

## Falling Back to Earth

A few months back, just before my 37<sup>th</sup> birthday, I decided to go skydiving again. I expected that the experience would dilute the fears and anxieties that had been troubling me. I told myself that this singular act would reignite passion and meaning from the embers of monotony of adult life. After all, my expectations had been cultivated by my prior experiences skydiving. From age 23 to 25, I had jumped 10 or so times, and had seriously considered getting certified. Jumping had provided emotional and psychological readjustments that were more impactful than therapy, Prozac, or half-marathons. In large part, I credited skydiving with keeping me sober for almost two years at that time. But I ought to have known that expectations lead to disappointment and I shouldn't have been surprised that skydiving now would not grant me instant clarity—if it had ever really provided this kind of divine vision at all. Nostalgia is cunning. Lucidity, or at least a better understanding of my angst, would come eventually. It would just take some time, as things often do.

As I drove 20 miles south on the New Jersey Parkway to Egg Harbor—just north of Atlantic City—to go to the small airport, I reflected on my life. I had recently submitted my resignation to the DC-based company for which I worked remotely as a federal proposal writer. I had been at the job for just shy of a year. It seemed to be going nowhere and my manager didn't know how to manage and it was all growing more and more absurd. It was a good job, I suppose, but there were lots of jobs like it, and I found a replacement that paid me 20 percent more. If I was going to do that kind of work—which I didn't enjoy and which I certainly wasn't passionate about—then I figured I might as well take some time off and get a job that paid more. I believed my motives for quitting were reasonable, and now I found myself with three weeks to think.

My life had changed. I had just gotten my driver's license back after being sidelined by the State of New Jersey for a DUI. This time around, I hadn't had a drink in almost a year. My relationship with my family

had been rebuilt, and my parents had even given me a key to their house, trusted me to watch their dog while they were away, and often invited me to dinner. The relationship with the much younger woman, Candice, whom I was dating, had hit a consistent streak of domesticity: everything was okay and that made me anxious and suspicious. As much as I wanted to leave town and travel and live in a different city every month for a year—as I had wanted to do for a long time—I didn't trust myself and knew it would be as much of a bid of escapism as drinking, and would likely lead to drinking anyway. I felt trapped in a bubble of the banal, unsure of how to break out.

The weight that I never put on in my 20s and early 30s was showing up on the scale. But there was money in the bank. Silver hairs were revealing themselves more often in my thick brown hair, but I had a car—a practical choice of a Ford Fusion rather than the Cadillacs or Camaros I had previously driven. I had been smoking cigarettes for 21 years but was still often asked for my ID when buying those cigarettes. I wasn't writing many essays, but I was making six figures by writing for *The Man*. Nothing was really wrong, but I felt like I was living someone else's life. I felt frozen. In the past, when I felt like this and life hit a plateau, I always picked up a drink again and hit the reset button. I treated life like it was a game of Sonic the Hedgehog that my friends and I played as kids: when the Sega froze and we sat there in frustration, we just hit the power button and started again.

And so, the idea of jumping out of a plane seemed like a healthier reset, and, like a game of Sonic, it was nostalgic. First, I yearned for a familiar jolt that would again provide a zest for life. Second, I yearned to return to that time in my mid-twenties when everything seemed possible—when all doors were still open. As I approached 37, it struck me that I had arrived somewhere, and I had never really arrived anywhere before.

I had made it, hadn't I? I had survived the worst parts of my addiction and was approaching a year of sobriety. But somewhere in there, survival had taught me to forget how to live and I was left with the gnawing feeling that although I had stopped drinking, I was unsure that I had changed. Maybe I was a bit kinder, a bit more empathetic, and a bit more responsible. But maybe I had simply stopped acting on the thoughts that had gotten me into trouble in the past: deliberate imprudence with women, thoughtful recklessness with money, and the absolute belief that I could still function

in the world with a glass of whiskey and a line of cocaine. Those thoughts were still there, I just hadn't done anything about them.

The skydiving center tried to get me on the plane quickly because a storm was moving up the coast. I initialed the paperwork without reading it, and although I was told I would watch an instructional video, the thick-German-accented instructor simply provided 60 seconds of training from the inside of a retired plane cabin that sat in the hanger. I gave my thumbs up. I wasn't anxious. I would step out onto the wheel with him behind me before we leaped together. The simplicity of jumping was coming back to me.

In the small, seatless plane we shimmied up next to the pilot and the three of us made our way up 13,000 feet in 15 or 20 minutes. The rain was a couple of miles in the distance, over the ocean, and appeared as a haze. I remember seeing a storm like that from a plane window when taking off from south Florida with a wicked hangover in my early twenties. The instructor opened the plane door—a translucent plexiglass garage-like door—the rain becoming more distinct, casting a shadow over the ocean in the distance. I could see Atlantic City to the south, where I had decided to stop gambling after my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. On that night, I had maxed out credit cards on cash advances at the Trump Taj Mahal—a casino that no longer existed. With the plane door open, I had an incredible sense of aloneness. Not loneliness, but just the recognition of the aloneness of living that I had first woken up to with my consciousness at some point in my teens. I had never gone skydiving without friends. And in that minute before I put my foot out the door and onto the wheel, I thought about the friends I had been skydiving with, and the friendships that had been given away through a wormhole of time, addiction, and distance. Friendships don't get lost. Neither did jobs or cars or freedom. In addiction, I gave my life away: family, health, friends, confidence, career, reliability, money, integrity. Nothing was ever lost. Addiction may have taken love and possessions, but it asked first.

The falling felt familiar, and I couldn't help but smile. The goggles weren't as tight as they needed to be on my left eye, so I kept it closed for most of the jump. I found myself looking out at the storm and the ocean and the green stretches of the Pine Barrens with one eye open.

The best part about skydiving is the anticipation. The falling seems to happen almost in a blackout—the parachute snapping open like I’ve woken up in a hospital, drunk, wondering how I had gotten there. Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to it. It’s familiar. The scariest part is floating to the ground, when there is time to recognize that a flimsy harness and a chunk of fabric are all that prevents me from crashing to the ground. Mortality lurks, and I like it.

Life had become the antithesis of chaos, and I didn’t really know how to push through the constant adulating. Suddenly, I had woken up on the express train to middle age. I was unmarried, without kids, and with the longest relationship of my life stacking up to two years (if I’m being generous). Sure, I had gotten a couple of graduate degrees and traveled extensively and found myself with a kind and patient and beautiful woman. But I had also spent much of my adult life in rehab and 12-step meetings and hospitals. I just never expected to live this long.

I didn’t think much about skydiving by myself because doing things by myself is just part of life these days: no one is around to jump out of a plane on a Friday morning in mid-June. And maybe there aren’t a whole lot of people my age who decide that this is a good way to get their affairs in order. Oh well.

I am not jealous of my friends who are married, have children, or own their own homes. In moments of loneliness or uncertainty, my life of unattachment—or deliberate detachment—seems unabatingly selfish and meaningless. But I still bear the guilt, and sometimes shame, for the hell that I put people through. Even if I have made my own way through much of it, I keep people at a distance, like that storm from the plane.

A few days after falling back to Earth, I got in a car with Candice and we drove north to the lower Catskills in New York. We spent four days hiking and taking baths and eating vegetarian food. We stopped off at the university where I went to undergrad—a place I hadn’t been since those early skydiving days. And then we stopped at the house where I lived senior year, which my friends and I called the Green Briar. It was in that house, 16 years before, that I had tried to take my own life.

The house still stood, barely—roof collapsed from fire damage, overgrown with ivy and weeds and trees. My friends and I had been the last renters, and the house had been left to return to nature. That seemed

fitting. I stood at the base of the driveway, unable to maneuver up to the house as the rest of the gravel road had been overtaken by thick brush, as if there had never been a driveway at all. The Green Briar had been left to the world and no one wanted it. It was as if the damage done there had bled into the ground, rendering the property uninhabitable like a decades-old gas station with leaky tanks, unworthy of even demolition. The basement of that home had a dirt floor with an abandoned workshop from the 1920s. My friends often wondered if it was haunted. I never believed that. I've come to believe that if ghosts exist, they aren't found in a century-old house or Revolutionary War barracks or abandoned mental hospitals. No, if ghosts exist, they are inside of us, and we have to find a way to live with them.

People like me go to 12-step meetings and yoga and counseling sessions. We smoke too many cigarettes, drink too much coffee, live in recovery houses, work at diners. Sometimes we quit smoking and move out of those sober homes and become your doctor or your teacher or your counselor or your Senator or your professor. Maybe we were these things all along. But we all have a Green Briar.

I know that even if I don't know what I'm doing, I don't have to throw a grenade on my life just because I'm having thoughts about blowing it up. I can make mistakes. I can be reckless. It's my life, after all. One thing I don't have to do is pick up a drink. I don't have to give away all the good things in my life, even if sometimes I feel that overwhelming sense of aloneness.

I drove home from the Catskills, dropped off Candice, and spent a couple of days with myself. It seemed that the skydive hadn't affected me. But it had. It was just subtle, like a shift in the wind. I spent a lot of time in quiet. I ate good meals. I walked. I wrote. I read. I watched films. And I sat out on the porch and watched a storm roll in with both eyes open. Sometimes it's hard to pay attention. Sometimes it's hard to be at peace with the things that I've done. And it's okay to feel that way. It's okay to be uneasy. The only way to change is to feel it.