

Freefall

Everyone's nervous the first time. Hunched in the doorway of a plane listening to the 90mph wind buffeting the props, staring down at the earth 14,000 feet below, fingers white from grabbing the rail.

When you finally swing yourself out into the blue, momentum carries you forwards as well as down: for a few seconds you're 'on the hill'. You reach terminal velocity (an unfortunate phrase, given the circumstances) in twelve seconds, experiencing about 50 seconds of freefall where you're hurtling towards the ground at 120mph, before the chute kicks in.

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"Why were you kicking the door?" Andrew Wiseman asked his stepdaughter as she backed into the kitchen.

"You're welcome," said Hannah, unburdening herself of Starbucks coffees and muffins. "Drink up."

"Blimey. Thanks, Hannah," said Andrew, looking surprised. He prised the lid off the coffee, "Americano? Clever girl. Don't suppose that's a blueberry muffin, is it?"

"'Tis, actually," said Hannah, blushing.

"Oh God. What's happened?" said Andrew, heading for the window and peering out into the street. "You've scratched the car, haven't you? I told you to be careful. I've only just had it fixed."

Hannah took off her leather shoulder bag, lifting the strap carefully to stop it tangling in her mass of corkscrew blonde curls.

"Calm down, Dad," she said, pulling out a chair. "There's nothing wrong with the car. Just thought I'd buy you breakfast."

"Getting paranoid in my old age. Sorry, Hannah," Andrew said, joining her at the table and bringing his coffee up towards his lips. His glasses steamed up instantly, so he pushed them up on top of his head. Without the heavy frames, his face looked vulnerable; sweet and mole-like.

"Thanks, darling, this is lovely," he said, smiling short-sightedly at Hannah. She

looked towards him but didn't meet his gaze, staring instead at the pinch marks on the bridge of his nose. This was even worse than she'd imagined.

"So. Any plans for the weekend?" said Andrew. "Forecast's looking good. Your mother's been talking going down to Chichester to see your..."

"Actually, it's the weekend I wanted to talk about," Hannah said, focusing intently on scraping the froth from the sides of the cup with the wooden stirrer. Andrew looked at her quizzically, his head tilted, crumbs spilling from his lips.

"Not another party?" he groaned. "That might be a hard sell after what happened when we were in Barcelona, Hannah."

"No. Not a party. It's, well, it's... There's this fundraising thing at college, and I... a group of us put our names down for it. And..." Hannah took a deep breath, then said quickly,

"It's skydiving. I've signed up to go skydiving this weekend."

Andrew reared back, holding up his hands in protest.

"I know, I know: Mum's going to have an eppie," said Hannah, hurriedly. "I thought you could talk to her for me."

"Hannah, you can't be serious? You do know what you're asking?" said Andrew, running his hand through his hair, in the process knocking his glasses off and leaving a trail of muffin crumbs dandruffing his greying fringe. Putting his glasses back on, he stared at Hannah, worry lines creasing his forehead.

"Your mother will never agree to this, Hannah. I can't believe you're even considering it."

"I know Mum's not going to like it," said Hannah. "But this isn't about her. It's about me. It's my decision." Seeing the intransigent expression on Andrew's face, she added, "Anyway, it's all arranged. I can't chicken out now."

"Come on, darling, be reasonable. Skydiving? What were you thinking? You must have known what mum would say. To be honest, I'm surprised at you. You know better than this. It's thoughtless to even suggest it," said Andrew.

"Thoughtless?" said Hannah, the wooden chair legs screeching across the floorboards as she pushed herself away from the table and stood up. "Why do always take her side? This isn't about her. I'm going and you can't stop me."

"Hannah, sit down. We need to sort this out," said Andrew.

"I'm 18. It's my life. I can do what I want," said Hannah, grabbing her bag and heading towards the door.

"I'm sorry, Hannah, but it's utter madness. You're not doing it. End of story."

“You can’t tell me what to do,” shouted Hannah. “You’re not my dad.” Averting her eyes from the injured look on Andrew’s face, she stormed out, wincing at the sound the door made as she slammed it behind her.

She strode towards the park, blood rushing in her ears. Why couldn’t he think about her instead of her mum for once? Consider this from her point of view? She’d only ever known her real father as an empty shell: an absence. Trying skydiving was the one thing that might change that.

The summer before Andrew and her mum got married, they’d had a party for friends and family in Battersea Park. It was 2003, the year of the heatwave. It was really a goodbye party for Mike: a way of acknowledging that he was never getting better.

Around thirty friends and family gathered under the trees in the park. Someone had brought cricket stumps, a bat and ball, but no-one wanted to play. It seemed the wrong thing, somehow, and anyway it was too hot.

After the picnic, Andrew had said a few words and then her mum’s best friend Marsha Wallis – her hair, as always, swathed in a colourful turban – read ‘Freefall’; a poem she’d written about the accident and its aftermath. Hannah was in it: Mike’s pre-conceived daughter, ‘*shock-shaken from the womb’s warmth*,’ after her mum Allie received the call informing her that Mike’s skydive had gone terribly wrong.

Marsha’s recitation over, Hannah slipped her hot and sticky hand from her mum’s grasp and walked over to Mike’s wheelchair. As always, his eyes slid over her with no sign of recognition. It was something she never got used to, this being a stranger to him. Not because he was her father, but because she’d spent so many hours visiting him. (Although he didn’t recognise her mum either, and they’d lived together for six years before the accident.)

Hannah stared at Mike, noticing the gristly-looking pink and white bit on his ear where the NY Mets baseball cap was squashing it; the growing stain on his lap from his melting icecream; the string of drool hanging from his bottom lip. She stood there, transfixed, until Andrew, who’d been talking to Mike’s parents, spotted her and came over to rescue her.

Remembering that day, Hannah shivered. Was that really how they wanted her to think of her father? She needed to re-frame Mike, understand what he’d been like before the accident that had almost killed him; that should have killed him. That was the real reason she’d signed up to go skydiving, the thought of which was scaring her half to death.

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Hannah's legs were trembling: if she hadn't been strapped to the front of her instructor like a koala cub she'd never have left the plane.

"Don't let me die, don't let me die," she whispered at first, then, "Let the chute open. Please let it open."

For a few seconds she perched on the doorsill, like a fledgling chick contemplating flight. Then the instructor stepped out, propelling them both into the deep blue bowl of the sky. She felt a sickening lurch and a brief drop before things levelled out and her loose limbs doubled his. She pictured herself as a spider, plummeting to earth after being lobbed from a tower block window.

A hand appeared on the periphery of her vision: her instructor giving her the thumbs up; checking that everything was ok. Hannah stuck her thumb up. Ok so far, she thought, then laughed weakly.

The instructor pulled the lines and they began to turn. As they slowly gyrated, she panicked, and her thoughts started to spin out of control. What had she been thinking? Andrew had been right: this was crazy. She wasn't flying: she was falling. She could die. Or she could end up like her dad. As if from far away, Hannah heard a thin, high keening, the sound swallowed up by the flapping, fluttering and slapping of her jumpsuit. She realised it was coming from her. She opened her mouth to scream but the inrush of air stifled her cry, the pressure of it hurting her chest; making her feel like a patient, being bagged and resuscitated.

The wind billowing Hannah's cheeks sculpted her face into a Joker-like rictus. Dribble bubbled from her mouth, edging upwards and tickling the edge of her nostril before continuing its ascent; hesitating a while at the rubber seal of her goggles before lurching up, onto the lens. Seen through the trail of sticky spit, everything looked fuzzy, so she re-focused.

For the first time, she really looked at the scene spread out below her: the patchwork fields, the occasional pop of yellow amidst the green, the silky ribbon of river, the light winking off the shiny carapaces of cars. Towards the horizon she caught a glimpse of the coast, sunlight glinting off the water through the pleated cotton wool clouds. It was beautiful.

A figure appeared in front of her, his legs and arms streaming upwards from his torso, a video camera fixed to his helmet. Seeing his beaming face, she became aware of her own chipmunk-like cheeks. She was smiling. She felt as though she was swimming in a boundless

ocean.

Her instructor's arms came round her, as if in an embrace, and both he and the cameraman stuck their thumbs up. She mirrored the gesture and as she did so realised that she was actually enjoying herself. Her spirits rose. She got it; she totally got it. This is what her father had loved, all of this: the adrenalin rush; the feeling of floating on a great cushion of air; the camaraderie. She'd never felt this close to him.

There was a sharp tug and Hannah was yanked upright, heading fleetingly skywards. Raising her head, she saw a beautiful sight: a yellow and blue chute billowing over her, cradling her gently back to earth.

It was only then that she cried.

1701 words
