

and the loudspeaker was set up to say whatever the pilot said into the radio. We all looked up. We saw a dot moving across the sky. We saw another dot fall from the first toward the earth. And then we saw that dot split in two.

We knew it was very important that the dot with a parachute stay connected to the dot without one. We were sure this was very important. The dots moved farther apart.

Seconds passed. I fought the urge to reach for my notebook and record how Sarah gripped the wooden fence we both stood behind. More seconds. Then the kid behind us looked up from his chute packing and pointed somewhere out to the left of the two dots we were watching put distance between each other.

"Looks like they're just about ready," he said. The loudspeaker crackled. We'd been looking at the wrong dots. The faint buzz of the plane washed down from a bigger, shinier, redder dot, and Sarah's grip on the rail loosened. This time I did take out my notebook, and we watched a new set of dots fall from the plane. This one stayed safely clipped together.

Carl and John skimmed into the grass next to the runway, and John stepped out of his harness. Sarah stepped into hers. My photographer took some pictures. The plane landed a

few minutes later, and then Carl and Sarah taxied and took off on their spiral upwards. I stood behind the fence with John, and we waited until Carl and Sarah grew from a dot to a splotch to a blue and yellow striped parachute and slid into the grass on their bottoms. The plane landed and my photographer took some more pictures. I stepped into my harness. It made the zippered part of my pants stick out in a funny way.

"You the photographer?" Carl shouted to my photographer. I think his hearing was still a little off from the wind up there.

"Yeah," my photographer said. I didn't get a chance to introduce the two. The plane was out of fuel, and Carl took the opportunity to walk my photographer through the jump.

"Ok, listen" Carl said. "It's not an easy shot, but if you listen and do what I tell you, you'll get it and we'll all go home happy tonight."

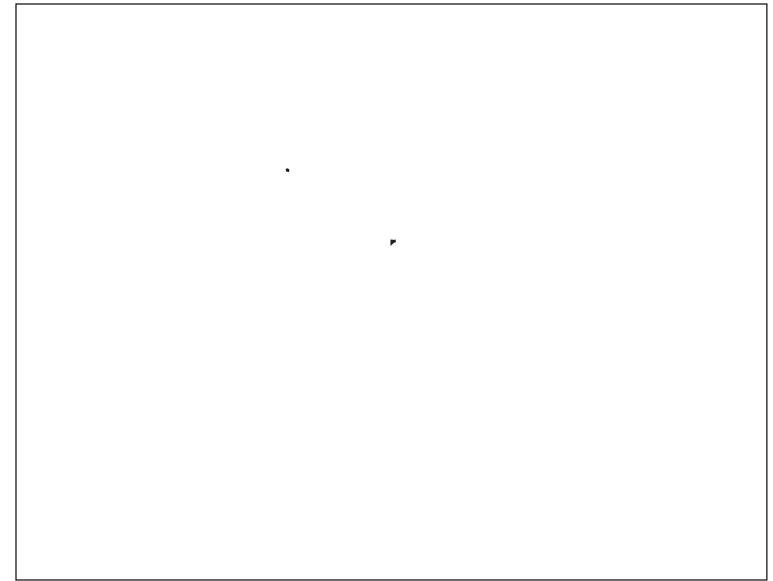
My photographer nodded. I noticed that he'd taken a little step backward toward the hangar.

"Ok," Carl said. "We're gonna fall out of that plane at 10 meters per second."

He paused.

"That means that if you wait one second, we'll be fifteen feet away. Wait two, and it's sixty. Got that?"

My photographer nodded again. I checked his math in my head. We



started walking toward the plane.

"So here's what you're gonna do. You're going to sit here," we'd reached the plane, and Carl motioned to a small stretch of floor behind the pilot's seat. The pilot was just taking the fuel nozzle out of the side of the plane.

"When we go, you're going to roll over the side, stick your head out of the plane, and push the shutter. Don't even look. Just push. Got it?" My photographer looked a little green. He nodded. "And don't drop the camera. You could kill somebody."

Carl turned to me, and started pulling at the straps on my harness. "How about you, you ready?"

"Yeah," I said. I handed my notebook and pencil to my photogra-

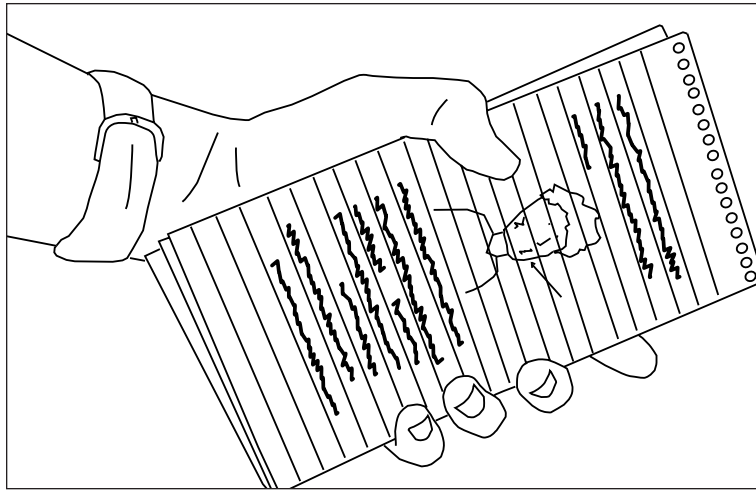
pher.

"Ok," he said. The pilot slammed the gas tank cover shut and circled around the front. We all got in the plane, and taxied past the hangar to the end of the runway.

The airplane only had one seat. Carl, the photographer and I sat on the floor. Carl sat in the back on the right side of the plane, my sat photographer directly behind the pilot, and I squeezed between the pilot and the door, resting my head on the instrument console. We all had little seat belts that were bolted to the floor.

Carl leaned over me, turned to the pilot, and pointed to a spot on the altimeter. "We're going to go up to about here on this one," Carl shouted over the little Cessna's engine.

"Here?" the pilot said, putting his



the table and pushed it across, his middle and ring fingers crossing a blank line toward the bottom. I'd forgotten an initial.

"I hope I was more careful packing those chutes than you were signing these forms," he said.

Me too.

After the forms, we received our instruction, and I got out my notebook. I'd done other stories for the paper before, covered lectures, written music reviews, but I was a little nervous about this one; I hadn't done many big feature stories, and I wanted to be sure I had excellent notes. I took 38 pages of them.

I wrote down how strange John looked on top of a three-foot sawhorse, arching his back as if he were falling. I wrote down how Carl

slapped me in the ass after no one could tell him which was the heaviest part of a skydiver. Carl said it was the ass part that fell fastest. That was why we practiced arching our backs belly down on the sawhorses.

I wrote down how shiny the red paint of the plane looked in the sun and I sketched the pair of jagged three-inch pink-white scars that framed Carl's mouth from both sides. I took 38 pages of notes.

That was always a little unnerving, those scars. I didn't mind them, but I couldn't stop wondering if he'd gotten them falling out of a plane somewhere. Maybe on the edge of a propeller or colliding with a small, misguided bird. Or maybe someone had punched him in the face with a bottle.

spinning through the instructions I jotted down in my notebook on the ground. Roll. Tuck. Spread. He puts my goggles on my face, leans over and shouts into my ear over the wind and the engine.

"That guy from the other paper," Carl shouts, "was a disaster. He forgot everything I told him, and I fixed it, but it wasn't good. We both went home that night, but it was bad. Let's see if we can do things a little cleaner this time."

A few weeks before, another local newspaper had sent a reporter to do a feature with Carl. He'd been calling a lot of newspapers lately, trying to drum up business.

"We're gonna fall," he keeps shouting, but I barely hear. "We're going to jump out of this plane, and we'll fall. Falling is easy. But if you let me, we won't fall. If you let me, if you work with me, if you dance with me up here, we're gonna fly."

I nod my head and steal a quick glance out the open side of the plane.

"Ok," he shouts again. "Here we go."

On the ground, we had all practiced sticking our legs out the side of the plane. I stuck mine out at 10,000 feet and the wind grabbed it like a tube sock in a leaf-blower. Up here, I can't bend my knees, and I guide my little stick of a leg to the platform by the right wheel. 10,000 feet above sea level, standing on a four-inch metal platform halfway outside an airplane,

I can look straight down.

Tuck, roll, spread. Tuck. Spread, tuck, bend, roll. Tuck. Tuck, roll, spread.

"I can't jump for you," Carl shouts. I can feel his stomach press against my back. "I'll count you down. Three!"

Ok. Tuck, roll, spread. Tuck, spread—tuck- tuck, spread, roll.

Fuck.

"Two!"

Tuck. Roll. Spread.

"One! Ok, let's go!"

I'm not sure which one I did. I think I rolled out of the plane. I may have tucked. I remember seeing my feet spill up in front of me, watching the plane sink underneath them, seeing the ground whiz by as we spun earth over sky, one, two, three times, almost four. I felt something hit my shoes and legs, first the left, then the right, hitting them hard. It was Carl. I pushed them back. We leveled out, the wind pushing back at my hair and at the skin around my mouth. It was cold. We started spinning laterally, turning in flat circles, and then stopped, still speeding toward the earth. And then there was a lift in my stomach that stood me up straight and swung my legs out in front of me.

It was so quiet, that change from 210 mph to 15. I looked up at the yellow and blue stripes of the parachute. I couldn't see Carl. He was behind me.

the Fall

BY TODD GORDON

This is a story about the time I jumped out of a Cessna 182 at 10,000 feet without wearing a parachute. That's not a metaphor, or a simile or anything. I did it. I wouldn't have gone if it hadn't been for free, but it was and I did and I doubt I will ever again. Obviously, I lived.

During college I worked on the school paper, and there was a skydiving firm that advertised in our sports section. That's how I ended up going for nothing; my editor said the guy from the skydiving place would give us a free jump if we ran a story on him. I called the number from the ad and told the guy I was from the paper. He told me to come by on Tuesday. That's how it happened. The whole thing took less than ten minutes.

By Monday night I'd told everyone. One of my friends asked if he could have my stereo if anything should happen, and I told him he could. I emailed a professor to let her know that, rather than attend

her class the following Tuesday afternoon, I would be busy cheating death. Because I'd let her know in advance, she marked the absence as an excused one.

Tuesday came, and I drove the 15 miles to the airstrip. That's really all it was, a strip of asphalt in an overgrown field next to a golf course, running into the half-cylinder of a corrugated steel hanger. I parked in the dirt next to the hanger, fished a reporter's notebook from the back seat pocket, and walked to the front.

My photographer was late.

I got a kick out of saying "my photographer." He was just some kid with a digital camera, but he granted me status. Because he was *mine*.

"I'm Todd," I said to a strained looking woman standing near where the asphalt of the runway hit the concrete floor of the hanger, "from the newspaper. I'm looking for Carl?"

"Oh, he'll be along," the woman said. I could tell from her fingers and the way her eyes sat in her face that

more I told my story, the more righteous I felt. The more of my words I bound to the ones Carl had used at 3,500 feet, the less indebted to him I felt. The more I felt that Carl's speech could have waited.

He called me at 10 p.m. that Friday upset that my article hadn't made the paper that week. He was a little drunk. It took ten minutes to convince him that his story was slated for the next issue, had been slated there for two weeks. He wasn't happy, and he hung up on me. Ten minutes after that, he called back to apologize. He'd had too much to drink with dinner, he said. He was sorry. I think he may have mentioned something about calling him for another dive, but I'm not sure. It was late, and I was trying to get off the phone.

I no longer felt bad about failing Carl. I was, however, faced with the problem of what to write. My deadline was coming up, and I hadn't written a word. My 38 pages of notes sat shut in a drawer in my desk.

I really wanted to pan this guy. I wanted to make him look like a person who would take your money and ruin forever any romantic notions of skydiving you'd ever had.

I called Sarah, whose number I'd written down on page 16, and tried to feel her out. Did Carl make her feel uncomfortable in any way? No, not really. Did she feel safe with him at all times? Absolutely, she did. Did any-

thing happen, either before or after her jump, that made her question her decision to go in the first place? No, not that she could think of.

I didn't bother calling John. It didn't matter. Whatever either one of them said, I took a \$200 jump strapped to the front of this guy and I couldn't very well slam him in the article I was using to pay for it. Which was too bad. Because I really wanted to. I didn't feel ashamed anymore, I felt angry. Angry I'd put myself in this situation. Angry Carl had chewed me out halfway up the stratosphere. Angry Sarah hadn't given me anything I could use.

I sat down to write, and stared blankly at the cursor. Nothing came. In my head, I made myself a deal.

I wrote the article straight. I made skydiving exciting and dangerous, and just a little exotic. I painted Carl as the renegade outsider, as crazy as you'd want anyone hired to pump your adrenaline, and painted the experience as once in a lifetime.

I saved the other story, full of mixed feelings and disillusionment, for another time. I wrote that article straight, and in return I promised I would write another where Carl played the villain and I played the innocent.

I wrote that article straight, and promised that someday I'd write the story I wanted to tell. And that's exactly what I've done.