

Mr. Fejes

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2nd period

FREE FALL

I don't know exactly when the idea of going skydiving occurred to me, but the feeling had been in the back of my mind for a long time. I'd watched countless videos of skydivers over the years, some jumping by themselves, some jumping in large groups creating amazing formations, and some in winged suits shooting the gaps between huge granite formations as they screamed down mountainsides. Those videos planted the seed in my mind, and when I turned thirty, I gave myself the birthday present of a skydiving adventure. The event was life-changing.

The AeroOhio Skydiving Center in Rittman, Ohio, is in the middle of nowhere. It's set in the center of a patchwork of fields that are farmed by Amish families. I arrived at the center on a day in early August and went through the accelerated freefall (AFF) training course. We watched videos of how to fall properly, which seemed ironic. The instructor, a young guy in his mid-twenties, showed us how to position our bodies as we plunged toward the ground, arms out and hands flat, legs straight, knees locked. This position would help us to control our fall and balance us in the air, preventing us from tumbling end-over-end. He put a parachute on our backs and showed us the two most important parts – the primary ripcord and the emergency handle that released our backup chute, should the primary fail. We were to cut the dead chute off first and then release the backup. He walked us through the routine of checking the horizon, watching our distance above the Earth (altitude), and how to land safely on the ground so that we wouldn't break our knees or ankles. For five hours we prepped and I felt ready when we left the hangar and walked out to the grassy runway to prepare for our flight.

My two instructors, Sheri and Alphabet, had more than 5,000 jumps between them, so I felt safe and confident. Alphabet wasn't really the instructor's name, but he said that his last name had so many letters that he acquired the nickname "Alphabet" and it stuck. He was older, probably late 50s or so, and had skin that was tanned reddish-brown. A thick salt-and-pepper colored moustache clung to his upper lip. It matched the silver-streaked ponytail dangling down the back of his neck. The wrinkles on his face looked leathery. His smiling blue eyes could flash from humor to seriousness in the flutter of a heartbeat. He loved what he was doing, being an instructor, but he knew this activity was no joking

matter. If something went wrong during a jump, it was literally a life-and-death situation. Sheri was very short and had close-cropped blond hair. Her fair pale skin and almond-shaped eyes reminded me of the elves from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels. Like Alphabet, she was quick to smile and quick to laugh, but she could snap back to stone-cold seriousness in an instant. They got me into my black jumpsuit, hung the parachute from my back, adjusted the straps and buckles, handed me a helmet, and gave me a thumbs up.

"There are a couple of people ahead of you," Alphabet said, "so we're going to take them up first. When they're through, it's your turn." His smile was warm and genuine as he shook my hand. He loved sharing his passion with others.

I watched a single-engine plane land on the runway in front of me, a wide strip of spring-green grass mowed directly into the middle of a huge corn field. It seemed strange to see a plane landing on an undulating grass field instead of on a paved runway at an airport. The guys who were jumping before me ducked their heads and climbed into the plane along with Sheri and Alphabet. Sheri rolled the clear Plexiglas door down and the plane's engines roared to life. In a moment, the craft had taxied down to the end of the runway, made a tight turn, and was rocketing along, gaining speed before it lurched off the ground. The aircraft banked to its right as it started a series of slow circles to build altitude while staying over the jump zone.

As the plane vanished into the light clouds above me, I looked around and saw an unusual sight. Since there was not much entertainment around for Amish families in Rittman, the skydiving center was a big attraction. There were several families gathered to watch the skydivers. They sat on the wooden fences that lined the airstrip. The women and girls wore their colorful but plain dresses, which looked unbearably hot in the early-August afternoon. The men wore dark slacks, white shirts, and dark suspenders. Many had black-rimmed hats and sported thick beards. They'd brought food with them, so they were eating and chatting, occasionally checking the sky to look for divers.

Another instructor came up to me and leaned on the fence I was standing against. I kept going over all of the information I had learned that day, running through the instructions over and over: check the horizon, check altitude, check my body position. As I did this, the instructor spoke to me.

"Hmmm...I hope those clouds don't thicken. We can't jump if we can't see the landing zone."

Looking up, I noticed that the clouds had thickened significantly. What had been just a few puffy clouds a few hours ago had now turned into a gathering blanket of gray. There were still tattered holes here and there, but they were shrinking. At that moment, I heard the Amish spectators behind me gasp. They spotted the skydivers.

Directly above me, I saw three small X-shaped figures. They were hard to see due to their height. For a while it looked like they weren't moving at all, like they were suspended in the sky by wires and would remain there forever. A little at a time, they took on more shape, their bodies thickening and gaining detail as they neared the ground. Finally, their colorful parachutes erupted from their packs, a flutter of nylon rainbows. The skydivers grabbed the handles above their heads and steered their chutes, guiding them gently back and forth until each person landed safely.

And then I got the bad news. The clouds were too thick. I was not going to be able to jump. The jumpers that had just landed had dropped through the last usable gap in the cloud cover.

"Come back the next day that the sky is clear and we'll get you up there," the guy behind the counter told me. "You don't need an appointment. Just show up and you'll be first on the list." I was ready to go *now*, though. I had psyched myself up. I had the routine down in my head. My adrenaline was pumping. Now I had to wait. I headed home dejectedly and bookmarked several weather sites on my computer. Hopefully I'd be able to go tomorrow or the next day.

One week. I waited an entire week for the stupid clouds to finally break up enough that I was allowed to jump. During those seven days I rehearsed what I had to do, repeating the directions in my head and lying on the living room floor with my arms out wide, legs locked, and eyes forward to scan the horizon. I dreamed about jumping every night, often waking up with a jolt when I touched down on the ground or when my parachute yanked on my body. The drive to Rittman felt like another week-long delay even though it was only a 45-minute drive.

I received a quick refresher course and then Sheri and Alphabet suited me up. It was finally my turn to climb into the plane. The fuselage was virtually empty, a long silver soda can with two benches bolted down to the left and right of the center of the floor for jumpers to sit on. We felt the plane bump along the field-turned-runway until we lifted off the grass, light as a feather. The afternoon sun gleamed brightly as the plane climbed steadily. I looked at the altimeter attached to my wrist like an oversized wristwatch that showed how high we were. At 800 feet the ground started losing detail. At 5,500 feet, the altitude at which I was supposed to pull my ripcord, we had pierced a thin layer of clouds and the ground now looked like Legos, each farmer's field portioned off into neat squares of varying shades of green and gold. Sheri and Alphabet ran me through some last-minute instructions, making sure I knew what I was doing.

The entire time that I was going through the preparation for my jump, I was not nervous. I was excited. I never had butterflies. It was just not scaring me, which sort of surprised me. That all changed when we hit our jumping altitude of 14,000 feet. At that moment, the guy that I had hired to take

pictures and to shoot video of me rolled the Plexiglas door up. Suddenly, I was standing in the open door of an airplane roaring through the sky, two and a half miles above the ground. The reality of what I was about to do hit me like hammer blow. All our lives we are told by our parents to “stay away from the edge” of whatever we happened to be near, like a steep trail edge in the park. For our own safety, for self-preservation, we need to *stay away from the edge*. And here I was, very much *not* staying away from the edge. In fact, on my right side was the safety of the plane. On my left was a 14,000-foot drop.

Cold air rushed into the plane and ate our voices as we yelled to one another. I watched Alphabet climb *outside the plane* by hanging onto the door frame. He stood on a small metal step just outside the threshold - he literally clung to the outside of the moving aircraft. I was next, standing in the doorway, half in and half out of the plane, my goggled eyes seeing the frame of the plane etched against the bright blue sky. My heartbeats tripled. My throat closed. Wind pulled at the half of me that was outside the craft.

Sheri took her place at my right side, the half of me that was still inside the plane. We fell into the rhythm that signaled that we were all ready to go.

“Hotel check, out!” I yelled to Alphabet.

I turned to look at him and he nodded back to me while he screamed, “Check!”

“Hotel check, in!” I yelled to Sheri over the roar of the wind and the airplane engine.

She gave a thumbs up and hollered her reply, “Check!”

Together, the three of us leaned out the door, then back in for a second, and then we flung ourselves out at the same time, letting go of the plane and plunging into thousands of miles of unoccupied sky. We were free. We were flying. We had a view of the world that many people never get to see. All around me in every direction there was nothing. I’d never had such of feeling in my life. I was totally disconnected from the Earth. As humans, we’re used to being able to touch something – a chair, a car, or at least the ground. It was the first time in my life that I was totally free of the bonds that tethered me to our planet.

People use the word *overwhelming* too often, I have decided. While I was soaring through the air, the wind screaming in my ears, I had the strangest feeling of being completely overwhelmed and blown away by this unique sensation. I was going through the motions of what I had learned, but it felt like the conscious, decision-making part of my brain was still inside the plane that was speeding away from us. I had this dreamy feeling as I looked around the sky. I felt the presence of Sheri and Alphabet, felt them on either side of me, stabilizing my arms and legs, but I was *somewhere else* in my mind.

Suddenly, the feeling of floating and flying passed by. Below, I saw a bank of clouds rushing up at us and I realized that I was shooting toward the ground at 120 miles per hour. We were traveling at two miles per minute. The clouds grew closer and closer, and then we disappeared into them like needles through cotton. A thick fog bank enveloped us. Visibility was reduced to about fifteen feet. We were in a dreamlike state, three people suspended in the soupy air, disconnected from Earth but in touch with one another.

Then the clouds faded and we appeared beneath the mist to see our quickly-approaching landing site. The ground had all kinds of detail. I could make out roads, cars, fields. It snapped me out of my reverie and back to reality. Jolted by the view of the ground rushing at us, I realized that I had not checked my altimeter recently enough. When I looked at the clunky instrument on my wrist, I realized that we were 2,000 feet below where I should have pulled my ripcord! *I had totally forgotten the most important part of skydiving.* Like I said before, people use the word overwhelmed too often.

Sheri pulled my ripcord and my speed went from 120 miles per hour to only twenty miles per hour in one second. The roar of the air died instantly and I was now floating peacefully above the countryside. I pulled the handles above me to begin steering the canopy. A voice sounded in my headset, the voice of an instructor, telling me which handle to pull to steer me toward the landing point. The serenity of that lazy trip to the ground will stay with me forever. It was absolutely silent. I was a piece of dandelion fluff drifting wherever the wind wanted to take me.

In a few minutes my wild ride was over. I touched down safely, my colorful parachute collapsing behind me. Sheri and Alphabet congratulated me and told me that they hoped that I had fun and they hoped that they'd see me again. Although I still think of that amazing day often, once was enough. I still dream about falling through the sky, a wingless bird who wants nothing more than to fly on his own. But I have accepted my fate as an earth-dweller and will have to be forever envious of the feathered creatures soaring above us.