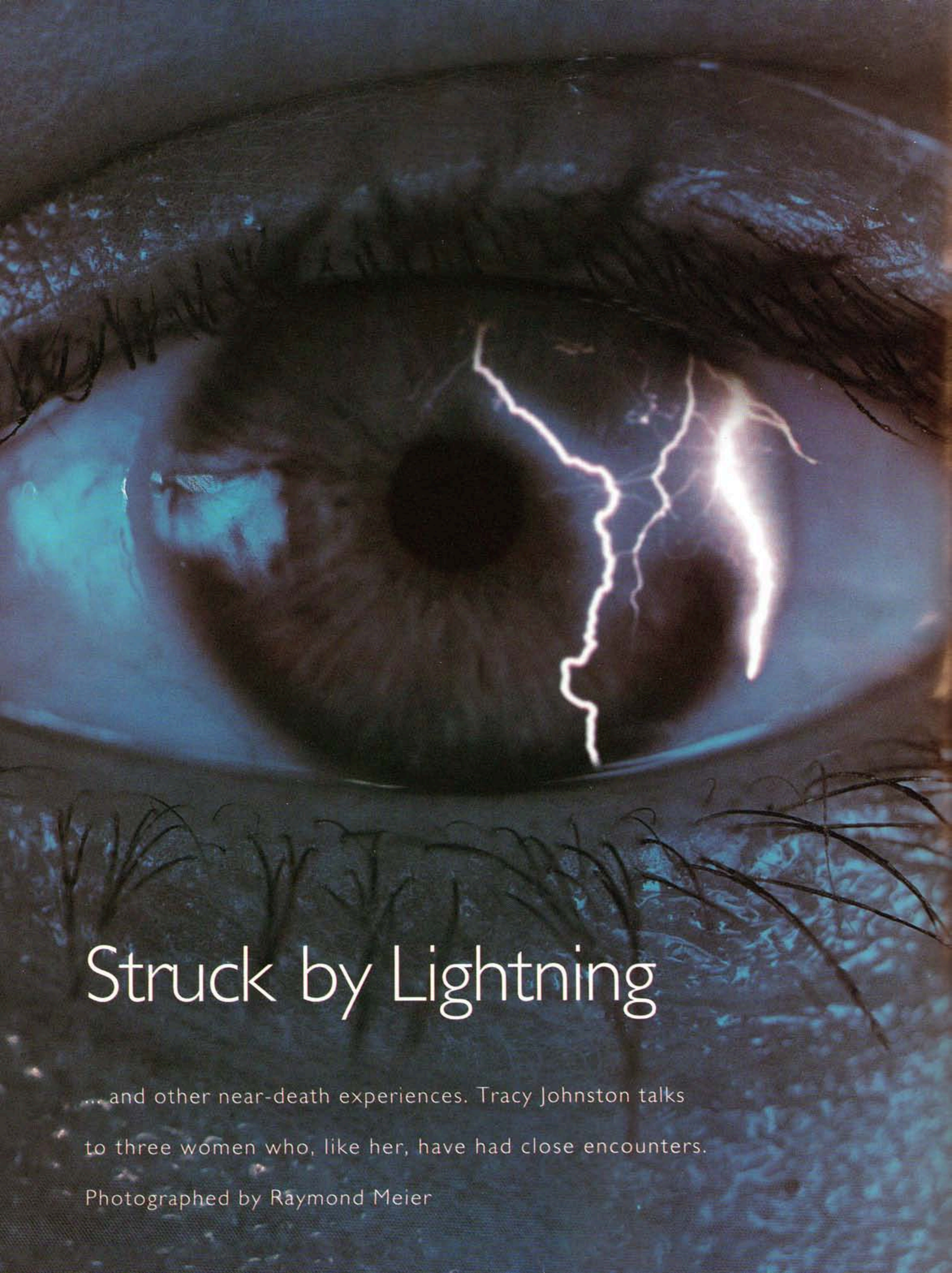

Struck by Lightning

... and other near-death experiences. Tracy Johnston talks to three women who, like her, have had close encounters.

Photographed by Raymond Meier

I had a confrontation with a brute force of nature several years ago in Borneo, on a river called the Boh. I wrote a book about it, and was surprised by the reaction of many women readers. They wouldn't have been able to handle it, they told me: They would have collapsed; they would have been hysterical, or mute, or terrified beyond sanity. I am not exceptional, not particularly brave, not a pirate queen or a high-stakes gambler. I know that most women would have survived just as I did; what interests me is why so many believed they wouldn't.

Recently, I spoke with three women who have survival stories far more frightening than mine. They had to fight for their lives, calling on strength they didn't know they had. Did they believe they were special? Where did that strength come from? Had their encounters damaged them or had they made them better, stronger, wiser?

In August 1991, Gretel Ehrlich was taking a walk with her dogs on her ranch in Wyoming when she had a vision: She was deep in an ocean, suspended, motionless. When the vision started fading and she felt the first beats of her heart, she opened her eyes and saw that she was lying at an odd angle in a pool of blood, some distance from the path where she had been walking. Her heart started to beat wildly, erratically, thumping in her chest. She tried to call out to her dogs, but her throat wouldn't work. Neither did her legs or her right arm. It wasn't until thunder exploded in the sky that she realized what had happened. She had been struck by lightning.

At the time, she was living alone, so no help was possible. Although the earth felt like it was rolling, she forced herself to stand up. She walked the quarter mile back to her house by lifting each leg with her good arm, putting it forward, and setting it down again. Sometimes her legs held and sometimes they didn't; she fell continually. But she made it. Just before she passed out she managed to pick up the phone, dial 911, and get out a scream.

Gretel, 48, an acclaimed novelist and essayist, has written an account of her experience, *A Match to the Heart*. Published by Pantheon this month, it's a beautiful book, as poetic and philosophical as it is dramatic and gutsy. When I spoke with her, though, she downplayed the horror of the lightning strike. She had lived on a ranch for 17 years, she said, and had survived plenty of accidents. More frightening than the lightning itself were the 10 days afterward, when she was slipping in and out of consciousness. Three doctors told her that nothing was wrong with her, but she knew she was dying.

"I thought I might die every night," she says. "So I became completely engaged in surviving—I was pissed off, and adamant about staying alive. I felt the presence of death physically and fought it the way you fight an attacker; like hitting someone with a two-by-four. I don't know where that strength came from, but it was very visceral."

Still, she felt like she was running out of time. She called her parents, who immediately chartered a plane and brought her back to their home in Santa Barbara, CA. By the time she was checked into the hospital there, she was unconscious and had no blood pressure. The first thing she heard was a doctor saying he couldn't believe she was alive. The lightning had damaged her sympathetic nervous system, which meant that she would have to live very quietly for the next two years. Instead of roping and riding, she would struggle just to walk along the beach.

"Because my whole life was shattered, I took it as an opportunity to learn something," Gretel says. "Since I couldn't blame myself or other people for the accident, and I couldn't dissect it or figure it out psychologically, it had a bigger frame of reference for me. A Buddhist monk told me, 'You know how to be strong; now you must learn how to be weak.' Buddhism teaches us that we are mistaken when we think of something as tragic. It's really just part of the ebb and flow. You move in one direction and have the rug pulled out from under you. That's the lesson of impermanence."

"Have you learned?" I asked her. "Are you different?"

"I am quieter now and more humble, which is a lesson I needed. I don't speed through the world so passionately and aggressively."

"And you had no flashbacks, no post-traumatic stress?"

"Lightning victims don't have that because we can't remember the experience. It's the people who have been electrocuted who remember everything. They have to deal with the nightmares and the terror; I guess you could say I was lucky."

Ruth Anne Kocour and a group of nine male climbers were on Mount McKinley in Alaska when they were hit by a ferocious storm. In a matter of seconds the wind roared up to 70 miles per hour; before they could set their packs down, their faces were frostbitten. They managed to reach a camp at 14,000 feet and worked half the night to set up tents and build protective ice walls.

Anyone who attempts to climb Mount McKinley is prepared to wait out a storm, but this was a hundred-year storm. It lasted 11 days, during which temperatures plunged to minus 47 degrees, with windchills in excess of 150 below zero. In this kind of weather it was a struggle to eat and go to the bathroom—even to talk. One man in a tent right next to Ruth Anne's died in his sleep, and others piled up in body bags nearby—seven people in all died (none from Ruth Anne's group). People reacted by trying to shut out the fear; one man became catatonic and had to be screamed at to eat.

"It was surreal," says Ruth Anne, 47, an illustrator and experienced rock climber. "We couldn't see, we couldn't hear anything over the constant roar of the wind, and since the sun never set there was no sense of time." She kept a journal by talking into a microcassette recorder, and its contents are chilling: "We are riding out the siege, surrounded by carnage—a battle zone. Nights are the worst time, tough to push through. The cold, the noise, the violence, seem even more extreme. We're so exhausted and totally alone with our thoughts, our imagination, our own heartbeat.... This experience is touching places inside me I've never been—or haven't dared to venture. It goes far beyond fear...."

➤ 159

STRUCK BY LIGHTNING
(continued from page 147)

"It's hard to describe the violence," she explains. "The wind was like a thousand freight trains bearing down on you. People would be ripped off the ground and flung about like they were popcorn. And the cold was brutal: Your eyelids would freeze if you went outside without goggles; one man drank a hot liquid after being out in the cold and cracked all his teeth."

Her worst moment came when she woke up one night, just because her tent mate happened to move. She turned over in her sleeping bag and realized that she couldn't feel her legs from the knees down. "When I took off my sleeping bag," she says, "my legs were covered with ice and my toes were black and frozen solid."

On the 11th day the sun came out, and Ruth Anne was in the first group of climbers to reach the summit. She had no severe damage from frostbite, no broken bones; she seemed to have survived the experience intact. But when she got home, she started to feel the terror she'd repressed.

"I was on a little speaking tour, telling my story and showing slides, when I had to stop. I would feel nauseated when I came to the slides of the storm, and at night I would relive the whole thing in my dreams. Finally, I realized I had to confront the emotions I'd suppressed on the mountain. So I wrote about it and thought about it and made myself listen to the tapes. It was chilling to hear my voice and realize how I had deteriorated. My world had narrowed down to whatever it took to survive."

It's been two years since Ruth Anne survived the storm, and she says she's changed in many ways. "I'm more willing to be vulnerable, and I feel more connections with people and nature. Although I was physically isolated on the mountain, I never felt more connected to a whole. I felt an energy that was holistic—and it didn't have anything to do with faith. I was on that fine line between life and death, and that edge is the most alive place there is. I took some of that away with me, and I now consider that experience to have been a gift."

Deborah Kiley was only 24 in 1982 when what she calls "the sinking" happened; she was a tough, experienced sailor as well as a mixed-up kid. When she signed on to crew a 58-foot boat sailing from Maine to Florida, it was no big deal—just a week at sea and a chance to find a better job in the Caribbean.

Her doubts about the voyage began when she realized that John, the captain, was a heavy drinker, and Mark, one of the two men crewing with her, was a borderline psychotic. Then Meg, John's girlfriend, turned up, and John insisted on taking her along. The only person on board whom she could depend on was Brad, the kid brother of a friend.

On their second night out, they ran into a gale off Charleston, SC, and for the next 24 hours they fought winds that reached up to 80 knots. While Brad, Deborah, and John struggled to keep the boat afloat, Mark's response was to get drunk, and Meg, who stayed in the cabin, was tossed around by the rolling ship and badly hurt. Finally, when the motor burned out and the wind shredded the sails, the boat "fell off a wave" and sank in minutes. All they were able to recover was an 11-foot rubber dinghy, which they kept losing in gusts of wind, only to find it on top of waves the size of a two-story building.

When the storm finally abated, their conditions got even worse. Without food, water, or extra clothing, they were exhausted, dehydrated, and in the advanced stages of hypothermia. They tried various ways of staying warm, including rigging up a wire contraption to suspend themselves in the airspace of the boat when it was overturned. But nothing worked for very long.

One interminable afternoon, when they were in the water holding on to the boat, Mark told Deborah to stop kicking him. "I'm not touching you," she said, and ducked down into the water. There, in the dim blue light, she saw hundreds of sharks, some so close she could see the hoods on their eyes, others just circling shadows.

Now they had to leave the water—which was much warmer than the air—and find some way to fight the cold. The only thing warm in the boat was the water that sloshed around ➤ 160

STRUCK BY LIGHTNING
(continued from page 159)
the bottom—but it quickly became filthy because Meg was unable to sit over the side to defecate. In no time, everyone's sores became badly inflamed, including those on Meg's legs, which were deeply cut. Soon Meg's whole body started to swell, and she began to die, slowly and painfully, from blood poisoning.

Not too long afterward, John and then Mark, both maddened from drinking seawater, jumped out of the raft—they said they were going to get beer and cigarettes—leaving Deborah with only Brad to share her ordeal. But on the fifth day Brad started vomiting uncontrollably—he lost 30 pounds—and thought he was going to die. Instead of giving up in despair, Deborah says, she just got angry with herself for having relied on him so much psychologically.

Deborah and Brad, the only survivors, were finally rescued by a passing Russian freighter and were in the news for a while. Then Deborah tried to get on with her life. But in her compelling new book about the experience, *Albatross* (Houghton Mifflin), she writes that she suffered from post-traumatic stress for almost six years.

"For years I tried to put the sinking behind me," she says. "I'd had this great life sailing around the world, and I didn't want to give it up. But finally I ran into a brick wall. I had become afraid of water, of flying. I started wetting my bed. I went to several therapists, but the only one who helped me was a woman who believed in regression therapy. She made me relive everything—the moment, for instance, when I saw the sharks. I found an image for that terror—a warm, fuzzy ball—and I went inside it and saw the darkness and saw that there was nothing there to fear. I learned that surviving is a process of peeling away the layers of yourself until you get to the core. Ultimately I was all alone out there. Believing in God helped, but if I hadn't also believed in myself, I wouldn't have made it."

Even Deborah, who had been psychologically wounded by her encounter with death, won't say she regrets the experience: "I think everything happened the way it should have happened. Who knows if it was all bad? I married my husband because he could relate to what I'd been through—he had sailed around the world in a 30-foot boat. And I certainly don't see myself as a victim—I've even forgiven Mark and John. I'm the type who takes control of things, so who knows what they would have done without me? Maybe they would have paid more attention; maybe they wouldn't have gotten drunk; maybe they would have survived."

My exploratory whitewater-rafting trip down the Boh River in Borneo was terrifying for only a couple of minutes—when I was held at the bottom of a waterfall, helplessly cartwheeling in its violence. I did look death in the face after I ran out of breath and started gulping water and, like Gretel, I was pissed. Ironically, it's the rest of the trip that most people think they couldn't have handled—not the fear of dying but the extreme discomfort: painful fungi, oozing sores, swelling bites, blood-sucking leeches, and relentless swarms of bees. I figure that the people who say they couldn't have handled it don't know the power of the survival instinct.

For me, that river trip had many rewards. At the time, I was, like Gretel and Ruth Anne, fascinated by the look, the feel, the astonishment, and the horror of what I was experiencing. And like all these women, I learned about myself from the way I handled it. Gretel, who is the poet among us, found a quote about lightning from the California Chumash Indians that helps explain why none of us regret our experiences:

"Beware, that is an element from the hand of a power that caused us to see the world."

The difference between the four of us and most other people is that we have seen the overwhelming power and intensity of nature and the knowledge it brings. And it is not a matter of being stronger or better or wiser; it's a matter of having discovered a secret place in ourselves—a place that everyone has, but only a few are lucky enough to penetrate.

Tracy Johnston is the author of Shooting the Boh, *published by Vintage in 1992.*