

Leaning Left Above the Eiger

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I am lingering late over breakfast on a quiet summer morning, talking parasailing with the hotel manager. The brightly colored wings that dot the Alpine sky every sunny day here in Switzerland's Bernese Alps have frequently caught my eye as I hike. Tim, who is earning his parasailing pilot's certification at a local school, has a patient answer for every question.

The weather recently has been fantastic for flying, Tim says, with warm air and thermals lifting parasailers on exceptionally long flights. When I tell him I imagine his experiences in the air as part parachute jump, part eagle's flight, he laughs. "I doubt I'll ever be that graceful myself," he says, admitting to a catalog of bruises and scrapes that would long since have grounded a less dedicated student.

Without much provocation, he takes my interest in his hobby to mean I must want to fly, too. "Why not?" I say, not yet knowing the thousand rational answers to that question. The next thing I hear is Tim's clipped British voice on the telephone, arranging my tandem flight with one of his instructors.

This easily, in less than an hour Tim and I are driving to a nearby village to meet my pilot. Micha has the freshly scrubbed good looks of a teenager, so I am relieved to learn he is 29 and has seven years' experience as a parasailer. Traveling with Micha is Elizabeth, a member of the Swiss national parasailing team. The knowledge that Switzerland has a national parasailing team gives me confidence enough to step into a ski tram that will pull us to the top of a steep, grassy hill favored by parasailers as a launching ramp.

Across the deep valley dotted with farms I look up toward the famous peaks of the Bernese Oberland: steel-gray Eiger on the left, triangular and forbidding;

placid Monch in the middle; beautiful Jungfrau on the right, glaciers riding her shoulders like a lace shawl. The day is sunny and calm. A dozen parasailers stand in groups on the hillside, preparing gear, chatting, awaiting their turn and a favorable gust of wind for launching. The atmosphere is one of relaxed excitement.

In anticipation of a gentle glide down from the mountainside into the valley below, I am wearing only shorts, a T-shirt and sweatshirt. Micha holds a brief conference with Tim and Elizabeth.

Among the three of them, they soon set me up with gloves, thermal shirt and jacket, but Micha remains worried. Feeling overdressed already on this summer day, I don't understand the problem.

"It might be a bit cool up there," Tim says. Not yet as familiar with the British gift for understatement as I will soon become, I protest when he offers me his pants.

"But this means you'll be flying in shorts," I say, not wanting to inconvenience him. It doesn't



occur to me to wonder just how cold he thinks it will be. "Better me than you," he responds.

In English accented with his native Swiss German, Micha gets down to the business of flight. He talks me through the complicated takeoff procedure. "When I say to go, start running and keep running," he says. This, I believe I can do.

It's time to suit up. The tandem harness that will connect me to my pilot for the flight turns out



to be a complicated apparatus. Micha invites me to step into the leg straps, then harnesses and clips me in and steps into position behind me. Soon he is so tightly spooned up against my back that I feel every movement as he pivots to adjust his gear. I didn't anticipate what an intimate experience this would be.

Sitting on the grass together, we watch other pilots take off. Micha is getting a sense of the weather and flight conditions, and I am contributing to the effort by blushing. This handsome young man in whose lap I am sitting is 10 years my junior, and a stranger. It doesn't seem proper, but then again, we are about to run off the side of a mountain together. Given the context, the rules of physics seem more pressing than those of propriety.

After the passage of a few centuries, Micha stands up,

and because I am strapped to his chest I stand, too. He signals to the other pilots that we are ready to go. For the first time, it occurs to me I might actually do this thing. I want to say, "Wait!" so I can think things over more thoroughly, perhaps for the next week or so, but this is it – any decision I had about the matter, I made over breakfast a few hours ago. Three, two, one, run ... ten steps later I am flying.

The parasail is held aloft only by air and motion, so at the moment of takeoff I hear the same sound flying birds do: the rush of wind. No humming engine, no metallic airplane skin separates Micha and me from the skies. My heart leaps into my throat with joy as for the first time I feel

the grace and freedom of a bird's flight. And I get to spend the next 45 minutes gradually descending across the valley to land in the warm green grasses below – what great good fortune!

That's what I think. But unknown to me, as we sat together on the hillside before launching, Micha saw something I could not: The conditions are just right for riding thermals. Now I feel him shift his weight in the harness, strong arms working the canopy lines in search of an invisible elevator that will lift us high into the sky. As we soar above Shynigge Platte ridge he finds one.

The valley I expected to land in so soon begins to fall away beneath us instead. Looking down in surprise, I register a new sound. It's Micha's wrist altimeter, which reports the gain or loss of 100 meters of altitude by beeping as well as on a visual display. After

takeoff it beeped once every few seconds, reporting a gradual ascent. Now as we rise in the dynamic thermal, its rapid pulses outrace the thudding of my heart. As farmhouses become specks far below, the incessant beeps confirm we are gaining altitude quickly.

Micha leans around to ask me how I feel. With my heart rate rapid and my breathing shallow, I honestly feel more scared than I've ever felt. My mind knows I am not in immediate danger of death, but my body is so terrified I can't release my tight grip on the harness straps. Later, Micha will say I should have let go, "Because, if we were in trouble, holding on would not have helped you." The muscles in my forearms will be sore for the next three days. But I am thrilled to be doing this thing. Trusting in the knowledge that, though we are thousands of feet in the air and held aloft only by the parasail's geometry, we are relatively safe, I tell Micha I feel fine.

"It would be normal for you to feel a bit sick at some point," he says. "Your body is not used to flying and I have all the controls, so you may feel like a passenger in a very crazy car." I wish Tim had mentioned this detail in the dining room over breakfast. Prone to motion sickness, I always carry Dramamine, but it is a bit late to return to the hotel for supplies.

Today is a perfect day for soaring – even I can see that now. Instead of gliding slowly down, we ride the thermal up above 4,000 meters, then soar across the valley toward the big peaks. There we find more rising air. Telling myself to be calm, I focus on the glories around us. The ice-covered Alps sparkle beneath a flawless sky, peaks marching row on row to the horizon. What an amazing feeling, flight. I am seeing what a soaring bird would see, and the view is grand.

Though my mind is absorbed in beauty, with the wind rushing through the canopy over our heads and tearing at my hair,

my body will not relax. I fight to take deep breaths as the oxygen thins. When I hear Micha asking if we can trade gloves, I think he is joking, or possibly insane. Release my grip on the harness, even for a few moments? Handle items that are not attached to us? What if I drop a glove?

Micha explains that I have the thicker gloves, and it would be best for both of us if he were wearing them now. He needs to continue being able to feel the lines. This will not be possible if his hands freeze. Already I am sensing the dropping air temperature as we gain altitude. The skin on my face and lips is drying, tightening in the cold breeze. The Swiss are always so reasonable, I think to myself. Despite my terror of letting go of the harness, we somehow manage the glove exchange in mid-flight and it takes only a few years off my life expectancy. I resume holding onto the harness as soon as humanly possible.

"Wonderful!" enthuses Micha above the rapidly beeping altimeter, "I just set a new personal altitude record!" At 4,500 meters, we are now flying higher than he ever has. As I watch granite peaks and great glaciers pass far below my feet, I reflect on the wisdom of setting an altitude record with a tandem rider in harness. This is not the relaxed, tame descent I bargained for. But it does not seem like my place to question his authority: At this moment, I am just the baggage.

It is majestic

country to fly. My businesslike, professional pilot is muttering, "My god!" at regular intervals, excitement filling his voice as we soar over mountains he only previously flew alongside. We can see to the south all the way to Mont Blanc in the French Alps, he tells me, handing me his camera (securely attached to the harness) to capture images. I switch back and forth between his camera and mine as he points out peaks to photograph.

"Save some film for later," he says. "You don't know what might happen next." Just how high is he planning to take us? As I look down toward the Eiger, Micha asks again how I am feeling. This time, reluctantly, I confess to feeling sick to my stomach. "That is a normal response to thermal flying, and do not worry," he comforts me. Then, ever-practical, he adds, "If you need to throw up, lean left."

Throwing up is not an experience I want to share with anyone, and especially not my handsome young pilot. Surely I will be spared that indignity? But eventually I can no longer overcome my body's natural

responses. Humans, and especially humans prone to motion sickness, are not built for flight. So after Micha removes his camera from harm's way, I lean left, and he leans right ...

So now I am barfing on the Eiger, an alpine peak famed in mountain climbing and moviemaking. From now on, my relationship with this particular mountain will be far more personal than most other people's. Ah well. It is still heartbreakingly beautiful country, and when I am not leaning left, I take pictures with both cameras, recording our journey as we bag peak after peak. Eventually we fly over the four tallest peaks in this part of the Alps, something Micha has never heard of anyone doing.

At this height, the air is frigid. Every now and then Micha releases his grip on one brake line or the other and shakes out his hands to force blood back into his fingers. Both of us shiver mightily in the harness, our bodies fighting to maintain core temperatures. Strapped this tightly together, I can feel every shudder that wracks his body, as he can mine. Given



our close physical proximity and his good looks, this flight might, under other circumstances, be a comparatively sensual experience. But the plain fact is that I am freezing and throwing up in the arms of a stranger, and no matter how gorgeous he might be, there is nothing remotely sensual about our physical intimacy.

My body now miserable with altitude sickness and cold, the joy of flying fades. My nose runs, my lips are chapped and cracking, and I can barely feel my toes. I couldn't let go of the harness to reach for a tissue even if I'd thought to bring one. I feel embarrassed to be sharing such conditions with a stranger. Sensitive to my plight even in the midst of the greatest flight of his life, he asks, "Do you want to go down?" I debate my answer, then decide not to ask for relief. This is once-in-a-lifetime stuff. Quit now? No way!

I want to memorize every detail of the day. If the pilot of a

parasail is like a powerful eagle, I am like a kitten in its talons. I can feel the great wings folding the air around me, the muscular work of flight. And like a kitten I feel both exhilarated and terrified, the emotional thrill of soaring balanced by the physical knowledge that I am sure to die before I feel the ground again.

Strangely, I am no longer scared. I am simply cold and queasy. Looking at the horizon or at details of the landscape, I try to pin my location in the air to give my body a reference point. It is of little use. Mind over matter, I tell myself, feeling sad that the matter to be overcome is my own body.

"Okay, let's head down." When Micha finally says the magic words, my surge of relief embarrasses me. Shedding altitude nearly as rapidly as we gained it, eventually we find warmer air. My shivers ease. With the rough thermals behind us, I slowly regain my internal balance. Flying stops being a physical

torment, but I am too exhausted to enjoy the sensation. I know I should be absorbing the gorgeous Alpine scenery surrounding us, yet all I can think is, "The lower we go, the happier I am."

At long last, we bump to earth in a field of grass. Welcoming, warm Swiss grass is the sweetest smell in all the world. If there were a cow nearby, and I could stand up, I would give it a hug.

No longer a stranger, Micha reaches around my body casually to unlock the harness that bound us together. More than two hours have passed since we launched, he notes scientifically. If he had said two years, I would not have been surprised.

As we become separate creatures once again, I feel only a little sad at the parting. Lying on my back in the grass, I look up into the perilous sky, a happy kitten indeed.

