

*How a Maniac TV Producer
Put Down His Blackberry
and Started to Live His Life*



What I Learned When I Almost Died

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 Simon & Schuster

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

[<http://www.simonsandschuster.com>] www.simonsandschuster.com

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First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition May 2011

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Designed by Nancy Singer

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Licht, Chris.

What I learned when I almost died : how a maniac tv producer put down his BlackBerry and started to live his life / Chris Licht. —1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed.

1. Licht, Chris. 2. Television producers and directors—United States—Biography. I. Title.

PN1992.4.L45A3 2011

791.4502'33092—dc22

[B]

2011011244

ISBN 978-1-4516-2767-1

ISBN 978-1-4516-2768-8 (ebook)

To my family—who make life worth living

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What I Learned
When I Almost Died

□ *prologue* □

The Killer Producer

Lately, if I happen to be looking through my address book for a phone number, I'm apt to stop when I come across the name of someone I haven't been in touch with for a while. A friend, maybe, or an acquaintance. When I do, I'm likely to fire off an e-mail with no more length or gravitas than this:

Hey, how you been?

The gesture is a small one, but I didn't used to do this. Days that were filled with the pressure and crises of running a national cable television program had little room for casual nicety. If I wasn't in the control room producing it, I was in my office thinking about how to produce it. If the talent was unhappy, I'd let it gnaw at my gut. If somebody screwed up, I could go off like a roadside bomb, in a finger snap. I knew this. But the show so consumed me that it couldn't be merely acceptable. It had to be great. I had ambitions. I had to be the killer producer.

Then one day, with no warning whatsoever, I became scary sick in a random and hard-to-figure way, given that I was not even forty years old. Most people with the medical emergency I had do not emerge from the experience physically intact, if they emerge at all. Weeks later, my health restored, I went back to work, and was eager and happy to do so. Illness hadn't scared me into some big life makeover. I had no urge to surrender my spot in the fast lane for ownership of a B&B in Vermont.

But serious illness had recalibrated me. It had brought a trove of knowledge, as if I had involuntarily paid a painful tuition for an elite education. It was about letting go of my fears. It was about what I could control and what I couldn't, and how people felt about me, really felt about me. It was about how to use time. It was even about Joe Biden, the vice president of the United States.

It would be nice, I thought, if everyone could get the education I had gotten without having to nearly die.

So I decided to write a book.

□ *chapter one* □

The Event

The man who would become my neurosurgeon doubts that a brain can make a noise. Mine did. I'm sure of it. On a cool, partly cloudy spring day not long after nine in the morning, my brain went audible, emitting a *pop* from deep within, not a loud one, more like a balloon had been pricked in the distance.

Now came something else. It was as if a glass of water had tipped up there and spilled its contents; only this didn't feel like a liquid, just a sensation of movement inside, from the back of my head toward the front. Now someone clamped a vise around my skull. Now someone tightened the vise with sadistic gusto, evidently striving for a pain number so far above ten it would merit a Guinness entry.

My body's inventiveness and the speed of its transformation were bewildering, and darkly impressive. In the time it takes to listen to a voice mail, which is what I had been doing, it had mustered a vicious headache. I was having a unique event, which I normally enjoy. Olympics? Worked several, loved them. Super Bowls, World Series, national political conventions, A-list receptions, book parties, movie screenings, all cool. This, absolutely not.

I was suddenly in the bizarre position of thinking about what was going wrong with the thing doing my thinking. My brain was trying to diagnose its own malfunction.

Was this a stroke?

In any television producer's career, especially if he comes up through local news, he usually does enough stories about "Stroke Awareness Month" or similar causes that he comes to know the warning signs by heart. I did. I ran down the list.

Fingers movable?

Yes.

Vision blurred?

No.

Words slurred?

"There's a lot of traffic," I said.

Sounded smooth.

I said this to the only other person around, the driver of a black Cadillac Escalade into whose rear seat I had dropped a few minutes before, back in my healthy era.

Everything seemed to be working properly except, of course, my head. I knew where I was, on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington. I knew when it was, Wednesday, April 28, 2010. So it seemed reasonable to conclude tomorrow's newspaper would not feature an obituary noting the passing of MSNBC's Christopher A. Licht, 38, husband of Jenny and father of Andrew, twenty months.

Which was comforting, but this still really, really hurt.

In the minutes preceding the pop, I was fine. I had never been an addict, never had surgery, never been rushed to an emergency room, needed no medications, was not overweight, had excellent blood pressure, never smoked, was filled with energy and confidence. Stress? No doubt there was stress. I was in live television, from 6 to 9 A.M. Eastern, five days a week, as the executive producer of a show called *Morning Joe*. Everybody in television has stress. The medium overflows with its ingredients. Money. Egos. Instant ratings. Constant deadlines. But I thrived on being *MJ*'s executive producer.

Having ruled out stroke, I was out of theories. I abandoned voice mail and dialed for help. Not to my wife, because telling her about the vise gripping my head without knowing why it was doing so would upset her without offering solace. Jenny has no medical background; like me, she's in television. And she was in New York City, where we live, and could hardly swing by in a few minutes to commiserate in the back of this SUV. I called Dad.

Peter Licht is a doctor, an internist. He and my mother, Susan, who is a physician's associate, work in the same medical office and still live in the house in Connecticut where I grew up with my sister, Stephanie. Until now, I had never called either parent about a medical emergency that I myself was suffering. But Dad is a man of no bull and no drama, and he never coddles and never overreacts. Once, in my teens, at camp in Florida, I took a tumble while barefoot waterskiing and damaged an eardrum. A local doctor prescribed major pain meds, really serious stuff. Dad declared this was nonsense, take two aspirin. If my super-headache was nothing, he'd say so. If it was something, he'd say that.

Dad didn't answer his cell. I called the house.

Mom was surprised I was in Washington because mostly we're in New York, at 30 Rockefeller Center, 30 Rock. But Washington is where our nation keeps its national politicians and politics is *MJ*'s métier, so we take the show there often. Not thirty minutes earlier, we had wrapped up the day's version and the Escalade had started back to my hotel from NBC's Washington bureau. The show's hosts, Mika Brzezinski and Joe Scarborough, were off to a speech.

“Something’s wrong with me,” I said to Mom.

I described the sensations. She was mildly concerned. As well as anyone, she knew I was never sick.

“It probably wouldn’t hurt to go to the hospital.”

She got a second call from me a few minutes later.

“I gotta tell you, my neck is starting to get stiff.”

I was beginning to have trouble moving my head in any direction, in addition to having pain. I couldn’t even lean it against the seat. Mom became more insistent.

“I think you should go to the hospital.”

Five minutes later, it was Dad calling.

“You need to go to the emergency room and you need to get a CAT scan, and I’m telling you that when you get there, you need to tell them you do not get headaches and this is the worst headache of your life.”

He was not panicked, because he never is. He was firm.

“Okay, good,” I said.

My response must have been too casual.

“Say that to me,” he said. “You do not get headaches and this is the worst headache of your life. Say that exactly.”

“I do not get headaches and this is the worst headache of my life.”

“Call me when you know what’s going on.”

Dad didn’t suspect anything specific; nor was he terribly worried. After all, I was conscious and coherent. What he wanted was that CAT scan, because that would be hard data, not a guess or a supposition. As for his pointed instruction to say “never get headaches” and “worst of my life,” I didn’t know, and didn’t ask, but that is an informal code within the medical profession. Any decent emergency room would interpret the phrases to mean I was not a habitual complainer, I was in the midst of something rare, pay attention, give me a CAT scan.

Having visited Washington so often, I knew where I wanted to go—George Washington University Hospital in the neighborhood known as Foggy Bottom. They took President Ronald Reagan there when he was shot in 1981, a good enough endorsement as far as I was concerned. And it was a short distance from my hotel. In all probability, they would give me something to knock down the pain and I would

cycle back to my room and get on with the day. There was another show tomorrow to prep for, because there always is another show to prep for, and there was a black-tie dinner that night featuring Bill Clinton and Bono. Mika and Joe were the hosts. I was going.

Nothing traumatic had marred my life to that moment, and there was no reason to think the streak would end. Job, wife, kid, health, all good. Pessimism was not my default position. Setback happened to the other guy, not me.

“Can we go to the GW emergency room?” I said to the driver.

We were already headed in that direction. But while the busiest part of my day had ended when *MJ* did, the busiest of Washington’s was still unfolding. Traffic was thick. This was bad. My head was being squeezed without intermission, and now the landscape was only crawling past. Here’s the National Cathedral. Here’s Rock Creek Park. Here’s a bunch of embassies. At one point, we inched past the grounds of the U.S. Naval Observatory, the vice president’s official residence. In a couple of hours, its occupant and I were going to have a bond.

By now I had new sensations. My head was pulsing with each heartbeat, and each pulse made the hurt worse. My stomach was nauseous and I was trying mightily not to throw up. I was sweating. At some point, I asked if there were any shortcuts, but there were none.

I still didn’t envision the horrible, like disability or death, and wasn’t having anguished thoughts about Jenny and Andrew. But I wanted to get to the hospital and be given something to make the pain evaporate. It was making concentration so difficult that listening to more voice mails or making more calls was impossible.

Finally, we rolled up to the stone facade of George Washington. I told the driver to wait, because I suspected I would be back momentarily, and I gingerly took my head up two flights of steps, through the pedestrian entrance of the emergency room, to a counter where a woman sat. She was the “Greet Tech.”

“I’m having a real problem here,” I said.

Greet Tech said something noncommittal, like “yup.” My father’s words found my lips.

“I do not get headaches, I never get headaches, and I’m having the worst headache of my life. There’s something very wrong with me. And I need to see somebody now.”

Greet Tech came to life. She knew the code, even if I didn’t.

“I believe you are in the right place,” she said.

She wanted identification. There were forms.

Then, I sat.

The reception area was not empty. Decades passed. My hands cradled my head and there arose from me a kind of low moan, an “ahhh,” because I sincerely hurt, and if that drew a little attention, great. It was actually only minutes before they beckoned me to a triage cubicle, where a nurse checked my vitals and found them normal except for blood pressure, which stood at 159 over 107.

They dropped me in a wheelchair and rolled me through double doors and into the heart of the emergency room, to a small examination bay that was all fluorescence and monitoring equipment. I knew such bays. I’d been to ERs as a kid with Dad, sometimes playfully hooked up to EKGs by the nurses.

My bay was curtained into halves, front and back, and each had a bed with wheels and rails. They rolled me to the back, making me the patient in C2B. Patient C2A, a woman, seemed to have fallen during a footrace that morning. I never did get the story. They told me to get undressed, put on one of those haute couture hospital gowns, and put my street clothes in a clear, plastic bag.

Now I remembered that not a soul beyond the confines of the hospital knew where I was.

Dad and Mom had told me to get to an emergency room, but they didn’t know which one I’d chosen. Nobody at *Morning Joe* even knew I was having a mini-nightmare. Jenny didn’t. Things had unraveled so quickly. It hadn’t even been an hour since the show ended. At 9:59 A.M., I sent a text to Mika Brzezinski at the Marriott Wardman Park hotel, the site of her and Joe’s speech.

In er at gw

Got excruciating and sudden pain in head

Scared—getting cat scan

Will call when I can

I wasn’t scared, really. The word was only meant to get her attention. Joe and Mika needed to know their executive producer was going to be out of touch and the reason wasn’t trivial. But my goal wasn’t to herald a huge personal emergency. Everything in my past said this would be a brief suspension of duty. The EP would be getting out of George Washington.

□ *chapter two* □

The Little Anchor

There once was a boy with a camera in a house on a sylvan hill in Connecticut.

I was eleven. The camera was a clunky old VCR sort because this was 1983. I set it up in the basement TV room, where I had a desk, and on the desk I put a microphone on a tiny stand.

Each week, I would write a script and put on my tweed sport coat, a dress shirt and a tie, but no dress slacks, because the camera would show me only from the waist up, so underpants were okay. My hair was often an unruly mop, but in every other way I was the mature, authoritative preteen host of *The Week in Review*, the leading and only show on the WBC television network, which I owned and all of whose viewers were named Licht.

The show was thorough, covering national and international news, local items, sports, obits, weather, and pop culture. Sometimes it featured my sister, Stephanie, who was nearly three years younger and reluctant, or I'd bring in Dad for medical reports and sports commentary. (He was versatile.) If Stephanie screwed up or didn't take the show seriously, the host could get miffed. At times, I had to bribe her for an appearance or to work the camera, once offering a Velcro Michael Jackson wallet. Mom and Dad still have the show tapes.

Anchor:

For some people, the world is just one big fuzzy thing. Let The Week in Review focus it in for you. (The screen image morphs from hazy and indistinct to a knife-sharp map of the seven continents.)

We'll be back right after these messages with why we have two feet of snow on the ground. (Cut to commercials, real ones I had taped off TV and spliced in.)

This is Chris Licht speaking. Join us next week. (Run credits.)

It wasn't a coincidence that my network's name was one letter away from NBC. I loved NBC. When I was little, the Lichts took the 30 Rock tour, and our gaggle of the bug-eyed was taken into a studio, where the tour guides asked for volunteers to play Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon. Up went my hand. They made me Johnny and made some older guy Ed, put us in chairs, and gave us a script to read. The older guy was terrible. I was so good my own mother couldn't believe it. I had Johnny down cold.

terrible. I was so good my own mother couldn't believe it. I had Johnny down cold.

One summer when I was nine or so, we rented a condo on Martha's Vineyard. Carl Stern was renting nearby. Carl was an NBC star, covering the U.S. Supreme Court and the Justice Department, winning numerous awards. Mom says I stuck like glue to the guy. About a month after we got back from vacation, the phone rang at our house.

Dad picked up.

It was Carl Stern.

"Just returning Chris's call."

On the Vineyard, Carl had given me his number, probably secure in the thought that no nine-year-old would actually call a leading national television correspondent. But I did, because I felt Carl and I had much to discuss, being in the same business. I used to call Sue Simmons, too, one of the anchors of WNBC—New York's evening news. I called Sue a lot, enough to become known to her as "Chris from Connecticut." Mom says I once told Sue, "I'm going to work for NBC one day." (Years later, my wife worked with Sue at WNBC, and mentioned to her that she was dating someone Sue knew, someone who used to telephone her as a kid. "Chris from Connecticut?" Sue said.)

As my childhood fascination with broadcasting grew, I pictured myself as some kind of network "talent," an anchor perhaps, certainly a reporter, a person on the air. When I went off to Syracuse University to study broadcasting, Stephanie handwrote a letter assuring her big brother, *You're going to be in Tom Brokaw's seat one day.*

I might have had the voice for it. In the wee hours on weekends during high school, I earned four dollars an hour as a DJ on a fifty-thousand-watt rock station that blanketed Connecticut. This made me a bit of a celebrity among my peers, especially female, and I'd dedicate songs to my buddies who were out doing what more normal teenage males did on weekend nights, which was hang out. If you had been listening, my best friend Marc Nespoli says, you would have assumed from the dulcet pipes that I "was thirty, not eighteen."

After graduating from Syracuse, I settled in Allentown, Pennsylvania, to commence my television news ascent. The job there, working for a company that produced and sold medical stories that television stations could air as their own, was instructive and decent. But life in Allentown was slow death in obscurity.

So when a friend suggested I move to Los Angeles to help with his production company, I leaped at the chance to work for nothing, which is what they paid me for the first couple of months. In time, I was working on a television pilot two floors above the newsroom of KNBC, the local NBC-owned station, and I would hang out down there, doing research if asked. I liked the energy of a newsroom. And there I got to know Jeff Kaufman.

In the summer of 1995, Jeff was the executive producer of a nightly program about the trial of one Orenthal James Simpson, who was charged with the knife murders of his ex-wife and a friend of hers. With its threads of sex, race, violence, and police bias, the O.J. trial was big. You might have heard of it. Jeff's live half-hour program recapped each day's testimony, beginning at 7:30 P.M. One day, he asked if I wanted a full-time job as one of the show's writers.

I didn't know how to write television copy, but that was a minor matter I kept to myself. This was a big show in a big city about big news. I accepted. Jeff butchered nearly every sentence I wrote during my early days, and I got schooled.

The O.J. show was supervised each night by a certain line producer, except on Wednesdays, when he left early to teach a college class. He would designate a writer to sit in his chair during the show, which was not as big a risk as it sounds, because the trial always ended at five, giving us plenty of time to prepare for seven-thirty before he left. To be Line Producer for a Day was a babysitting job, a judgment-free exercise, so easy that one evening they gave the chore to me.

Then, at 6:15 P.M., with the line producer now gone and Jeff off that day, the Fuhrman tapes were released.

Mark Fuhrman was a detective with the Los Angeles Police Department who investigated the O.J. case. He is white. Simpson is black. Fuhrman's racial attitudes were a major part of the defense's case because Simpson's lawyers believed the police were prejudiced against their client. Fuhrman had sworn in court he held no racial animus and hadn't used the word *nigger* in a decade.

But during taped interviews in recent years with a writer developing a screenplay about police officers, Fuhrman had used that very word several dozen times, and now the court had released some of the tapes, which the jury would be allowed to hear.

That detonated our script. There had to be a rewrite. A camera crew had to scramble to get to the home of Fred Goldman, the father of Nicole Simpson's murdered friend, so we could get his reaction to this development that was so damaging to the prosecution's case. That evening's program would be no babysitting affair. I was in charge, me, age twenty-three, training wheels still on and, at that moment, terrified.

With major help from another writer whom I thank to this day, the overhaul of the script came together. But would the camera crew get to Fred Goldman's place in time? The show began. The crew arrived at Goldman's. It began setting up. Five minutes left in the show. Three. There! We went live from the Goldman home, with two minutes to spare.

The adrenaline rush was nothing like I had ever felt. The show was so good that when we had finished, the news director wanted to thank the brilliant soul who had led the effort. He refused to believe it was the Syracuse kid. In fact, he was annoyed I had been put in charge in the first place.

That night changed everything. No more Tom Brokaw. No more aiming to be in front of a camera.

I knew instantly that the feeling of control and creation I had experienced made me happy. I liked sculpting the chaos. To have a vision and see it broadcast on TV, well, there was nothing better than that, I thought. Being on-air talent could not possibly be as wonderful, because you only command the slice of the whole involving you. Being a producer meant having the entire show in your hands.

We all went to a restaurant and got drunk to celebrate.

Producing was what I wanted.