

## Turning

It was on my most recent birthday when I chose to jump out of a plane.

Goes something like this, yet nothing written, I'm sure, could ever come close to how it all felt: the sky as it wrapped me in a free-fall turbulence, the wind ruffling my cheeks like the skin of water, and my strange, maniacal laughing as I plummeted at 200km/h. 32 feet per second.

June 7 2008, Waterville, Nova Scotia, Canada

My posse: Meghan Bray (my sister) and Brittany Bell (a former coworker who jumps every weekend and has an undying passion for the sport).

It was probably the most beautiful day we had that summer, regardless. I remember the sun burning high in all that blue my right hand shielding the heat and light, and my bare feet curling up the grass as I kept my eyes fixed on the plane, small as a tadpole. Then before my eyes and very suddenly tiny blits of colour would erupt and the divers sailed their parachute back down to earth.

With ease and grace they each landed like great birds, their canopy falling overtop them, and I wondered to myself how it must feel to actually ascend earth, then reencounter it, dead or alive, I guess.

Absolutely, I was terrified.

(When I was a little boy living in Saskatchewan, during the dry and open-fielded summers hot-air balloons littered the sky like coloured glass on soft beaches. We would watch them, my family and I sitting outside, maybe eating ice-cream in the late afternoon & slowly bob away.)

I was tandem diving means to be strapped onto the master-diver who on his back bore the giant canopy that would support the weight of us both. Along with Brittany and Charlie (her boyfriend and jump-buddy who were to jump after me), the pilot, and my master-tandem-diver, I entered the aircraft. Wearing only shorts and wrapped head-to-toe in various belts I took my crouched position and looked out the window.

Ignition and take-off.

The last person I saw on earth, that day before I took myself high, was my sister, waving me off.

Fabulous horizon sapphire blue and darker higher and higher.

To my right the Bay of Fundy eats the coast. To my left farmers fields, meadows and lakes.

We had reached 12,000 ft, I couldn't hear a thing, save the propellers on either side of me. Then, sitting in front and facing me, Brittany's voice carried above all else, You will *love* this. She draws her lips into all desire. I promise .

The door swings open and floods the cabin with cold wind. I am confused and barely breathing. The master-diver and I were strapped together so tight there stood no chance to slip through the thinnest hair; yet despite what safety and skill protected me, I felt like dissolving into the last gasp that left my mouth.

Weird motion & a kind of rolling and felt like being born again with all that sucking in my ears and the shrill whistling in my head. In this beginning it was a blur of blue and blue and blue then the plane in sight a million miles away and sideways.

I turned my head just slightly and caught my world in clear view.

That screaming and laughing came from a throat I had never known before

To know the freedom that comes with falling is falling in love. You never forget it.

And with a flick of his wrist he deployed the parachute. The canopy streamed above us, and like origami folded with meticulous care it took itself apart. For three minutes I was a type of birthday marionette, absorbing the world I have always known and adoring my life, my family, friends, my memories.

I landed brand new. And honestly I thank the master-diver for keeping it clean, no joke. Meghan came running up with all hugs and tears and shouts of amazement.

Brittany and Charlie came swooshing in for their perfect landing.

Skydiving was the most sublime way to spend a birthday. Getting some earth/air/fire/water & never felt so alive.

I don't often talk about this experience in detail. In fact, this is the first time I have ever written about my skydiving. It's personal and I hope you understand why. If you ever feel the need to become instantly rejuvenated, feel your soul cling dearly to your spine, your lungs explode like stars, then try it.

It's how I got to know myself.

Michael Bray