

The Thrill of Sky Diving

by Kyle Hemmings

It's not that you want to be silkworm all your life. That's what I'm telling my on-again-off-again girlfriend aboard the plane. Her name is Phoebe as in that song about a girl who lived in her own world within the shell of another. Phoebe, I'm saying, to bridge distances you once considered safe you must take risks like men wishing to be birds. Actually, Phoebe's father used to make jumps from a Beech 18 before he disappeared. Despite distances, I believe she still loves me.

Phoebe smiles behind her goggles, but she's probably shitting her pants. I mean the way she keeps adjusting her helmet and checking her toggles. Don't trust the accuracy of digital altimeters, I say; up here, it's only us. I hold her hand and feel the cocoon of an old love shedding beneath the insulation of our jackets. As the plane ascends, my thoughts turn cold and aerial, perhaps like my first fears at birth, the way babies cry for a safe drop zone.

Phoebe and I are going to perform a "swoop," a dangerous maneuver that involves a high-speed landing before leveling off a few feet above ground, gliding parallel to it. We want to get as close to death as possible and cheat the fucker.

"Ready?" says the pilot. We've met him briefly. In offering us some fine points about elliptical canopies, which can be challenging to land, he tried showing only one side of his face. The other side was disfigured. Perhaps a fall-out from love caused this rather than a crash landing from faulty instruments. While he instructed us, his feet were on land.

We jump. Catching the momentum of a forward throw, then, changing directions with our hand grips, we are not falling. But flying. Reaching a terminal velocity of maybe two hundred mph,

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/kyle-hemmings/the-thrill-of-sky-diving>»

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Phoebe maintains a head down orientation, laughing the delirium of a tragic drunk. Her laughter is like ribbons floating in the air. I peer down.

How big, how so much bigger than I is the world below.

Accelerating, I notice Phoebe's main canopy isn't opening. Nor is her automatic activation device. I glide towards her, groping for her hand. We keep missing. An inch feels like a lifetime. Phoebe is becoming a meteor.

Phoebe, I yell, my haaaaaaaaand.

The doctors say that every bone in her body was shattered. It's a miracle she survived.

In the hospital room, while Phoebe sleeps sedated, I sneak a peek out the window, gaze up at the rolling clouds, sensing a shift in wind mass. I stretch out my arms like a bird and the room is my cockpit.

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In 1797, Andre-Jacques Garnerin was credited with making the first parachute jumps from a hot air balloon. After him, a man named Drager experimented with parachuting from Mount Capricorn in Indo-China, an activity that later inspired base-jumping, that is, landing from buildings. bridges, antennas, cliffs, etc.

Oh, and also Da Vinci...

That's not true. I lied about Drager. He never existed. Indo-China, however, is still accessible in aerial views.

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The funniest story I ever heard was about a man, who consistently cheating on his wife, took up sky diving to relieve the tediousness of his existence. Deploying strict belly-to-earth orientation, he glided

far off course, careening straight through the roof of his home, lying unconscious feet from his shocked wife, who was ironing his dress shirts. When one tabloid reported this, a commenter stated that this was a perfect example of a "target landing."

* * *

From the journals of the prisoner, Marcel Le Guin. (translated by Theresa Hume).

As we hovered above Devil's Island, I wrestled the pilot's gun and shot him. Not knowing how to land a plane, I jumped. The freedom of falling swallowed me. It was the freedom of laughing at your own father who beat you daily. The earth and trees below swirled into a canvas of running colors. [I] fell into deep turgid water, swam towards the banks of a dense jungle. For days, I trudged without food or water. . . Upon a coiling path, I met a dark-skinned woman carrying a basket of slick, silvery fish. Her eyes entranced me. I thought of beautiful Mombo snakes and a woman I once met in Algiers. She motioned me to follow her, as if expecting me. In her village, the men wore trinkets of sharks' teeth and at night they performed odd dances, jumping from trees, mimicking the movements of flying fish. . . Has it really been ten years? . . . Upon [my] capture, I was returned to Paris. In the cell, each day, I practice jumping [off] a cot. At first, I landed on my feet. But now I practice jumping to my knees. I do this in hopes of breaking my legs so the judge will offer clemency to an old man speaking the tongue of all flying fish.

* * *

You are standing on a cliff. It is the same one you've dreamt about for months. When you look down, the sea is a dark emerald and when you turn around, you can see the hills and rooftops of Pomono, Los Angeles, perhaps even the dunes of Death Valley. The Ferris Wheel below your right appears as insignificant as a toy. Behind you, the wind is full of Chinese whispers.

Now if you fall, you won't glide horizontally the way sky divers do, oh, say, ten miles on a good day. It will be the sensation of falling through your mother's canal, an acceleration lasting what seems years instead of seconds, the duration of a lifetime. Imagine the speed of an elevator descending below ground zero. Then, the shock. The smack of water against your feet will resemble that first slap by the doctor after you landed safely in his arms. That was your first impression of thunder and later, you ached for the blue sky reflected in your mother's eyes. From then on, you've never walked on solid ground, but rather, *have been falling to ground*.

But today you will land in water, expecting it to be the memory of something womb-like.

And if you survive, you'll emerge above the surface of water, wiping your eyes, amazed at the miracle you've just accomplished, a fission no one has successfully created. You'll peer up at your shadow, far and still, the one you left at the edge of the cliff. It might be your primordial self, this shadow, before you were given a name. No matter. You feel sad because the two of you have been together for so long. It will wave to you, then, eventually turn and leave. You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll scream *mommy*. This is the moment you waited for all your life, this is the moment you'll awake, you'll explode in an epiphany of light, this is the moment you'll die, you'll die for the last time.

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If man was meant to fly, he would not dream of crushing dragonflies.--*Unknown Chinese philosopher*.

* * *

Jump.

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