saw him frown.

Finally, he told me he suspected something neurological, but he couldn't be sure. He referred me to Shands Hospital up in Gainesville, where I could get more advanced testing done.

Of course, from that moment on, all I could think of was "brain tumor." I took some time off work, and sat home in a panic, until my appointment in Gainesville at the end of the week.

Soon I was back home again, waiting for the phone to ring. When the call came, it came quickly, so quickly that I knew it was the kind of news they want to get to you right away.

Bad news.

My diagnosis was secondary-progressive multiple sclerosis, which is kind of a slow and INEVITABLE decay of the nervous system, the muscles, the bones … apparently I had already exhausted the relapsing/remitting phase, where the disease goes into periods of

remission … now it was all about *how long*? How long did I have until I could no longer, walk, talk or think?

They can treat the symptoms, but the bottom line is that MS is a death sentence.

Here's the kicker: You know what's a trigger for multiple sclerosis? Stress!

It's within the realm of reason that I had the seed of this degenerative disease in my cells for years – nobody really knows, and I had never had any of these symptoms before – and it sits dormant and waiting, just fucking WAITING to ambush me like that goddam storm on the 9th of May!

Since then, stress had ridden shotgun with me every day, every night, every drive in the car, on every vessel I'd brought in and out of port, every hearing, every court case, every deposition, every media microphone shoved into my face, every clerk in every Seven-Eleven …

(he begins to weep)

Every time I made love to a woman

Every time I had a screaming match with my son

And especially, ESPECIALLY, when I had to sit in a courtroom waiting to testify in a civil case. The families of the people who died weren't going to get their pound of flesh out of me, and so they sued the State of Florida, they sued Greyhound, they sued the shipping line, they sued the shipowners … and every time, I'd get subpoenaed to tell my story, AGAIN … and they'd all be staring at me, with blank faces and accusing eyes … because whatever the law said, I did it. I killed their mother or their father or their wife or husband or grandma … or their little baby …

(he composes himself)

They never got closure, really. They got financial restitution from the shipowners, when a judge found them negligent for not training Captain Liu to take back command of his ship earlier, when the weather broke.

So that's what they got.

Tampa Bay got a new Skyway bridge.

I got MS.

So I voluntary gave up my license. My boss at the pilots association and I agreed it was temporary, like the disease was just playing with me and would eventually go away, and I'd get my life, my job, my manhood back. I'd get my dignity back.

But we both knew, him and I. We both knew I would never pilot another ship.

So I wallowed in woe-is-me. The fatigue from this disease is all-encompassing; some days I could barely get out of bed, and once I did I'd only be good for eight or nine hours, before I'd feel exhausted again and have to crawl back in.

Those first years went by in a blur. I know we tried to write a movie about the incident – that didn't work – and I got hired by my alma mater, the SUNY Maritime Academy in New York, to teach Basic Seamanship aboard Empire State, the training ship they dock right there on campus, at the Throg's Neck Inlet.

But it was cold, and walking for me was already becoming difficult. And I had to bunk belowdecks, right there on the ship. It was like living in a broom closet, stinking of diesel fuel and Pine-Sol. I liked working with the kids, and they respected me, which was something I really, really needed at that point in my life. But everything else was miserable.

I taught for one semester, then turned in my resignation and flew home to Tampa.

While I was at the Academy, though, I'd had an epiphany. It was kind of like how a prison inmate, who's holed up in a little room with no windows, has to literally think outside the box. To free himself, at least in his mind, from the shackles that hold him down, that keep him there.

My dream wasn't of a beach in Mexico, with pretty girls feeding me sweet fruits and kissing my forehead … although that would have been nice.

No, I decided that self-pity was for losers. My muscles might be going to shit, but my brain hadn't atrophied, and I considered myself a reasonably smart man. I thought: Put your experience to good use, Lerro. Others can learn from what you've been through.

There is a reason why I'm here on earth. It wasn't to kill people.

So I went back to school. For two years, 1987 to 1989, I studied Behavioral Therapy at the University of South Florida. It was hard some days, getting across campus, because by then I had to walk with a cane. But I was determined, and I saw it through, and I came out of there with a Master's in Counseling.

See, I figured I could talk anybody down off a ledge, because I'd been out there myself. "If somebody comes to me with troubles, it has got to have some relationship to the troubles I've been through." In other words, whatever YOU'RE going through, I'VE been through worse. And hey, look at me, I survived.

I started an apprenticeship at the Hillsborough County Crisis Center. They sent me out talk to inmates in the local jails, and to high school kids in trouble, and for three nights a week I took phone calls on the Suicide Hotline.

(as Counselor Lerro)

"Everybody screws up. I know. I invented screwup. When you get caught screwing up, keep your dignity. If you've lost that, you've lost everything. Self-esteem is the most important thing.

(turning, talking to someone else)

"One of the things I tell suicide people – young kids – when they're mad at their parents and they say 'I'm gonna show them. I'll kill myself,' I say things like 'Why don't you hang around? You're gonna be a bigger pain the ass to your parents if you're hanging around.' You're not going to show anybody anything if you commit suicide, 'cause you're gone."

(pause)

Ironic, huh?

Like a lot of Italians, I didn't feel I could express myself unless I'm being emphatic. So I felt I had a right to be emphatic.

I was only governed by my heart in those jobs. In trying to save someone else's life, there's no time limits, and no rules can be applied. You do whatever it takes. At whatever cost it requires. That was my philosophy.

But it wasn't the philosophy of the Crisis Center. Picture a switchboard with 100 callers. If I was talking to a caller that I believed in, I would let the switchboard go, instead of moving on to the next one. And because I tended to talk and talk, and stay on the line with everybody to establish what I thought was a relationship of trust, they dismissed me in the spring of 1992. They also told me I cursed too much.

I was exhausted. Drained. And for a long time, I refused to consider myself an invalid. At a gathering, or a party or whatever, I would just plant myself in a chair and stay there, so people didn't see me trying to walk, didn't see I was a cripple.

Eventually, though, my vision blurred, and the MS started eroding my other faculties. Simple speech became harder and harder.

(his speech sloooows)

So even though I had a Master's, and had fulfilled the requirements of my apprenticeship, I never was able to actually work as a counselor. My stamina was gone. My body just would not allow it.

I was home again. Soon enough, I had to hire a caregiver, someone who could help me get out of bed – those few times when I wanted to – and who could drive me to my weekly physical therapy sessions. She made sure I took my medications, which made me sick pretty much all of the time.

She was so good to me. Connie. She not only looked after me, she looked after the house, she made sure my son, who was living in California, kept in contact with me.

It was no picnic for her, being the eyes, ears, legs and arms of an invalid. She pushed my wheelchair everywhere and never bitched about anything. Not long after she moved in full-time, we got married. Connie.

At first, I kept my own company. Inside my head. And then it started to get crowded in there: Wanda and MaNesha, and Michael, Gerta, and the Canadian sisters, and the kids from

Tuskegee, all of them. Every time I closed my blurry eyes and went someplace deep and private, they were there, pleading, asking why I had murdered them.

Every time I dreamed, I was back in the wheelhouse of Summit Venture, looking into a black hole. And all the men in there with me were staring at me, like I knew what to do.

(preaching, standing, full voice)

And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

(As Lerro)

One of my favorite operas, going back to my parents' record collection, was *Rigolett).*

He's a court jester, see, a wise guy, and one day he says the wrong thing to the wrong person. The man is so pissed off that he puts a curse on Rigoletto – some day, some way, you will pay for what you have done.

And from there, things go from bad to worse. And in the end, Rigoletto – after endless suffering, and despite pleading from his heart for absolution from God – pays the price.

I was absolved on August 31, 2002. Just over 20 tough years since the two minutes that had changed everything. The two minutes that turned me into a court jester. Into a curse and a punchline.

My wife and my son were at my side.

After all that, I finally got through to the other side of the bridge.

(to black)

THE END