

Ego Death at 12,000 Feet

By Maria Nightingale

The email took me four attempts to write. Not because I didn't know what to say — my psychiatrist had literally dictated it — but because I kept adding context. Softening. Inserting performance reviews and project statuses and reassurances. She said, "Take your pen. Write this down: I'm not in a good place. Full stop. I need to take care of myself. Full stop. I'm going on leave. Full stop. Then send it." She didn't say the next thought out loud, but I can now: if they'd been paying attention, they would have noticed earlier.

I sent it on a Friday. To my team: Mental health is important, take care of yourselves. To my bosses: Here's the status, this person will cover this, that person will cover that. Clinical, competent, signed off. My autopilot was better than my real self by then — I could hardly tell what was what anymore.

That was the day I quit my identity. Not my job. My identity.

Let me tell you who I was. I was thirty-five, a project leader at BCG, a woman who had led multi-country carve-outs and national healthcare strategies across three continents. I held a Gold European Effie Award. I had three diplomas — philology, management, mining engineering — because somewhere in my twenties I'd confused thoroughness with self-worth and just kept going. In seven years at the firm I had survived every gauntlet: the case studies, the performance calibrations, the Paris-based manager who left all-caps feedback at 8 a.m. (I WANT YOU. I NEED YOU, he wrote once, meaning: stay on this nightmare project two more months until I can replace you). I survived the feedback forms that spelled my name wrong — Mary is... Maia continued... — before giving me a score of two. Below average. The praise reads like an apology.

My job was 95% of my life. I knew this. I said it proudly at dinner parties. And when it cracked, the remaining 5% wasn't enough to keep me afloat.

Burnout doesn't announce itself. It leaks. For months I was crying between meetings — in the five minutes reserved for lunch, in the forty minutes I was supposed to review the team's work. Bright screen, tears, mascara. Smile when the camera's on. Fine, good, thanks for asking. The psychiatrist — a woman who had spent years working with the military — asked me on our first call: "Are you OK?" I froze. I didn't want to lie, but I couldn't say the truth either. I didn't know. I whispered: "I cried five times today. I have no words left. Nothing."

She looked at me and said, "I know what's happening. Your amygdala is overactive. You're stuck in freeze-fight-flight. You need to take a pause."

It sounded simple. Medical, even manageable. What it actually was: a six-month leave of absence, a cracked phone screen I couldn't look at, a 28th-floor Chicago apartment where the view from the balcony suggested a brief fear and then no problems at all. That pattern of thinking terrified me to the bone. I say it plainly because it happened, not for sympathy but because erasing it would be a lie, and I'm done with those.

Depression, for me, was the bottom of the Mariana Trench: no light, no warmth. Every tiny movement impossible. And yet — by nature, I'm joyful. Three thousand ideas a minute, twenty plans, inviting everyone to dance. Maybe it was that memory that saved me. I couldn't feel joy. But I remembered where I had felt good: by the sea. And in the air, under a paraglider.

Now: paragliding is not what you think. It is not the tandem tourist flight where a stranger clips you in and you dangle, screaming, for twelve minutes over a beach. It is a free-flight discipline — you launch a foot-launched inflatable glider, shaped like a soft rectangular wing, controlling speed and direction with your body weight and two brake toggles. You launch yourself. You read the air. When something goes wrong, you fix it, or you don't. Acro — the discipline I fly — sits at the far end of the sport, where pilots throw their gliders into controlled collapses and rotations. Full stall. Helicopter. SAT. The names sound brutal because the physics are. The art is learning to be precise in the wrong place. To hold a broken wing in the exact narrow band where it stays collapsed but controlled. To release at exactly the right moment, catch the surge, land it clean.

Acro is the art of making wrongness exact.

I had been flying for five years when I quit. I didn't go back to it because I was brave. I went back because I was desperate and Chicago in February is gray in a way that feels personal.

From the couch, I opened paragliding forums — still run the old-school way, with threads and little plus signs if you're interested. I found Morocco: a thousand dollars, everything decided for you. Where you live, what you eat, where you fly. Not hardcore. More like traveling with the option to fly. Even if I never opened my gear bag, I'd still be by the ocean. I booked it from my bed in pajamas, using my phone with the cracked screen that I couldn't look at. It was the first decision I'd made in two months that wasn't about managing the damage.

Morocco hit like weather. I left Chicago still half-asleep, half-alive, three suitcases and exactly zero certainty about where my life was going. In my diary I'd written: I feel like a piece of wet clay — pliable, unshaped, waiting for my future. It sounded brave at the time. Mostly it was terror wrapped in stationery.

My first flight in the Atlas Mountains — my first on a new continent — was a mess of procedure and muscle memory. Pull, lean into it, give it some speed. The wind filled my glider and suddenly I was weightless. The ground fell away and the world opened: hills, roads, a river, all laid flat beneath. My heart thumped, but I wasn't scared. I laughed. Shouted, actually. Proof that I was still capable of lift.

Mirleft came after: a small coastal village, whitewashed and frayed around the edges. Coastal flying is always different — the damp sea air is thick, forgiving, almost lazy. It hugs you like a weighted blanket, slowing you down, allowing precious moments to feel instead of survive. In places like Mirleft you can glide for kilometers and barely touch the steering lines. Like a seagull, I hovered over the coastline — dust, cliffs, white foam, the Atlantic blue reaching farther than my eyes could go.

For the first time in months, I felt light.

Not cured. Not fixed. Light.

India came later — the Himalayas, the village of Bir, my old instructor Serge waiting on the other side of a twelve-hour road trip from Delhi. Serge is about seventy. He started paragliding before it was cool, when they had to sew their own wings. He never raises his voice. Around him you somehow know the standards are sky-high and feel compelled to match them — not because you feel threatened, but because it's good for you and the most reasonable thing to do. He was the one who taught me to fly, years ago, and that's a bond that doesn't go away. I hadn't seen him in three years.

"Ready when you are," he said. That was all. That was his blessing.

The Himalayas are something else. The mountains don't look real — they look like a backdrop painted on paper, impossible depth, snow-capped peaks brushed in with soft strokes. I launched above them: check the lines, shout "Take-off!", lift the glider, turn, run — and in three steps the ground fell away. Every time, it feels like a trick. Like the earth simply forgets to hold you.

The very next day, I nearly lost it. I turned into a small canyon someone had recommended — good lift there. Instead of rising, I sank. The ridge disappeared behind me. The landing field vanished in the distance. My heartbeat outpaced my altimeter. I started scanning the terraced mountain fields below, green from altitude, stone and walls when you're actually falling toward them.

At the last moment, a breath of lift brushed my wing.

"Good," Serge radioed. "You found it. Take it."

I spiraled up two hundred meters, shaking with relief. When I landed, my knees were so weak I could barely stand. Something shifted after that. The fear didn't leave. It stopped taking the lead.

Here is what I've learned about agency — which is the word for the thing I lost in a Chicago apartment and found again in the air.

Agency is not confidence. I had plenty of confidence in my career: the kind that shows up polished and on time and answers questions before they're asked. That is not agency. Agency is the felt sense that your choices matter. That when you decide something and act on it, something real happens.

Depression is the complete collapse of that feeling. Not sadness exactly. The specific horror of caring what happens but having no sense that what you do will change it.

Paragliding doesn't give you confidence. What it gives you is consequence. You pull a brake — the wing responds. You release — it surges. You make a mistake — you feel it immediately in your hands and your altitude. Nobody is being polite to you up there. Nobody is cushioning the information to manage your feelings. The wing tells you the truth. Immediately. Without a performance review cycle.

In seven years of consulting I was evaluated by people who misspelled my name and still decided whether I was excellent. In the air, there is no such absurdity. There is the wing, the brake, the sky, and me. The feedback loop is honest and unforgiving in a way that corporate systems rarely are. That's why I keep going back — not the adrenaline, not the views, though both are real and magnificent. It's this: in the air, I know exactly what I'm doing and what it costs.

The morning I climbed above 3,600 meters in the Himalayas, the world opened in a way I hadn't expected. Snow-capped peaks lay beneath me — white, ancient, indifferent. The air thinned into something holy.

"Well done," Serge radioed.

A pause.

"Enjoy it."

Two words. From him, it felt like a medal.

That evening we flew in sunset light — pink, gold, soft as breath. No lift, just thirty minutes of pleasure glide down to the valley. I made a video, knowing no one would care about it as much as I would when I'm fifty.

That's me, I thought. That beautiful flying woman is me.

Not the woman on the feedback form. Not the woman on the 28th floor. The woman in the air, who remembered what she was made of after everything burned away.

I land softly. I pack the paraglider with steady hands. And for the first time in a long time, I feel not broken, not lost. More myself.

It turns out that's exactly enough.

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