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Main Image:

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It usually comes up with a small mention to a curious coworker about "lightning day." Each July 28, I try to celebrate being alive, because on that day, 21 years ago, I was hit by lightning.

Being struck by lightning was one of the most memorable things that ever happened to a kid who grew up in Fairbanks. It immediately put me in an exclusive club. According to the National Weather Service, the odds of someone being struck by lightning during their lifetime is about 1 in 12,000. An average of 51 people are killed by lightning each year in the U.S., making it the second most fatal weather-related phenomenon (flooding is the most deadly.) Worldwide, it's estimated that lightning kills as many as 24,000 people annually. But, like other lightning strike survivors, some of my memories of that day (and the following two weeks) are slightly smeared -- like looking at a watercolor picture after it has been left out in the rain. With that said, here's how I remember it:

The date was July 28, 1993 -- the day before my 25th birthday. At 6:45 p.m., I was standing on a baseball field in North Pole, a small community 15 miles southeast of Fairbanks, waiting for the game to begin. Our team -- the Alyeska Pipeline Tigers -- was about to face the North Pole Titans.

I was the center fielder. While we waited for the game to start, the pitcher and catcher hit ground balls to the infielders. I vividly recall the sounds: the soft metallic "clink" of the bat, the leathery "thwap" as the ball hit the first baseman's mitt. Dragonflies whizzed past, darting across the green grass at Newby Field, once home to a former Alaska Baseball League team called the North Pole Nicks.

Oh, yeah, and once every few minutes, I heard thunder. It seemed distant. I looked up and saw nothing but blue sky. Far to the east, past the center field fence, were some clouds.

A bit bored, I called for a ball from the dugout so we outfielders could keep our arms warm. I struck up a conversation with the left and right fielders, Damon Alexander and J.R. Johnson, about what would happen if an opposing player got to second base (a distinct possibility since our team -- myself included -- was of marginal ability). I remember telling Damon that he should watch out for James Johnson -- the power-hitting clean-up batter for the Titans. I was much more worried about what havoc Johnson might cause on the scorecard than the distant thunderstorms.

Then it happened. I remember hearing a high-pitched whine in the air -- something you could almost feel, like the shuddering-to-life of an old television. Hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

A bright flash followed (I never heard the thunderclap), and I found myself on the ground. I couldn't move. The air around me seemed heavy, preventing my limbs from working. I couldn't talk. When I opened my eyes, a military medic -- a player from the opposing team -- was about to start CPR. (He later said that when he first got to me, he couldn't find my pulse.)

Confused and angry, I told him, "Get off me." I thought I had been hit in the head with that ball I had asked to be thrown my way from the dugout. My mouth was full of rocks, which I quickly spit out as my body began to work again. When I looked at what came out of my mouth, I realized they weren't rocks, but my tooth fillings. All of them.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked out loud.

The answer I got seemed ridiculous at the time.

"You guys got hit by lightning," the baseball-playing Army medic said.

I rolled over to see the other two outfielders on the ground as well. Damon Alexander was moaning. He was surrounded by several players from our team. J.R. Johnson -- also an Army soldier -- was all alone a few feet away. He was grumbling something incoherently as he "low-crawled" toward second base. Like me, Johnson didn't know he had been hit by lightning. He thought he had been shot.

Others on the team were on the ground as well. Most were stumbling to their feet like dazed prizefighters trying to beat a 10-count. I tried to stand up, but my legs and balance betrayed me. Almost immediately, my face was reintroduced to the patchy grass.

Then things get fuzzy. I remember people running around the field, tending to other players. I remember being propped up in the dugout. I remember being mad that I couldn't play in the game. (Adult league baseball games were notoriously hard to schedule and even after the lightning strike, both teams and the umpires decided to start the game. It was cut short two innings later when lightning hit the outfield fence.)

I recall that the Army medic who ran to my aid as I lay on the ground unconscious said that he saw the lightning hit my head and branch off, hitting Alexander and Johnson nearby.

"It lit you up like a Christmas Tree," he said.

I remember people saying someone should go get help -- it was, after all, 1993, and cellphones were not as prevalent as they are today.

I don't remember insisting I didn't need medical attention.

My next clearly recalled moment is from a stretcher at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, some 18 miles from the field. I thought I had gotten there by ambulance. In reality, I had driven myself from the field to my parents' house in my father's 1979 green Dodge passenger van, which I had earlier driven to the game. My mother said she remembers me arriving at the house in the green van and stumbling inside, saying something like, "I may have been hit by lightning." It was my father, Pat, she said, who immediately loaded me into the van and drove me to the hospital.

Once inside, my memories become clearer. I can still see the bewildered look in the faces of a crowd of doctors and nurses attending to me. As they began to cut away the \$130 replica Detroit Tigers jersey I was wearing, I yelled at them to let me just take it off.

The jersey now on the floor, the doctors and nurses began to turn me over, looking for pattern burns, or a "blow-out" -- a hole left in the flesh when strong electrical currents leave the human body. A small hole on my left foot and a tiny burn on my left ankle were my only apparent injuries.

At this exact moment, just six hours before my 25th birthday, my mother, Barbara, ran into the room, screaming, "my baby, my baby."

A quick conversation with the nearest doctor led to a small cloth being placed over my groin while the nurses began an IV.

I was told that I had a concussion, and that the lightning apparently hit the little metal beanie on top of my baseball cap. (I went back to the field two weeks later, but never found that beanie.)

A reporter for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner called to talk to me about what happened. A producer for "The Oprah Winfrey Show" called, wanting to know if my life had changed since the lightning strike. You know, questions like "Did you see God?" and "Do you have any lasting after-effects?"

I was lucky. The game hadn't started when I was hit. I wasn't sweaty. There was no rain above us when the streak of lightning hit me and felled my entire team. Lightning can eliminate all the air nearby, and when it rushes back in, people standing nearby can be knocked over. The force of that air was the cause of my concussion, according to the doctors, my only lasting injury from the event. Oh, and I needed new tooth fillings.

These days, my only real lightning strike symptoms are the occasional unexplained migraine, some intermittent nerve pain, lingering memory loss of the days and weeks following the strike and probably most acute of all, the incessant need on the anniversary of the event to tell people I have been struck by lightning. After all, it could have been much worse. According to the Juneau division of the National Weather Service, in 1986, near Tok, a young girl was killed and her three companions injured when lightning struck a tree under which they were taking shelter from a passing storm. The National Weather Service said it does not track lightning strikes on people unless they are fatal.

Still, I never played organized baseball again. I couldn't bring myself to stand in the middle of an open field.

When asked if I feel unlucky to have been hit, my answer is always the same.

"No," I say. "At least I am still here to annoy you with the story."

Oh, you won't catch me outside when thunder roars, either. Ever.

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