The Birthday Jump

by John Olson

I remember the first & only time I parachuted it was 1964 my 16th birthday a rite of passage if you will from the old man an aerospace engineer & former WWII B24 bomber pilot I practice-jumped from oil barrels taught how to fall back then when the time came & the plane got fired up & took us up high in the sky over Snohomish county mostly pretty farm country I got the signal & stood out on the little step & took hold of the wing strut with both hands wind blasting into my face & racketing my clothes & waited for the signal to let go the instructor inside a genial guy in his 30s counted down with his hand & shouted now! & I let go & tumbled crazily didn't remember anything I'd been taught I was senseless with terror then the chute opened I felt something scrape my neck & jerked like a puppet into air with the canvas ballooning over my head & realized there was something wrong with the left pull cord it was missing the men on the ground kept yelling at me from a little transistor radio pull your left cord! pull your left cord! & I kept yelling back I have no left cord! I have no left cord! I can't turn! I can't turn! but of course they couldn't hear me it was a one-way radio they no doubt wondered what the hell I was thinking they stopped yelling they must've just figured something was wrong with the radio I stopped yelling the silence was weird I'd never heard such silence birds went sailing by it surprised me I didn't think birds flew that high it was really nice floating in the sky but then as I neared the ground I worried over some high wires I barely cleared those then began drifting to a big field of freshly furrowed black dirt as a farmer in his tractor looked up watched me go over I was told not to look at the ground but I did I couldn't help it then wham my legs hit the ground a knee hit my jaw they warned me that might happen bite my tongue off but I stood up & was ok.

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