

# Freefall

- from the novel *The Wisdom of Crocodiles* by Paul Hoffman -

As a child I did not have to get used to the sight of men falling out of the sky because they had always done so from the moment I was born. So unremarkable was it that I don't have any earliest memory of when I first realised that men were falling from amazing heights, any more than you would have an earliest memory of eating or of your mother and father. For years, until now, I took these things for granted, proud that there was something unusual about my life compared to other lives; but in itself it seemed normal, what went on.

One thing I do remember as having a definite beginning was the first time I saw one of these parachutists killed. He was a novice, with thirty jumps or so, making a descent from two thousand feet. It isn't clear what happened and some of the things I recall probably did not take place. I was four years old and playing outside in a crowd of people waiting for the plane. Suddenly there was a lot of confusion, legs dispersing everywhere. Someone, I don't know whether it was my mother or my father, told me to go into the clubhouse and wait. I did as I was told. I sat on the table swinging my legs and humming to myself, but I could be wrong, it could have been another time. After a while, I've no idea how long but to me it felt like a very long time without anyone to talk to, I went out by the back door and without any particular sense of curiosity walked round to the front. People were looking towards the runway at an approaching car. No one noticed me. As I remember, it was a Fifties job in black with someone standing on a runner along the side. I stood on a coal-bunker to get a better view. I have a sense of enormous drama, of great movement, of people in shock, disturbed, craning to see, and of three men in the back with the one in the middle not like any man I've ever seen before or since. What struck me then, and now, was the floppiness of his neck, bent back and away from me and to one side so that I couldn't see his face. He lacked resilience and seemed to be attempting to flow into the man on whose shoulder he was resting. This man had shape but the dead man's shape was gone, even though there was no mark on him as far as I could see. After that I don't remember anything. Somewhere through the years, I don't know how, I got the idea that he'd been showing off to his girlfriend, intending to leave the opening to the last moment.

A few months ago, while my mother was preparing dinner for us all, I told her what I remembered of his death. She was surprised at what I'd seen but couldn't remember much herself as it was over thirty years ago. In passing, I commented on the reason he had pulled too low. She looked at me oddly and then told me the real story of what killed him.

His name was Parry Hughes and he was married. He was an obsessive type, closed up and secretive, and had developed a fascination for calculating heights of opening, the time it took for a chute to deploy and how the one could be calculated against the other in order to give the exact lowest point at which you could pull the ripcord and land safely. His wife, also a parachutist but with only fifteen jumps, discovered what he was up to and had tried to stop him. As a result of her fearful pleas and threats he apparently relented and gave his word he would stay at home. When Saturday came, he locked her

in their bedroom while she was dressing and came to the dropping zone to carry out his plan. No one knew for sure exactly what went wrong but the coroner accepted my father's likely version of events. The chances were, he thought, that Parry had simply fumbled his first attempt at pulling the ripcord and because there was no margin for error he had hit the ground while the parachute was still unfolding from his back. Later his wife found a diary filled with calculations and illegible scribbling that detailed the depth of his desire to get it right but gave nothing away about why.

I was struck by this new side to a story I had lived with all my life, touched by the locked door and fearful wife and the depth of her grief after a long and silent wait until large men in flying suits broke down the door to tell her that her husband had been killed, and Parry, overlooking the need to take himself into account, scribbling in his secret book and failing in his calculations to give a number to his clumsy hands.

My parents were both Irish, my father having come to England to join the Royal Air Force shortly after the war. My mother had the "drop dead" attitude that Irish women often have, particularly the pretty ones, and she resolutely refused to be impressed by my father, even though impressing people, usually by attempting some dangerous and often stupid stunt, was what he enjoyed most. If you had seen her then, but hadn't heard her speak, you would have thought her a delicate English beauty, thin to the point of being consumptive. "That one'll be dead before she's twenty," the crones in Dublin used to prophesy, when she walked down the street. Despite this apparent fragility, she was remarkably tough even though she was often in terrible pain because of a spinal injury she'd got when roller-skating as a child. When she was bad, she'd have to lie in bed for weeks on end, and when she got up we'd ask to see how bent she was. Standing in her nightdress she would turn her back to us to demonstrate the collapsing tower of her spine and we would gawp at the way her back curved to one side by six or seven degrees. Sometimes it looked as if she'd topple over just by standing still. Her back was slowly disintegrating because of the lack of decent medical treatment. Her doctor had forbidden her, on pain of an unspecified anathema, from consulting a chiropractor, a breed regarded by the medical profession in those days as one step up from the kind of practitioners who filed their teeth to a point. In the Fifties, doctors regarded women as, in their very essence, a problem. They were inherently unhealthy in a way it seemed rarely possible to treat. Like collapsing towers, they could be propped, shored up with metal stays, their foundations reinforced but nothing fundamental could be done to treat their essential weaknesses. The pain, however, became so bad she secretly went to see a chiropractor in Bath, and I can still remember waiting for her in the Volkswagen outside the clinic feeling as if we were part of a blasphemous conspiracy, all voodoo and witchcraft.

But the sense remained with me that women were utterly different from men in some way that I had yet to grasp. Men were muscular like my father, built for strength like posts, clear in their lines of muscle and sinew. But women were hidden, curved and blurred in their intent, bodies mysterious, soft and collapsible. Their underwear reflected this systemic instability. When I first saw my mother strapping herself into a corset in that curious shade of pink, I used to think it was unique to her because of her bad back; but one of the fascinating things about women, or at least about my mother's friends, was their carelessness in matters of dress around little boys. The result of this was that much of my childhood seemed to have been spent watching women in their late twenties wandering around in various stages of undress. Not that there was much of the essential

fleshy woman on display even so. They were always encased in lacy shells, crossed by straps and buckles, bones and silver suspenders. The sense was always of something interior needing to be held in place, supported, buttressed, underwired to prevent an imminent collapse. Still, being admitted to a world from which older boys and men were excluded was freedom that I prized. There was nothing innocent about my voyeurism as I wandered through their bedrooms or sat on the floor playing with my soldiers waiting for the crossing and uncrossing of their legs; but with hindsight there also seemed to be no shame.

Things began to change when I was eight. I remember one visitor, a widow in her thirties, I suppose, whose officer husband had been killed in a flying accident in Bahrain. She had a beautiful face and would correct me if I did not put my knife and fork together on my plate when I had finished eating. At some point during her visit, as I was wandering around upstairs, I walked in through her open bedroom door looking for a toy. She was sitting cross-legged in front of the mirror. She was naked. She was so white, so round, so unconfined. I can still see the ridges of her spine descending to the curves of her buttocks, and the hanging sideways look of her breasts. And the brown nipples, burning me with their colour. I stood quite still. She turned. Then, unconcerned she said, "Hello, Michael, are you all right darling?" She seemed not to notice my astonished face, wide eyes and shock. Then she stood up and faced me. I had never seen hair on the body of a woman before. I would have been a deal less struck if she'd had wings. Who would have thought it? It was so unpredictable, so black, the rest of her so white. It was too much. I turned around and ran away.

This will never happen to my son; he's used to that kind of thing. There are none of these astonishments in store for him. The loss is his, I'd say, even though he'll never have that endless nag I still feel to return to the bedroom and the woman turning her thoughtless head to welcome me.

The lock-out finally came one day when Bridget Gallagher was visiting us. My parents were both bewildered and impressed by her because she would say the first thing that came into her head, however outrageous it might be. Although the women talked of sex quite frequently, it was usually referential enough to keep me slightly in the dark. I picked up lots of useful things about sex this way, even if the satisfyingly precise was hard to come by. Bridget didn't care for the oblique and during her visits it was especially important to be always in earshot. On this occasion Bridget and my mother were sitting opposite each other while I was on the floor between them, using the sofa as a battleground and not paying much attention because the conversation had drifted towards a detailed description of a lengthy shop. Still, mindful of Bridget's tendency to sudden and dramatic changes of topic, part of me was monitoring what was going on. She'd been to a big department store in London and was telling my mother about her visit to the lingerie department. Ears alert, I increased the volume of my explosions to cover my newly-directed interest. As usual with children, I over-acted and my mother told me off:

"Mike! Either shut up or go upstairs."

I ignored her as I was expected to but turned the volume down. Bridget was discussing an article she'd read about a new machine that could make tights cheaply enough to replace stockings.

“I bought a pair, though they weren’t that cheap. Bloody liars.” With this she stood and in one quick movement pulled her skirt around her waist.

“What do you think?” she said to my mother. “God, they’re so comfortable.”

My mouth dropped open and my eyes widened as she whirled about, her slim buttocks encased by the unfamiliar nylon and, for the times, a tiny pair of knickers.

“What do you think of the panties? Cheeky, eh?”

I was so taken aback by this that my show of indifference vanished - enough for my mother to see how transfixed I was by Bridget’s exhibition of long legs and nylon covered bum. She gestured at Bridget that I was looking, but Bridget only laughed as she pulled down her skirt.

My mother never said anything to me but after this she always shooed me out of the bedrooms of her friends and immediately distracted me if I was playing on the floor when they were visiting. And so the new freedom for women ushered in by tights, and all that they implied, signalled my ejection from the harem with its easy chat and careless immodesty. Whenever I was around, my presence was taken into account and there was no way back. In effect I had become a man. I had been expelled, and before I’d found the secret. Maybe it’s much the same for every boy. We get thrown out just as we’re about to put our finger on the thing itself. Possibly that’s the secret of the male gaze, why we’re always looking at women. With all that gawping, all those stares, someone will be the Archimedes of this world. “Eureka!” he will shout, the earth will move, and paradise, perhaps, will be regained.

Until this exile, my father had been a distant figure. This was not because of any manly stand-offishness with children but simply because he wasn’t often there. Parachuting took him away most weekends and often he was abroad competing for weeks at a time. That year he became British champion for the first time and, one evening in September, we went off to the cinema, not to see the feature, but to watch the Pathé News which preceded it. There in black-and-white up on the screen was my father, dropping from the sky then smilingly receiving his prize from a minor aristocrat who was vaguely connected with the British Parachuting Association. How proud I was to hear that Pathé voice, fruitily congratulating him on what he’d done along with that peculiar music, which even then seemed to belong to an older, vanishing world.

Like most sports parachutists he was quite short, but he had been a wrestler before he had come to England, and on first joining the RAF had been a physical-training instructor. He was immensely muscular, his shoulders and arms particularly, and he was always striking those body-builder poses with his arms over his head to emphasise his triceps or akimbo to draw attention to his extraordinary latissimus dorsi which, when flexed, gave the impression that he had a pair of wings folded behind his back. He used to laugh at himself when he did this, while still admiring himself. He enjoyed exasperating my mother with these displays. She responded by mocking him and approving of him at the same time. “You’re a bloody show-off, Kevin,” she would say disdainfully. “Bigheads, the McCarthys. Every one of them.”

Week after week I watched him fall, through high summer and into a warm autumn, waiting in front of the crowds, sometimes large, sometimes small, sharing in what it meant to be observed, drawing from the hunger for excitement - I’m not entirely sure that

I can put my finger on what they got from watching men fooling about in the air with their noisy, expensive planes and their brightly coloured parachutes. But I think they were like people at a zoo: behind the bars were creatures who did not know what dread or worry was. Fear they knew, but not anxiety. My father was like an animal to them. They no more felt reproached by him than by the strength and courage of a horse. His willingness to die was admirably irrelevant. But not to me. It seems obvious now, absurd not to have noticed it before, week in, week out, loving the atmosphere, proud of the gaze of thousands watching as I walked with my father, carrying his helmet with our name printed on the front, his arms full of brightly-coloured cloth, soaking it up, worshipping the admiration of the crowd the way he did, that every time I heard the engines cut and that speck begin to gather speed I was afraid that I was going to watch him die.

My father's real job with the RAF was to train and despatch paratroopers. The army had tried to do this for itself but failed. The instructors needed a combination of gentleness and discipline to handle the young troops' fear of their first jump. Fighting came naturally to these men, but not falling from a great height. To get many of them to jump required a careful understanding of the particular nature of the terror. Bullying a man into jumping, said my father, was a sure way to get him killed and yourself court-martialled.

In the early spring of the next year, two Hercules transporters left RAF Abingdon for a NATO training exercise in Italy. My Mum and I went with him because we knew an Italian parachutist from the European championships whose wife had invited us to stay in their house just outside the city. The two Hercules were based near Pisa. Each one could hold sixty paras and six instructors, but the weather was poor at first and my father took the chance early on in the first week to take me to see the city from the top of the Leaning Tower where Galileo first demonstrated the nature of fundamental forces. There my father conducted his own experiment into the nature of gravity. Someone fooling about had started him off by encouraging him to do one of his gymnastic party tricks on the edge of the tower. To their horror, and that of the paras and tourists watching, he grabbed the low wall with both hands and swung up into a handstand. The intake of breath that resulted wasn't enough and he shifted his weight on to his right shoulder and lifted his left hand clear so that he was balancing on one hand. The amazed laughter that followed egged him on and, still supported by one arm only, he lowered his chest till it almost touched his hand then pushed up until his arm was almost fully extended. He put his left hand back and, swinging his body between his arms, landed lightly back on the Tower. He looked at me and I was filled with pride. Later he told me that it wasn't as dangerous as it looked, that he had balanced himself so that the only direction in which he could fall was back towards the safety of the tower.

My mum and I returned home at the end of the week. A few days later I came back from a school football match as she was sitting down to watch the six o'clock news. As the first item came up the newscaster adopted that po-faced expression and doomy voice, which always indicated that someone somewhere was about to have their world turned upside down. One of the two planes based in Pisa had gone into the side of a hill and everyone on board had been killed. The details were sketchy. My mother ran to the phone and called the base at Abingdon. Someone she knew answered it, which seemed

to calm her. He had no details but promised to ring as soon as he had news. Ten minutes later the phone rang. She snatched it up.

It was Jane Briggs. Her husband had been in the other Hercules. It must have been a strange conversation, with each one longing for the other's husband to be dead. They talked briefly then cleared the lines and sat and waited. Having been afraid for him each time he jumped, I felt a curious mixture of unease and, I suppose, disbelief. It was impossible to think of him not existing. He was too confident to die. Two hours later, after some agonising false alarms, the phone rang. She picked it up. "Yes?" She looked at me: "He's alive."

I was excited by the thought of my first funeral, but after six in less than a week I'd had enough. The weather was bad that month, wet as well as cold, though now I think about it, I can't remember any funeral I've ever been to where it hasn't rained. The thing about military funerals is that the men are nearly always young. The burials have run into a kind of blur of men in full-dress uniform and women in their early thirties weeping and the grave, which always surprises in the same way, the lines being so sharp and the hole so deep. I remember that cutting morning wind which seems to blow in graveyards everywhere. And, most of all, the private soldier playing *The Last Post*. You will have heard it, I suppose, in films or on television played by someone who's a master of his instrument, purified by engineers in studios. Needless to say, standing in a graveyard in the cold and wet, blown by a teenager on the verge of competence with the notes flattened by the damp air and nervous breath control, the bugle produced a cracked sound which seemed to hang painfully about the young widows and sad men in uniform. I've not heard anything like it since. The squadron leader always read the same words in a dull monotone. Six times I heard it:

They shall grow not old  
As we that are left grow old.  
Age shall not wither them  
Nor the years condemn.

There was one odd thing about the final burial. The dead man was another Irishman. His brother came across from Dublin in a uniform that most assumed was of the Irish Army. But I could see my father looking at him from time to time and there was a strange expression on his face, a kind of mild disdain. Later he told me why. The uniform was that of the IRA, illegal in his native country but not in England. It was as smart or smarter than any of the others at the funeral, with, if I remember rightly, badges of striking yellow and red. I could be wrong - it was a long time ago. Now whenever I see the balaclavas and the nailed baseball bats, I think of him with his carefully pressed best dress uniform, his upright bearing and the awkward look of a defiant adolescent who realised there might be a scene. But even though some of the others there knew what he was wearing, no one took it seriously. In 1968, all that was in the past.

For my father, and the others like him, the sandpit that they landed in was only a step away from mucking about with buckets and spades. These were men who still knew how to play. But because it was a military sport the Cold War had been fought out in

parachuting long before it reached athletics or any other sport. The Americans and Russians were professionals. What they did was turn this play into work. What they did was turn it into war. It was only a few months after the Cuban Missile Crisis when we got to Germany for the Sixth World Parachuting Championship. The terror about Cuba was so great, so much a part of the air everyone breathed, that even children went to bed and lay awake dreading the end of the world, knowing that it could really happen, and at any time. All that's vanished now, even for the people who were there, as if suddenly every true believer woke up one day and all of them stopped believing in hell.

Even though things had calmed down by the time we arrived in Germany, the tensions were obvious even to a child. Competitors from the Eastern bloc were not allowed to speak to anyone from the West, and as I wandered about the enormous complex I was often eyed suspiciously by squat Russian apparatchiks with no necks. The championship was being held in Leitkirch, a small town set on the edge of a huge forest. On one side of the town a plain stretched as far as the eye could see, empty and featureless; on the other the rising hills were covered in trees of a dark green so deep it was almost black. As night fell and the temperature dropped, the dirt-grey mist seeped down the conifers like a slow avalanche. It was in this most obscure of German towns, in this most obscure of recreations, that the idea of playfulness in sport would die. Not immediately, of course, but this was where the terminal disease began. This was where the virus took a hold.

The competition began with the team event, and after two days, with the Americans still to come, everyone in the Irish team was beside themselves at having split the favourites by taking second place behind the Russians. The team event involved all four jumping at the same time and attempting to hit a small red disc about six inches in diameter. This was at the centre of a sandpit divided by a large cross of white cloth. A top parachutist could expect to hit the red disc - a dead centre it was called - about four or five times a year. In the team event the distances of each member from the disc were added up and divided by four. The worst jump of the team from the three allowed could be discarded and the final score was based on the average of the two that remained.

We would lie on the short grass of the airfield during the endless pauses between the minutes of action, drinking incredibly cold Coca-Cola from those curvaceous bottles. Half-dozing, we'd wait for the drop. It is the *sounds* of parachuting that I think of now when I recall those days. The distant drone of aero engines slowly made its presence felt in waves, like sleep advancing on a tired child, gradually becoming a single, droning note. Searching the sky with shaded eyes, the soldiers, women, kids looked like the models for an inspirational piece of Soviet social realism. Fingers would point skywards when someone saw the plane. Then figures would fall: one, two, three, four. Then seconds later, the silence of the engines, cut before the men had jumped but oddly delayed by the slowness of the speed of sound to match the eye. Ten seconds would pass, then the parachutes would open, and, if conditions were right and the sleeve on the parachute deployed too soon, the canopy would crack like a wet towel flicked against a boy's damp skin. The coloured canopies, different for each team, produced an endless variety of electric nylon blues and greens and golds and blacks and whites, turning and swooping in the blue air. They'd line themselves up, like geese in flight, and from a distance they'd look slow and calm, but as they came in to land you'd see how fast they fell, calling aloud to get the order of landing right. Then came the swift approach; giant

in size they crashed into the pit, their legs outstretched, desperately trying to reach the mark with the crump of the sand as they hit, one, two, three, four, like hawks failing to retrieve a dive. Then came the judges with tapes and it was done. Back to another drink of Coke and the long and pleasantly boring wait.

The following day it was the Americans' turn to jump. Between the time they opened and the time they landed, some three and a half minutes later, it became obvious that not only was the competition already over but that the world had changed. For the style competition, because where you landed was immaterial, they had used the same single blank gore parachute that everyone used: a half globe of nylon with a panel missing, more or less depending on little more than guesswork, steered by two lines which when pulled distorted the way the air passed through the chute and allowed it to be steered with haphazard accuracy. The basic technology had barely changed in thirty years. All the competitors had gathered to see if the Americans could come up with something and at the last moment overtake the Russians. We watched as their chutes opened two thousand feet above our heads, and the numerous ways that nations have of expressing astonishment rippled across the crowd.

Instead of a parachute, they were suspended beneath what looked like hundreds of holes linked together by red and blue cloth with two panels on each side like earmuffs on a hat. They didn't turn but banked like aeroplanes, and instead of a rapid constant fall they seemed to be able to travel at will almost parallel to the ground beneath. One broke off and, impossibly, headed back into the wind that should have been driving him inescapably forward. Each new unprecedented trick brought gasps of wonder, as the Americans had known it would. They'd saved the best, or worst, till last. As they approached we could see that they were not so much hanging from this extraordinary construction as sitting in the harness like pilots in a plane. The reserve chutes, much smaller than a normal ones, had been taken from their chests, where they were supposed to be, and put behind their necks as if on piggy back. They came in to land. Instead of simply riding the combination of gravity and air, they mastered it. They circled the pit above the open-mouthed watchers and seemed able to decide exactly when to come to earth. Then one by one, without effort, with none of that desperate, crashing stuff of reaching a foot towards the mark before their arse hit jarring sand at twenty miles an hour, they softly, accurately touched the ground and walked themselves to a stop. Two dead centres, and with the other two so close that even added together they were half the distance of the nearest Soviet. It was as if Achilles had produced a Gatling gun on the plains of Troy.

My father looked on entranced.

As for me, I learnt a history lesson there, that there are moments when what comes after is utterly different from what went before. In a German field, among men who played with forces more fundamental than fire, I watched Americans with flashy parachutes designed by computers meant to guide atomic missiles to Moscow or Peking exempt themselves from the whole business of slowly developing opposable thumbs and longer necks for reaching taller trees, and the endless hit-and-miss of mutant genes. For ever afterwards it gave me the sense that things could change no matter how fixed they seemed: technology could make redundant not just a skill, not just a life, but an entire world. It could do this in a couple of minutes. It could keep doing it. And my father wanted one.

Towards the end of a long day the wives and girlfriends would gather in groups to watch the last jump before the sun went down, waiting for husbands and lovers to return. They'd laugh, mocking their men while eyeing them with what I now realise was desire. The men would walk towards them, in fours or alone, their voices carrying through the still air. Holding their parachutes cupped in front of them, spilling around their chests in red, white and blue, like women carrying too much washing made from brightly coloured silk. Then the men and women would split into couples and head towards their tents. Voices drifted into the gathering dark, the men teasing and the woman laughing, waiting for something to happen. On the last night I simply watched them leave and turned back to watch the sun go down. As the air cooled, the hair stood up on my exposed arms as, behind me, the grey fog poured slowly through the trees. I waited for a long time, mournful, I don't know why, until I heard my mother's voice behind me.

"What are you up to?" she said gently.

"Nothing."

"It's cold. It's time to come in."

I stood up and we began to walk back, close but not touching.

"Can we afford it?"

"What? Oh, the parachute. . . we'll have to see."

"Will he start winning again if he gets it?"

She seemed taken aback by this and didn't answer for a moment. Then, "I don't know, maybe. I don't know. Perhaps you should ask your father."

"No, it's all right."

The next day, as we walked to the prize-giving, Eichorn, the new world champion, came over to my father. "Harper tells me you gonna buy a Para-Commander."

"Yes, that's right. Someone's bringing it back from the States next month."

The American nodded. "I'll get Harper to send you an invite to the US championship nex' July. You bring yo' PC an' I'll whip yo' ass."

My father laughed.

"You take care, y'hear. That PC is some 'chute but it can be real mean sometimes. You saw what happen to Hampton. He mayn't be good as you are but he's still damn good."

They talked on for a few minutes more then shook hands and parted with it clear that they were going to take each other on the following year. But Eichorn never made it. The new technology blurred the distinction between the inspired and the merely excellent. Though still the best, he was no longer indispensable. He was a helicopter pilot by training and a few months afterwards he had to stop competition parachuting for his first tour of duty in Vietnam. Later we heard he'd gone missing somewhere near Saigon during the Tet Offensive.

As soon as we got back to England my parents went to Barclays Bank to get a loan to buy the Para-Commander. They needed £250 to buy the whole rig, because its complexity required an entirely new system of expensive harnesses for it to be operated safely. They'd only had a bank account for six months, but they weren't naïve enough to tell the bank manager - who had to approve every loan by personal interview - what they wanted the money for; they told him it was for a car. But it was not an interview so much as an interrogation. My mother's subsequent fury at the humiliation never entirely died down.

The manager seemed to regard their application as a moral affront. “He looked down his nose at me, the creep,” she said that night. “Can you really afford the repayments, Mrs McCarthy?” she said, imitating the supercilious tone, the disdain. “How dare you ask for such an amount you common, working-class Irish person?” He had not actually said this, it was understood, but this was what he had meant. He had calculated the repayments and their outgoings as if my mother were an idiot incapable of doing simple arithmetic. She was immensely proud of the way she handled the family accounts, and this was a grievous mortification. Worse was to come. The loan was refused.

That night my mother and father sat at the kitchen table trying to come up with the money. My father wanted to defy gravity, my mother the financial system as it puzzled its way into a new world by trying to hold onto the past with its corsets and squeezes and controls, not realising that money, too, was loosening its stays. Cash, as well, was about to torch its foundation garments. And the heat would be white, and very hot. And it would burn.

The special harness and reserve of the Para-Commander were well outside their reach but my mother scrounged through the various small savings schemes of which she was a member to find the £120 or so that they needed for the parachute alone. This was a phenomenal sum for them to find but slowly she trawled everything we had at home with a determination that made it seem unthinkable that she would fail. She buckled herself into her accounts. But more than just her pride was driving her: her desire for my father depended on feeding the visions he had. In the end it was for my father and what he meant to her that she amassed the money for the parachute from post office accounts, bits put by, the folded tenner in my father’s wallet kept for emergencies and the policies taken out on us as babies for the funerals if we died. For the first time I was made aware of the heroic side of money, that my mother was a champion and that she fought for my father with what she had in her purse. Neither my brother nor I, even now, can understand how she gave the impression of having an endless supply of cash. It was difficult to understand because we had very little money. Much of my adult life has been spent with people who are good with money, both in the larger and the domestic sense, and some are tight and some are not. But while she had an exact knowledge of every penny - where it had come from, where it was, and where it was going - she used what she had so carefully hoarded to spoil us, her husband and - this, I suppose, is central - herself. There was always more, somehow, than you expected. We inhabited, all of us, a world pregnant with treats, even if it was only a cream turnover or a second bottle of Coke. It was more specific than generosity. I suppose the word I’m looking for is love.

A few weeks later, after a training exercise in California, my father brought the canopy back with him. He mastered the PC quickly and had an extraordinary ability to play off its sometimes outrageous capacity to forgive with its sudden and terrifying intolerance of the slightest mistake when used without the special equipment denied us by the manager of Barclays Bank. Even in clumsy hands it could perform wonders, but at other times using it in a way entirely suitable for other parachutes could produce a sudden and total collapse of the canopy.

He practised with it at every opportunity into a warm late autumn. All through the winter whenever the cloud base was high enough he jumped, learning its virtues and vices. As summer came in and the days lengthened, he jumped after work. I’d hear him arriving home at ten o’clock and would creep downstairs to have a cup of tea with them

both and eat from his plate as he told my mother about the evening jump. Often we'd go with him and you could instantly recognise which one he was as the chutes deployed. The others would fall in their predictable descents but he would wheel and bank, turn into the wind, away from the target and back. It was rare that he was more than fifty centimetres away from the red circle and more and more consistently he'd put his foot on the dead centre once a day and sometimes twice.

In early August, a month before his trip to compete in the US championship, he was booked to jump at Biggin Hill, an RAF base where there was to be a celebration of the Battle of Britain. A crowd of two hundred thousand traffic-jammed their way onto the enormous airfield where Tannoys in all their metallic, railway-station incomprehensibility signalled the start and end of every act: Vulcans like flabby Concorde V-shaped their way across the sky; silver Electric lightnings broke the speed of sound above our heads; snatches of music from the military bands mingled with the sound of automatic blanks from a pretend assault on plasterboard citadels by men in khaki hamming it up in the centre of the field.

Half-way through the afternoon we scanned the blue sky for the Rapide; two hundred thousand faces, hands above eyes, watching for the fall. And then it came: one, two, three, four. The bodies fell, picking up speed and size. We counted them down to ten. Three of them opened; one kept falling. Thirteen, fourteen . . .

"No," my mother said, softly. Then she started to run. I stayed where I was, watching the fall. Others began to run, passing me by. It had happened before, these lengthier drops when something went wrong. Still he kept falling. There was a movement of arms, a twist of his body; the stop.

My father was dead.

Few deaths, I imagine, are so abrupt and absolute, yet give the man who dies such time to consider the relationship between the awful mass of the world to which he is falling and the mysterious fundamental force pulling him to his most sudden death. There are many horrible ways for people to die: death by fire, by water or by slow disease. But what is so terrible about these deaths is the pain and suffering that accompany an end that is the logical result of what is killing them. The inhalation of water, the burning of skin, the wasting of a body is dreadful, in itself to be avoided. But for my father, and for my father's son, the free fall was the point. I know that it served him right. By now having taken the plunge so many more times than him, I know that men were not made for falling, to be without weight, and that there can be no complaints for what was freely chosen. But even now I ask myself what was responsible for his death. Animal spirits? Class? The new technology? All of these, certainly. But in the end it was the banking policies of the age that killed him. Money that broke him. The squeeze on credit robbed me of my Dad. He fell to earth because of economics.

It's over thirty years ago but it still surprises me how walking past a church tower or some pillared monument can take me back; still watching him balanced precisely on his hands in the tall and leaning distance of the Tower of Pisa; or how, early in the morning, just between waking and sleeping, the sound of the central heating coming on becomes the intermittent drone of a Rapide, and I can see the faces turned upward into the sun and the wide expanse of short grass moved by the wind.

And my father, falling.