



To take her fear of heights head-on she skydives. Read what happened next

LEAP OF FAITH

BY RATHINA SANKARI

“I HAVE AN INTENSE FEAR OF HEIGHTS,” I tell my 45-year-old skydiving instructor Evan Richardson. “And I fear the ground,” he jokes. But his witty one-liner doesn’t bring a smile to my face. I shudder and realize my stomach is in knots. I wonder, for the nth time, if I have made a mistake by enrolling in this nightmare. It’s too late though, we are over 15,000 feet above ground.

SIGNING UP FOR SKYDIVING was my attempt to get over acrophobia—the fear of heights. I don’t exactly remember the origin of my fear, but I vividly recollect the first time I felt it—as a sixth grader, standing in my swimsuit on a platform five metres above a swimming pool and refusing to jump. My father stood below, sternly persuading me to dive in. Foiled, he even sent one of the staff up to push me into the water. I refused to let him touch me. Since that day I have never attempted any crazy rides in theme parks or adventure sports.

My job as a software engineer takes me around the globe. A few years ago, on the insistence of my colleagues, I take the elevator to the glass floor of Toronto’s CN (Canadian National) Tower to do the EdgeWalk at 1,168 feet above sea level. As my colleagues parade gleefully, I find it impossible to stand still, gripped by utter panic. I am 39 and realize it’s time I did something to conquer my fear.

I decide to take the bull by the horns in April 2018 in New Zealand—a Mecca for adventure seekers. I first consider bungee jumping, but realize that I would possibly back out at the last moment. Tandem skydiving seems a safer option—I needn’t take the initiative; if my instructor jumps, I jump.

After due diligence I select Nelson, one of the cities in New Zealand’s South Island that enjoys a

lot of sunshine. I land at Nelson Airport on D-day to be greeted by my host Tracee Neilson. As soon as we leave the airport, Neilson gets a call from the Skydive Abel Tasman team—the weather isn’t good for skydiving. I am both happy and disappointed by the news. “You can either opt out or jump tomorrow,” Neilson says. I mull over my options. I am supposed to go kayaking the next day in the picturesque coves and lagoons of the Abel Tasman National Park. I take a tour of the art scene in Nelson as Neilson drives me around in her car. By lunchtime, sitting on the Mapua Wharf and tucking into some fresh seafood at the Jellyfish Restaurant & Bar, I decide to jump the next day.

AFTER AN ANXIOUS NIGHT, I wait for the Skydive Abel Tasman shuttle at my apartment in Kaiteriteri. The weather gods seem to favour me—it’s a clear day—but I wonder if it is a good idea to jump on Friday the 13th. Not that I

am superstitious, I just have a lot buzzing on my mind. Nevertheless, an hour later, I sign a few disclaimer forms, get into a jumpsuit, strap on the harness and wear the hat and goggles. Evan Richardson my tandem master introduces himself and tries to break the ice with his one-liners.

Soon we board the Pilatus Porter or PC-6, a



*Gripped by
panic, I realize
it’s high time I
did something to
conquer my fear.*

tiny aircraft, with one French and two Scandinavian jumpers and their tandem masters. As the plane gains height, the fields, houses, roads all dwindle below us. On a regular flight cruising in the sky, I would have enjoyed the scene below, but today it is different. Richardson instructs me to hold on to the straps of the harness during the jump. Shortly, he fastens us together and secures an oxygen mask to my face for a couple of minutes. The ground is 15,000 ft below us and we are still gaining height. I am reluctant at first to make the highest altitude jump they had on offer at 16,500 ft. But they convince me that I would be able to get the maximum feel of free fall if I jumped from this height.

When the French lady jumps with her instructor, I stop breathing for a moment as I realize this is the final stretch. “We are next. Take a few deep breaths.” Richardson yells over the roar of the engines. We slide towards the door and I clutch the straps holding on to dear life. I dare not look below—I hate this moment and want it to be over somehow. If only I can fast forward these five minutes of my life and find myself magically transferred to the firm ground under my feet. But before I can think further, I find Richardson swinging back and forth. Pretty soon I realize I have tumbled out. But it isn’t just a regular jump, we do a somersault in the air. Things move in a rapid haze: I am pulled into a bottomless pit at a speed of 200 kmph gasping for air. I open my mouth wide enough to funnel oxygen into my screaming lungs. These never-



Rathina and her instructor Evan after landing in Abel Tasman National Park

ending 70-odd seconds of free fall are a nightmare. After what seems like an eternity, Richardson deploys the chute and we lose our tremendous speed. I find myself floating perpendicular to the ground and find I can breathe normally.

HE SOON MANOEUVRES the chute giving me a 360-degree view of the beautiful Abel Tasman National Park, its golden beaches and green hills. As I drink in the sights, I cannot believe I have managed to actually take the plunge and survive. I am back on my feet, on the ground, but I’m dizzy. “Drink lots of water and sit in the open air,” says Richardson. I nurse my drink and wonder if I would jump again. I don’t know. But I realize I have taken the most important step to conquer my fear. It is an achievement that I will always hold close to my heart.

Remember what writer Ray Bradbury once said? “Jump off the cliff and build your wings on the way down.” **R**