



others, over the barn's PA system. Mine was first on this roster of five; this meant that I would be first out the door of the plane. We dressed in our skydiving suits, boots and helmets in the barn, and were led to a yellow, single-engined plane which awaited us on the airfield. There was no more need to be nervous, so I wasn't.

From the moment we climbed aboard, chance was in the lap of the gods, and further worry was futile. From here on in, it was a matter of Fate.

After a long and bumpy run down the airstrip, the small, cramped plane achieved takeoff, its engine buzzing loudly enough to make conversation in the cockpit quite a chore. Not that there was much to say: it had all been said during our lessons. I had only to wait for the signal from Lars—now acting as the plane's jumpmaster—to hang my legs out the door in preparation to disembark. Since I was to be the first one out, and the plane was tiny, I seemed to be halfway out the door already; I was lying on the floor facing the tail, alongside the gap in the fuselage through which we climbed in.

There was nothing between me and the ozone layer, and when the craft banked to turn to the right, I stared straight down 2,800 feet to the farms, ponds and woods below. It was a sobering sight, but also an extremely beautiful one—I had never really appreciated the southern Ontario countryside before. I hoped this wouldn't be my last look at it, as I remembered a (probably apocryphal) story about a young woman somewhere out west whose lines had tangled on her first jump and who could now eat through her forehead.

The pilot veered once more to the right as he began to circle over the drop area. Lars motioned for me to climb into blastoff position. I swung my legs around and dangled them over the edge while he checked my static line—the virgin jumper's umbilical cord—to make sure it was fastened correctly.

Apparently it was, which please me, as having to rely on the reserve chute with the ripcord is not something one wants to have to do on one's first jump. (There is quite enough to think about as it is, without having to go through emergency procedures such as pulling the reserve pack's ripcord, opening the flap, tossing out the innards, feeding out the lines, praying, etc., when it's the first time. After a half dozen or so jumps, novices can begin freefalling, providing they've shown themselves not to be the type who will panic and scream all the way to the ground.)

The plane steadied itself again, and young Lars, veteran of over 400 jumps, scanned the countryside, waiting for the most appropriate moment for me to make my exit. After a tense period, he liked what he saw, and began to count. On "three," with all the force I could muster, I thrust myself out.

I can't exactly recall what those first two or three seconds were like, except that they were everything a terminal thrillseeker like myself could ask for: loud enough, fast enough, and exciting enough to make the adrenalin fairly burst out through the pores the skin. It was sensory overload of the best kind.

I was having so much fun I almost forgot to count off the first six seconds the way we had been taught. (At the end of six seconds you are supposed to look up to make sure your canopy has opened properly.) I began to number off quickly to make up for lost seconds. "Three thousand!, four thousand!," I wailed, then saw that my canopy had already spread out above me, in the most beautiful, most circular circle I had ever seen. "Five thousand . . ." I continued, then realized that there was no need. As everything appeared to be in order, I settled in to enjoy the show.

In the clear sunlight, the panorama offered from that height seems infinite, a sprawling vista of differing shades of green. The noisy rush of bailout had given way to an all-but-silent world of perfect peace. The downward motion was barely perceptible: I floated down, wondering if this was the kind of serenity that those grinning gurus offered.

I searched through the back files of my brain for a film or a piece of music to which this lyrical tranquility could be likened. (That Swedish tearjerker, *Elvira Madigan*, perhaps? No, skydiving isn't boring like that. Debussy's *Nocturnes*? Closer, but for a simile to do justice to this dreamlike state one would likely have to go back to the womb. Experiences that are of this earth simply cannot compare.)

Just then, I was reconnected to reality through the miracle of modern science: the radio transmitter strapped to my chest began to speak to me. "Jumper number one," it said, "pull down on your right toggle, jumper number one." I did so, grasping the steering mechanism, and spun around to face the wind, which was blowing lightly to the west. "How's that?" I stupidly asked before remembering that the radio was one-way only.

A few moments later, ground control came through again. "Jumper number one, pull your left toggle halfway," it said, "pull down on your right toggle, jumper number one." I did so, grasping the steering mechanism, and spun around to face the wind, which was blowing lightly to the west. "How's that?" I stupidly asked before remembering that the radio was one-way only.

A few moments later, ground control came through again. "Jumper number one, pull your left toggle halfway

the level of my ear. I swayed back to where I needed to be. "That's fine, jumper number one, now kick your legs if you're having a good time." I kicked.

down, only *halfway* down, jumper number one." I tugged gently at the rope above my head to the left until it reached

Holding steady and admiring the view, the next time I heard that voice it was addressing not me, but jumper number two. Looking up, I saw that the young woman who had been next to me had also taken the plunge, while the plane started to climb higher. The other three jumpers were competitors who were going all the way up to 8,500 feet, and the already faint droning of the propellers faded away as a clump of trees beneath me grew larger by the second.

My rate of descent, which at first had seemed virtually nonexistent, now seemed to be gaining rapidly. We had been warned of this phenomenon: the instructors called it "ground rush." The problem with it is that by the time you figure out where the drop zone is, it comes rushing toward your face.

It started happening while I was still trying to decide whether I was looking down on long blades of grass or the tips of pine trees. (I could see a barn, but whether it was one we had practiced our landing formations in, or one on some neighbouring farm, I couldn't have said.) The radio was now telling me to keep my feet and knees tightly together—*tight, tight, tight*—and not to look down. I held my knees as close together as the straps under my crotch would permit, but I found it impossible not to look down. I felt like I was plummeting as quickly as if I had no parachute at all. The blades of grass, or treetops, or whatever they were, sprouted up at me, as in time-lapse photography. I braced myself and prepared for the worst.

I hit with a thud, and went into one of our well-rehearsed rolls. The worst turned out to be not so very bad at all; a somewhat harder landing than we had been led to expect by jumping off that wooden platform in the barn, but by no means painful. Needless to say, it was a patch of grass to the north of the runway where I had come down, and not the feared pines. I stood up, brushed myself off and waited for the rest of my still-billowing canopy to settle on the good old *terra firma*. When it had, I gathered it up, slung it over my shoulder, and embarked upon the long trek back to headquarters, feeling exhilarated and just a little bit older. To think that the entire fall took only two and a half minutes . . .

Rick, of the Toronto Parachute School, is planning to organize regular charters from York, at about a third less than regular cost. This would put the training and first jump in the \$90 range. After that, the school charges \$25 per jump, which makes it a sport that is not cheap, but less crippling to the average student's budget than other pastimes we could name, such as deep-sea fishing or lion hunting safaris in Africa.

The cost of the first time may force you to go without beer for at least a week, but it's a first time you'll never forget. Be warned, though: parachuting is highly addictive, and your first time will likely not be your last.



**PREPARING FOR FLIGHT:** Alex Patterson undergoes last-minute adjustments to his life support system before embarking on the trip of a lifetime.

