

Honorable Mention, Non-Fiction

Jump!

by Dana Carpenter

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Ever since I can remember, I've had a fascination with skydiving. And even though jumping from a perfectly good plane seemed like an act of pure insanity, I couldn't help but get a twinkle in my eye when I thought about it. I was so obsessed with the idea that when people asked why I was in a wheelchair, I joked and said, "Because the parachute didn't open!" I know, I know, this was pretty twisted of me, but seeing the asker's face was priceless. I did stop using this, however, when one time the woman asking said that the same thing happened to her son... except he wasn't so lucky. Ouch.

A few close friends knew of my daring desire, but it wasn't something I usually talked about. That is until, as my life often affords, opportunity literally moved in next door. His name was Zack and he was taking classes at my college while training to be a paratrooper in the army. Of course I didn't know this at first, but since I'm a sucker for a cute boy in a uniform, I decided to strike up a conversation with him. I cleverly parked myself in the path to his door and waited for him to come home, and though I don't remember the exact conversation, it was the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

In no time at all, Zack was coming over to borrow toilet paper and to share stories of his weekend retreats. One weekend, he came home limping, and when I asked him about it, he said he had landed a jump wrong.

"A jump?" I asked with twinkling eyes.

Seeing my interest, he proceeded to tell me all about his jumping adventures. I knew I had found a kindred spirit, so I shared with him my enthusiasm for the sport. He didn't laugh or tell me it was absurd, but instead encouraged me to do it and assured me it was very safe. Zack is that kind of friend; he makes the improbable seem possible. He ended up moving across town, but we remained great friends.

A few months before our college graduation, Zack approached me on campus and sat down on the bench next to me. "Got any plans this weekend?"

"No," I replied.

"Well, you do now!" he said with a smirk. I knew this smirk all too well, so it was obvious he had something up his sleeve. I asked him what he meant, and he proceeded to explain that he and a few friends were going skydiving that weekend, and he wanted

me to tag along. He said that he had already talked with the owners of the shop, and they were experienced in jumping with people with disabilities. He said I didn't have to make my mind up yet, but I did have to consider it.

"Are you kidding me?" I exclaimed! "I am so doing this!"

Zack just smiled and said, "I figured you'd say that."

I didn't know all the details yet, but I knew I couldn't let this opportunity pass me by. I decided not to tell my family because I didn't want them talking me out of it, but I did, however, let a few close friends in on the secret. I guess news like this travels fast, and before I knew it, there were half a dozen friends and acquaintances asking directions to the jump site. They wanted to meet us out there and watch me take the plunge!

The morning of my jump I was pretty nervous, so I decided to call my mom and let her know what I had planned... you know, just in case. Turns out she was totally against it and told me I couldn't go. I gently reminded her I was 23 years old and reassured her I would call her when I got home. A few minutes later the phone rings, and it was my little sister. She asked me what was going on because our not so religious mom called her and asked her to pray for me. When I told her I was going skydiving, she started laughing. Apparently my mom didn't ask her to pray for my safety, but for me to change my mind!

Well, that didn't happen. Zack and our friend Joe showed up around noon to pick me up. Our jump wasn't till two, but we needed to get there early for orientation, and I had a few questions to ask. It had been misty all morning long, but as soon as we headed to the van, the sun poked its head out, and it became a beautiful spring day. As we headed out of town, Tom Petty's song *Free Fallin'* came on the radio. I remember that moment so vividly. I was filled with a sense of awe driving in that van with the windows rolled down singing at the top of my lungs with two of my most favorite people.

When we got there, my van was swarmed with about 15 of my friends. I was pretty embarrassed by all this attention, but deep down I was eating it up. We made our way down to the sign-in office, and Zack went inside to find someone to talk with me. A few minutes later, the owner came out and close behind him was a guy named Erik, who I later discovered had over 3,000 jumps under his belt, He would be the guy I would jump with. For the next 20 minutes, they explained how they used a technique called tandem jumping. They would attach me to Erik with a harness, and I'd basically go along for the ride while he did all the work. We would be the first ones out of the plane and the last ones to land so as to not to interfere with the other jumpers. When it was time to land, all Erik would do was pick up our legs, and slide into this circle pit of pea gravel

on his bottom. They would also have a couple of guys out there to slow us down in case we were coming in too fast.

That was all the info I needed. I forked over the \$100 bucks and signed my life away on the dotted line. After all the formalities were done, a lady came over with a sweatshirt and a harness. I understood the harness, but a sweatshirt? It was 75 degrees out for crying out loud! Seeing my puzzlement, the lady explained that the air was really cold at 12,000 ft. All the other jumpers had to put on wind suits, and since that wasn't feasible in my case, I needed this sweatshirt to keep me warm. My friend helped me put on the shirt, and then they both helped me get into the harness. It wasn't the most comfortable arrangement, but it was only a few more minutes till jump time. As the plane pulled up, Erik came up to me to go over any last minute concerns I had. I was pretty confident about things and too excited to really think at this point, so he said, "All right, let's head to the plane!"

Realizing this wasn't a normal everyday jump, the owners of the site decided to bend the rules a bit. Normally, anyone not jumping had to stay back at the pavilion, but they allowed all my friends, who I later nicknamed my fan club, to follow me out to the plane. It was all starting to seem surreal at this point. I couldn't believe one of my life's dreams was about to come true all because the love of a friend. Luckily, Zack had jumped before me, so he was able to be by my side offering encouraging words and a warm smile. Before I knew it, they had lifted me into the plane and set me on the floor right beside the door. Soon the plane was full, so the engines started and the plane took off. I remember seeing the earth leave me and thinking, here goes everything!

It took about eight minutes to ascend to 12,000 ft. They used that time to get me hooked up to Erik. Basically, he sat behind me, scooted close, and then latched our harnesses together. There was one last thing they had thankfully considered. Seeing how my arms are weak, they decided to strap them together and secure them to my chest. We were about to be falling at 120 M.P.H., and they didn't want my arms failing around and knocking Erik out. Gosh, they really had thought of everything! We were approaching 10,000 ft., so it was time to get into position. They slowly opened the door right next to me, and sure enough a gust of freezing air rushed in. The sound was deafening up there. By the time Erik scooted us to the edge of the plane, my heart was nearly beating out of my chest! The sky was the brightest of blues that I've ever seen, and the earth below looks like a beautiful patchwork quilt.

All of a sudden, I hear Erik yell "READY... ONE... TWO... JUMP!" and we tumbled out of the plane. I must admit my first reaction was panic. It goes against every natural instinct you have to leap into thin air. Now what?! There is no time for second guessing. You just have to wait it out and hope for the best! That initial feeling of panic only lasted a second or two, and then my other senses went on sensory overload. Contrary to

popular belief, it didn't actually feel like falling. Instead, it felt like I was hovering in front of a huge and powerful fan. The wind enveloped my whole body, and I could literally feel it infusing every pore. My cheeks were flapping in their own rhythmic dance, while my teeth chattered in pure exhilaration. I could see the earth getting closer and closer, but it seemed as if it was moving in slow motion. I had the perspective of a bird and felt the insignificance of an ant. On one hand, the full minute of free fall seemed to last forever, but on the other hand, it ended way too quickly.

With a pull of the chute and a jolt that catches you off guard, the freefall came to an end. We were still up pretty high, but the rest of the ride would be a tranquil one. We gingerly floated our way back to earth, and I soaked in all the beauty I could. I wish I could have hit the record button in my mind, but my memories would have to do. Erik was great. He pointed out a few landmarks for me to see, but for the most part he kept quiet and allowed me to take it all in. At that moment, I felt more alive than I've ever felt. I was humbled by the sheer brilliance of Mother Nature, but at the same time the enormity of what I had just accomplished was beginning to set in.

All of my life, I had been proving to people that their doubts in me had no merit, and now I had just proved it to my biggest critic... myself. I realized I could do anything I put my mind to, despite my disability, or perhaps because of my disability. I confirmed what I already knew, this world is full of possibilities and we should never let one slip from our grasp. I had just jumped 12,000 ft. from a plane, and I was ready to take on the world! My perspective had changed in an instant. I have never walked, but that day I learned to fly.

Erik regained my attention when he said we were coming in to the landing, and just like that we slid to a stop on a cushion of air. Immediately, I see the fan club cheering as they ran towards me. The next few minutes were a bit fuzzy. My friends said they bombarded me with questions, but I just sat there with a big cheesy grin on my face. Once they got me back into my chair, I saw Zack heading towards me. He bent down and gave me a hug.

"What ya think? He asked.

All I could manage was "Thank you..."

The rest of the weekend was pretty much a blur, but eventually things went back to normal. A few months later the same fan club came to watch me, Zack, and the gang graduate from college. I was on a natural high that no one could bring me down from. Over the next few weeks we all went our separate ways. I moved to Austin, and Zack headed overseas to help with the war on terrorism. We have remained close over the years and to this day we have a tight bond that will never be unraveled.