

## ALMOST FAMOUS

There were four of us huddled at the back of the plane. We wore jumpsuits, for jumping.

Although there was no moment of jumping. There was only falling, as in love. Or out of love.

The instructor, whose name was Mick, slid the door of the plane open exactly like you would the side door in a Kombi, and there, less than a metre away, was the huge and roaring sky.

We shank backwards, farting.

“On the way up, the plane is always full of farts,” Mick had told us the day before.

“It’s just fear.”

Just fear.

He’d explained, with the help of a whiteboard, all the things that could kill us. The hard ground, obviously, but apart from that, it was the powerlines you had to worry about the most. “You land in a tree, you’ll be alright, most likely. Maybe a broken limb. But a powerline will fry you like bacon.”

He drew a stick figure on the white board with lightning coming out of its head.

“If you see someone else caught in a powerline, for god’s sake, don’t try to help them.” He turned from the white board and looked at us to make sure we were listening. “As soon as you touch the stuck jumper, you earth them, which will kill the both of you.”

An involuntary noise came out of me.

“It happens.” He looked at me. “Even if you do land in the right place, things can go wrong. People getting caught in their chute. They land too hard, too heavy, at the wrong angle, snapping bones, cracking a skull.” He tapped the white board.

In the last three months, I hadn't stepped in front of a bus, but I had become aware of the possibility. Every time one of them sped towards me, I felt how easy it would be to step off the curb and into oblivion.

I didn't actively want to die. I just wanted a rest from the pain. And the shame. When the people closest to you hurt you and lie about it and the whole town knows before you do, it's hard not to doubt yourself.

The third time I didn't step in front of a bus, I understood I needed to do something. Something that would reset things in my body. Something wild and grand that would change the way I thought about myself.

"I know the exact thing," said Paul.

"Is it dangerous?"

"Of course."

"Excellent."

This was the second time I had followed Paul's advice. The first had changed my life. I was hopeful this would too. If it didn't kill me.

Mick was standing in an orange jumpsuit by the open door and yelling my name. He had to yell because the wind threw his words out of the plane.

I stood. He took my hand across the dangerous space and I stepped through white noise reaching for the large square hole in the belly of the plane.

I took hold of the rim around the open doorway.

There was a small metal platform over the wheel. This is where I had to get to.

"Ready?" Mick had to yell. The air was rushing around us, flicking hair and sucking sound from the plane.

“I’m ready.” I yelled back. The words whooshed outside and were gone. Mick checked my face, my eyes. I noticed that his own eyes were pale brown and flecked with light.

He let go of my hand.

I held onto on the top of the door frame and stretched my hand outside of the plane until I had the wing strut. We had done this on the ground, but up here, the wind pushed at my body hard as a hand. My eyes were dry. The fabric of my jumpsuit flapped and cracked. I held hard onto the strut and pushed a leg out into the rushing air until my foot touched the platform above the wheel and for a moment I was straddling the wing and the plane with nothing but a lot of cold space beneath me.

This wasn’t like stepping in front of a bus.

I reached my other hand out and grabbed the strut and then it was an almost a natural rebalancing to swing the rest of my body to follow.

And then there I was, completely outside the plane, ten thousand feet above the earth.

My mouth was dry, my throat was dry. The air was cold on my hands and face, but I was toasty warm with terror. My palms were sweating and I felt how easy it would be for a hand to slip, to lose my footing, and fall. ‘Careful’, I thought. ‘Don’t fall.’

And then I remembered that’s what I was here for. Falling was the point. There was liberation in this. If I fell now, I had a chute. I would be okay.

Behind me, from the door of the plane, Mick yelled, “Horizon.”

Through the cross bars, I found the milk and purple fuzzy line where earth met sky and I put my focus on it, knowing I would need to find it again when there was no wing and nothing to hold onto. Wind blew the loose strands of my hair straight backwards off my face. It pushed my cheeks into my skull.

Mick yelled something but the wind blew all his words away. It didn't matter, I knew what to do. I let go.

I let go.

When we had climbed into the plane, he'd asked me if I was a surfer.

"No, why?" I had one hand on the frame of the open door.

"You got body confidence."

"Yoga," I said and didn't say, Danger isn't the such a big deal when you're ambivalent about staying alive.

I fell backwards off the wing. It didn't feel like backwards or even down, only that suddenly I was untethered. As I let go, I made my body a star, a bat-flat shape to slow descent, but at the time there was nothing so clear as thought.

This is why we trained - so the body would remember when the brain forgot.

I found the horizon long enough to work out which way was sky and which way was ground, then I was gone.

Training had been four hours belly-flat to a bar stool inside a tin shed.

The bar stools were old. The frames were chrome and rust-spotted. The cushions red leather, but cracked and sometimes split so you could see the custard yellow foam inside.

We took one each and lay with our arms and legs sticking out and pretended we were 10,000 feet in the air. And falling.

"Horizon," Mick had yelled and I'd looked ahead of me for the horizon, but there was just the corrugated wall of the shed.

“Odometre check.”

I looked at the broken odometre strapped to my chest.

“Practice rip cord pull.”

I put one hand to my chest and the other above my head, arm bent at the elbow. “To balance you,” Mick explained. “You need to bend both arms, otherwise you’ll just spin.”

I could see myself then, one arm out, spinning through the cold high thin air. Plunging towards the solid earth.

“Rip cord pull.” I pulled on my imaginary rip cord. There were cracks in the leather seat that poked against the bare skin where my shirt had ridden up.

“Now count. One hippopotamus, two hippopotamus... if you get to ten and your chute hasn’t gone up, pull the ripcord on your backup chute.”

We practiced the drill over and over again. “Your senses will overload. Your body gets so full of stimuli up there, the brain shuts down, and all that’s left is sensation. It feels great, but it’ll kill you.”

*There’s something you need to do.* The voice was quiet and so far away it was hard to hear.

I fell without thinking of it in those terms. I was outside of time and language. Suspended in exhilarated emptiness. But then the tiny voice again, like a midge’s bite, *something important.*

A wordless ecstasy flooded me, scoured me clean of the things that had driven me to jump out of a plane. The milky circle of horizon bloomed around me, a perfect misted ring. *There’s something you need to do.*

And then it came, *Altimetre. Check the altimetre.*

I bent my head to look at the dial strapped between my breasts. It was like a speedo from an old car, the needle moving as I fell. I focused, looked at the numbers. 9,000 feet.

Below me was the curving earth. A vast bluegreen and purple wildness. And far away, Mick who had somehow gone past me and was now far below me, becoming tiny already.

8,000 feet. Practice rip cord pull. I bent both arms, touched the rip cord.

7,000 feet.

I fell. Falling did not feel like falling, despite the fact that it was. Every second that went by, I was closer to the hard earth.

6,000.

4,000

I pulled the ripcord hard, never doubting it would work.

I had loved the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Because they were beautiful and because they made music and I was so hungry for these things, I forgot that you can't catch them like you might catch a STD. You can't fuck or charm or even love your way into music and beauty. You have to grow them, with courage and with care, from the inside out.

I forgot to count my hippopotami.

I remember only being yanked by my back like a kitten, hard up into the enormous air. Because falling never felt like falling, slowing didn't feel like slowing, but like I had been catapulted up into the broad blue above.

Then everything went quiet and still. The white whoosh of rushing air that I noticed only now it was gone, was silent. The air was warm.

I felt my mind come back and remembered how to steer, pull down on the right toggle to turn right, left to turn left, both at the same time to slow down. I saw the patch of airfield among the trees, the white cross on the yellow dirt.

I looked up and saw the parachute that had sprung from my back, like wings, fully formed, red and yellow bands of silk puffed full and glorious above my head.

It seemed to take the longest time to come down to earth and I had no desire to leave the clear quiet sky. I felt all the moments that had brought me to this airborne ecstasy, not just Sam and Ruby and Flick, but all the way back to the beginning, to my mother and the months before she disappeared. To the piano that my father kept in the boatshed, against the repeated advice of the piano tuner, and the initial bliss that music had brought to our family.

Because here, in the middle of this enormous silence, I touched it again, that same ecstasy that music had once given me. The sense of being outside of ordinary life, soaked with wonder.

The earliest memory I have is of laying on the jetty watching clear green water moving beneath me, listening to the tenderness of small waves rolling up the beach. Notes from the piano came flitting from the boatshed out across the water to gather inside me like sunlight.

I don't know who was playing, but it must have been Mum. She was the only one who could make the piano sparkle like that, which is, of course, what caused all the problems. Although, now, floating through the crystalline air, it occurred to me, that maybe it wasn't her brilliance that was the problem, but Dad's inability to love that in her.

I saw the powerlines lacing silver through the trees beside the airfield, running by the road and across the paddocks. I remembered the white board and the stick figure with lightning coming out of her head. I steered myself carefully and steadily towards open ground and the white cross in the centre of the dry bare dirt.

As the earth rose to meet me, my flight seemed to accelerate. I pulled on both toggles to ease my descent, putting my legs out before me like a pelican landing on water, remembering at the last moment to bend my knees, but still the ground hurtled towards me too fast to manage. My legs peddled at the air, trying, and failing, to keep up with the accelerating earth, tumbling and tripping over myself until finally, I landed in a buckled, joyful, crumpled heap.

When the silk cleared and I could see again, Paul was standing with one hand reaching to help me stand. “How was it?”

I couldn’t answer. I was laughing too hard. I was scoured clean of hurt. I was filled with wild clear joy. I was overflowing.