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Falling Down

David Pace

When I was eleven I stepped onto the deck of the Gettysburg observation tower. The deck forms a doughnut around the glass-walled battlefield museum and viewing booth, all set at three hundred feet. The deck’s floor is an iron grill, ten feet wide, with a four-foot guardrail at the edge. The wind kicked that day—I felt the tower rock, and I pushed myself back against the plate glass windows with my palms to the panes for support. I could see down the steel girders to the tombstone-littered ground a hundred yards down. The wind pushed against my side and into the corners of my eyes, swaying my hundred-pound body in a rhythm with the tower.

Three hundred feet of iron beneath me, rebar bracing the metal floor under me, and me twenty feet from a steel-fenced edge—how could I be afraid of falling with all the strength of the world holding me up? But on a painted still day, my heart would have pounded my ribs yellow while I stood on that open-air deck three hundred feet from the hallowed earth. With an ecstatic April wind laughing at my tenuous attachment to the wall, my brain echoed my heart in beating against my skull. The tower’s sway turned to a swirl as the deck, the foundations, and Gettysburg started to spin. I pressed my palms into a suction against the glass.

My brother Nathan yelled my name from the edge of the deck. He pressed his stomach against the guardrail and leaned out over the battlefield, lifting one and then both feet off the deck. I focused on him and moved myself a foot at a time back along the glass wall, one foot, then two feet, then three feet closer to safety. I popped a hand from the wall long enough to pry the door open eight inches and squeeze my shaky legs inside. I took a full breath and traced the defense of Little Round Top on the contoured diorama filling the room. I let my eyes find the actual hill as I relaxed in my fishbowl of safety. To see Little Round Top I had to look around Nathan, who still leaned out so that he could look straight down onto the battlefield. He shouted, but just loud enough that I could hear a noise without words through the thick panes of glass.
When I met Hector, I saw a man who laughed with his son on his shoulders. I saw him lean forward over the scriptures and say, "Is this what God wants? I'll do it."

I felt my smile reflected in his, and I watched him arrange his life around his thoughts of God. Three weeks later, I held his son's hand and signed my name as a witness beside his wife's in the marriage record Tartagal. Hector's smile glowed.

A week later, Hector and I sat in his unlit shack on wrought iron chairs while red sunlight slanted through the door slats. He meant to be baptized as a pure follower of Christ with his just-married wife the next afternoon. Hector touched his fingers to the knuckles of his left hand.

"Yes. I've killed a man," he said. He had stalked him, stabbed him, and left him by a tree in the riverbed for a pocket of money.

I couldn't move my mouth. I breathed, and I held my eyes on Hector's. I felt a weight in the silence massive enough to drag this man over a cliff's edge, no matter what he strapped his arms around, or how he clawed his bleeding fingers at the cracked rock.

The glittering light in Hector's full, dark eyes faded to empty black when twilight pushed the sun out of the sky. I looked out the door to the horizon, but I saw nothing but black.

In August my friend Scott and I stopped for the night with my parents in Medina, New York, on our way to Utah. Medina grew from the Erie Canal. The canal widens at a bend there, forming a natural harbor and stopping place. Bargemen stopped for the night out of the flow of traffic; some decided to stay for good, and Medina was born. In time the canal stopped supporting commerce and started attracting Boy Scout Canoeists, but Medina and other canal towns survived. The legacy of the canal has become a plethora of bridges with twenty-five feet of water beneath them. Scott and I wanted to jump off a bridge together.

We drove to the Mill Road bridge at ten o'clock that night. I pulled the car down onto the towpath beneath the bridge and we walked the cobblestone path back up, wearing just shorts and used shoes. I wore a pair of my oldest brother's tennis shoes, and Scott wore my drowned brother-in-law's pitted canvas jungle boots. We followed each other to the center of the bridge and stepped over the rail onto the twelve-inch steel girder running the length of the span.
The bridge supports itself on two concrete wedges which are buttressed, part cosmetically, by Medina sandstone. Medina sandstone comes only from the now water-filled Medina quarry. The sandstone boasts remarkable color, great nonflammability, and phenomenal pressure resistance. The town armory is made of Medina sandstone, but the stone begs fame from its use for construction inside the Vatican. The bridge has achieved only local fame, but it aspires to more.

The canal is deeper than a diving pool, and the bridge at road level is less than a ten-meter platform: the distinction in bridge jumping is the water’s surface. Without a crystal blue chlorinated pool at the bottom of a fall, uncertainty clouds the point of entry. A jump is a leap of faith. The faith divides into one of ignorance and one of hopefulness, there being those who don’t realize that logs, cars, or dead cows are somewhere under the water, and those who acknowledge the possibilities but trust in luck both are blind. Until someone jumps, nobody knows what lies beneath the surface.

At ten o’clock on August 27, a full moon hovered between clouds in place of the sun and shone a strip of copper across the water thirty feet below us. A light breeze pushed the water under the bridge and built small ripples in the moonlight. I looked down at the water and saw only a green-black empty face, a hard table. I shared with Scott the testimonies of numerous friends whose distant cousins had jumped through hidden dead bodies of cows or horses on lazy summer nights and days. Even Joyce Carol Oates titles a story “Mule” on a character’s dive from a canal bridge straight through a mule’s rotted corpse. I wanted Scott to be well informed before we stepped off the bridge.

The moon tucked itself behind a charcoal cloud and its glint of hope on the water disappeared. My stomach clenched and turned. I flexed my legs to push out from the girder and unflexed them when my stomach forced its will onto my brain. My mind was stronger than at age eleven, but I could see the water thirty feet below me and couldn’t tell how soft it was.

I said, “We need to go when the moon comes out again.”

“Hey, I’m ready now.”
“Let’s go with the moon,” I said, and the veil slipped from its face. It floated between a V of clouds, like a cherry in a long-stemmed glass. The moon’s slow drift from the left side of the aperture to the right created a harshly tangible chronometer. “Okay, let’s go on three.”

“We’re going at the same time, right?”

“Right,” I said. The moon had slid halfway across its window. “We’ll count together to three, then jump.”

“We’ll jump on three?”

“No, we’ll jump after three. We’ll jump on four, but we won’t say four, we’ll just jump.”

“On four?” Scott said.

“Right.” The right edge of the moon touched the edge of blackness. Its path of light still glistened across the water where we would land. “We need to go,” I said.

Scott said, “Well, come on,” and lifted one foot off the bridge. He brought it back, then touched my arm. “Come on.”

We floated in the night and smashed through the moonlight. The August water gathered us, cradled us, and pushed us back up through the sliver of light.

A woman smiles while a tear traces a path down her cheek to the smiling corner of her mouth. She stands in the center of a photograph, surrounded by her husband and four children in front of the Buenos Aires Temple one year and one month after their baptisms. She took one initial step of faith with no reason but to test the word. Every time they took a step forward together, they found that the word accepted them, lifted them, and pushed them further into the light. After the first blind, hopeful step, they walked with faith.

The moment I prepared for as the epiphany of skydiving was to step through the open door of an airplane, look straight down through two miles to the
rock-littered, pit-filled, snake-infested ground, and jump. I looked forward to it as the culmination of fear.

Early on a Saturday morning I pulled into the parking lot of Cedar Valley Free Fall. My heart pumped in my throat, and then I stepped out of the car. A purple mountain range huddled twenty miles to my rear, some small hills studded the immediate landscape, and a grass prairie filled in the gaps. An early November chill guarded the ground, but a brilliant sun commanded the empty, endless sky and slowly imposed its warmth on the day.

My friend Brad and I stood under the sun and watched people float in the sky and settle to the ground. We walked into the cellar where a row of twelve parachute packs hung on a wall, and a man carefully rolled and packed a parachute on a forty-foot-long carpeted table. A woman in a jumpsuit asked if we were sure of ourselves and gave us a set of papers to sign.

The release forms voided my rights to life. By signing and/or initializing each of the thirty-two tenets set forth, I disavowed any connection whatsoever between Cedar Valley Free Fall and my decision to jump out of a perfectly good airplane two miles above the valley floor. I acknowledged that I was about to do a stupid and dangerous thing. I affirmed that I could not hold my instructors liable for anything arising from the jump even if they were willfully negligent in my supervision. I certified that the equipment and airplanes that I was about to entrust my life to were potentially old, shoddy, and in disrepair, and that I was completely responsible for any damages to myself from anything related to jumping out of an airplane. If I, my relatives, my next of kin, or my estate ever chose to sue Cedar Valley Free Fall, then I pledged to pay Cedar Valley Free Fall fifty thousand dollars.

"Brad, these guys are serious." I rattled the papers.
"We're jumping, aren't we?" he said.
Through the windows I saw someone coast into the field, recapturing the earth. I signed.

We packed eight people into a muddy, red-twin engine Cessna with a Velcro door. The plane climbed a thousand feet per minute. I watched the altimeter on my chest creep to the right and tried to gauge the ascent against the mountain in the window. At five thousand feet I looked at the Velcro door and at the bodies filling the plane, and I noted that everyone was wearing a parachute except for the pilot, Brad, and me. A carabiner locked me into my seat, directly facing the door, but it seemed that I wasn't in the best position in the event of a crash.

Brad and I were to jump in tandem rigs, meaning that we'd each be harnessed to the front of an experienced parachutist who would correct panic, a tangled chute, or an awkward flight. I would watch the altimeter, pull the ripcord, and steer us down, but the man on my back would be my safety valve.
The plane's twin-engined bellowing moan preempted conversation. I watched my altimeter. Every thousand feet brought me closer to the doorway and twisted my heart. At 9500 feet I slid my goggles into place and snapped my headguard on. My jumpguide, Chainsaw, moved behind me and buckled us together, twice at the shoulder and twice at the hips.

I shouted to Brad, "Are we doing this?"
He smiled and nodded. My altimeter read 10500. Our jumpmaster pulled back the Velcro and wind thrashed through the cabin. Brad slid into the doorway with a man on his back and disappeared. The doorway was very close.

I closed my eyes, opened them, and stepped out to the doorway, putting my feet on the runner under the door. The ground wasn't dangerous. I saw no link between me and the HO scale toy train landscape lying beneath me. I thought, "It's just a toy." I couldn't see anything to fear. I moved and fell from the doorway.

I fell through a quick somersault and saw the plane arc away into the sun. I continued the rotation to my front and found myself alone. I hung in the sky and air beat my face at one hundred and thirty miles an hour. The altimeter swirled to the left, my fingers numbed inside my gloves, and I felt motionless. I hooked my thumb through the handle at my right shoulder and raised my arm. I jerked into my harness and never looked up at the parachute, but stared at the ground. At four thousand feet the earth still couldn't make itself real.

What I can see directly frightens me. I appreciate fear because it gives me a warning, yet leaves me free to act. If I'm not strong enough to overcome my fears, however, then I'm enslaved. I don't like it that a two mile fall to earth isn't frightening because the destination is so far removed from its preceding action.

Discounting many obvious other factors, I will not put a gun to someone's head and pull the trigger, because the results are so immediate and terrible. I will not abruptly turn my back on God. What spiritual example, however, truthfully illustrates the one sure step to a two mile drop: Not praying one night? Ignoring my children for a day? Holding a single unclean image in my mind? Releasing my problems at work by yelling at my wife? Life isn't so clearly demarcated.

I stand at the lip of the Grand Canyon. Quarters, dimes, a silver dollar, and tarnished pennies blanket a ledge four feet below the guardrail. I'm tall enough to step over the guardrail, lower myself to the money, and still hold the safety bar.
My pockets would bulge. I lift my eyes from the ledge to look at the sun hanging red over the opposite lip, and the light turning to rock that forms a spectrum of orange and brown extending almost to the center of the earth. I toss a rock over the edge and listen . . . listen . . . listen for it to crack against a wall. I look down at the coins, and take a step back.

David has graduated from BYU with a BA in English. He likes riding his motorcycle and is currently pursuing his Master's in English and his JD from BYU Law School.