

Help! Here I am and I think I am going to die! This is what is going through my mind as my teammate CG and I are being yanked backwards through the atmosphere. All I can do is pray; pray that what I see happening to him isn't going to happen to me. Both of us viewing the earth below, both of us know its sight is now a luxury – a luxury that is not going to last. We've left ourselves no way out, no way to escape. It's time to live or die.

Three hundred feet above us is an enormous storm cloud, its dark spinning bottom looking like an upside down whirlpool, its center hole trying to suck us in. Thousands of feet below us, the precious earth looks like a wrinkled piece of soft green felt.

Diving our hang gliders, noses pointed straight down, wings bucking violently, racing futilely for the ground, my mind blaming my teammate for all the things gone wrong; my hands grip the control bar tightly, like a trapeze artist without a net, while I will the glider to go faster, praying for it not to break.

Inside my helmeted head, rushed panic, sweat, and terror. The wrong cloud, the wrong place, the wrong time, me and CG flying our hang gliders beyond the manufacturer's stated speed limit not to exceed. The gliders push 70 miles per hour as we travel backwards, on the verge of getting sucked uncontrollably up into a huge, black-and-white, lightning-included, cumulonimbus storm cloud.

Like Icarus in the ancient Greek legend, we have flown too close to danger, we have pushed each other too far. Our egos are out of control, dragging us under the bottom of the massive sucking whirlpool.

There are plenty of reasons why we got here, because I am the young upstart pilot and was trying to outperform the older, more experienced CG. That old man has taught me well over the last few years. Too well. It's made me cocky and overconfident, and now it's the student competing against the teacher. No, scratch that - it's student plus teacher competing against Mother Nature, her new rules of survival constantly changing. She shows us no mercy as she drags us higher through the atmosphere.

Today's subject: how to fly a hang glider fast enough to escape the overpowering currents that are getting vacuumed up into the bottom of the wrong cloud. We are trapped under the cloud, like two rats scrambling on a slippery tile floor, trying to escape from being sucked up into an industrial vacuum cleaner, the nozzle of the vacuum, the center of the whirlpool, dragging us into the huge cloud.

With our gliders pointed towards the earth, trying to go down, flying forward as fast as their aerodynamic design will allow, we are still getting sucked up backwards, our progress incorrect. We enter the bottom of the angry cloud, tail first.

Upon entering the storm, all my eyesight goes white. Many shades of white, bright white, gray white, dirty white. A big room filled with white terror, oh yeah, and panic. I can feel the sweat leaking from my helmet, rolling down my forehead, blowing into my eyes, but its salty blindness doesn't matter because on both sides of my eyelids I can see nothing. Strong winds force tears from my eyes, causing my sunglasses to ice over. Thunder cracks inside the storm cloud, shaking my brains. Frustration, fear, anger, terror, panic; powerful emotions churn like an electrical current between my ears.

If I want to live, I think, I got to relax, I got to focus. Focus on what? Everything inside this cloud is a white soaking hell. Relax how? The violent turbulence inside the cloud is thwarting my efforts at keeping the glider from flipping over and breaking. My mind begins losing to panic. I begin feeling small, scared, insignificant, lost in this vast, turbulent, wet, cold, white room. Feeling like a rat in a spinning clothes dryer half full of wet snow. My eyelids start icing up, all ten fingers freezing, my mouth gulping against air sickness.

Oh, God, I pray, get me out of here alive and I will never fly again...

My arms start to tire, my instruments are covered in frost, the wing is handling lethargically, acting like it is covered in ice; I'm losing track of reality, losing track of time, how long have I been in here, I can't see, help me CG, I want my mom.

I think, I am going to shit my pants and die, and yet I am strangely concerned with the rescue crew finding me with a poop in my pants, and just as I'm contemplating my mortifying end, I see a patch of blue over there at the clouds' border. I dive for the blue, but it keeps moving away, torturing me like a moving target, a target found in an amusement park booth, where the gun is manipulated and one hundred dollars is wasted to get a three dollar teddy bear, I finally hit the elusive target, my reward, punching out the side of the tall white cloud, into the bright blue, blinding sky.