



Really?

Oh, most of the stories in this 'A Story A Week' collection are so ... quiet! (I nearly said 'boring', but thought I should be a bit more polite to myself!) This general lack of excitement in the stories of course matches the lack of excitement in my life. I don't have many adventures, not these days anyway.

As you know from reading the previous few stories, I visited my family over in Vancouver last month, and we had many interesting family discussions. Because we are able to get together like this only infrequently, our meetings are always the occasion for plenty of story-telling about the 'old days', and it's not just my parents who do this. We've all got stories to tell! Here's one of mine ... a 'tall tale', or an actual event? What do you think?

It's early 1981, I'm 29 years old, and I'm 8,200 feet in the air, sitting in the doorway of a small Cessna airplane. As I look down at the ground, trying to gauge our location, I make a series of hand gestures to the pilot of the craft, and he turns the plane this way and that, following my instructions. It is late in the evening, and the ground is very dark; it is difficult to tell where we are. When I judge that we are in the right spot, I make a final signal, and he cuts back the engine. I turn my body to face the interior of the plane, then let myself fall backwards out of the open doorway.

The plane disappears instantly into the distance, and I flip my body over to face downwards. From this height there will be approximately 35 seconds of free fall before I will have to open my parachute. 35 seconds doesn't seem like such a long time, but if you try counting slowly to 35, and imagine that you are falling freely towards the earth all that time, you may have a different view!

It is indeed very dark, and I peer this way and that, looking for a landmark that will tell me where I should steer once my parachute is open. I think I recognize a bend of a nearby river, so relax and enjoy the remainder of my fall. When the needle on my altimeter approaches the red zone, signifying that it is time to open the parachute, I settle my body, reach behind me and pull the activation cord.

Nothing happens. The cord seems to be jammed, and the chute won't open. I pull it again, harder, and then again, still harder. Still nothing. By now, I am moving approximately 200 kph, straight down, and I really need to solve this little problem - quickly!

There is at this point only one thing to do. Forget the problem with the main chute, and use the reserve. This is not something I am very familiar with, but my hand finds the emergency handle, and without waiting to stabilize my now tumbling body, I pull it ... hard.

A normal parachute is designed to open slowly, in a gentle progression of unfolding stages. Reserves are different; they are spring-loaded, and deploy instantly, without regard for the consequences of sudden deceleration. This one works perfectly. In a split-second - in the most violent physical shock my body has ever experienced - my speed is reduced from 200 kph to a gentle downward float under the small round canopy.

I have no idea which way to fly, but that has become irrelevant. I am very close to the ground, there is no time left for any direction-finding, and in a matter of seconds the flight is over as I tumble into the earth of a farmer's plowed field. Safe.

Later investigation of the parachute showed that the pin of the activation mechanism had become bent somehow, and no matter how hard I had tried to pull it, it would never have released properly. I had been correct to leave it alone and use the reserve.

And no, this was no tall tale ... although my daughters do indeed find it difficult to imagine their 'boring' old dad in that kind of situation, this story is absolutely true ...

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