

## Fledglings

By Vern Seward

### Part 1

Jim lies back as he takes in the slow motion dance of the heavy grey clouds overhead. The late evening air, damp and earthy, stirs ahead of an incoming storm. His fingers are laced behind his head, his back is a few millimeters above the blanket he has spread out on the roof. A breeze, thick with moisture, nudges him and his head gently bumps against a large planter containing a rose bush. The flowers are all gone now, but the leaves sway slightly in the gentle draft. He unlaces his fingers and uses his hands to reposition himself over the blanket, then lowers himself so that any future breeze will have no affect. He squints as a flash of lightning splits the grey sky, a deep rumble follows that vibrates the rooftop beneath him. Several huge drops of rain splatter around him. Jim smiles as he remembers a similar night so long ago. It was March 29, at 2:47 AM. The air then was crisp and moist and, just like now, it held a promise of rain. He laces fingers behind his head again as he recalls every detail of that moment and everything else that occurred that night as if it had just happened.

He was 17 then, had had more beer than even he knew he should have had. The party was at a friend's fourth floor apartment where beer and even harder alcoholic concoctions that only a teenage mind could create flowed freely. There were girls of every shape, size, and color, all willing to abandoned their virginity just because it seemed like the thing to do. The music was so loud that corpses in the cemetery a mile away might call 911 to complain of the noise, and air so thick with pot smoke that just entering the apartment produce an instant high. It was a great party. One for the record books.

James McArthur, Jimmy to his mom or just Jim to his many friends, stumbled out onto a balcony hoping to get some fresh air. He closed the sliding door behind him, effectively isolating him from the din of music, yelled conversations and the moans and groans the fill the air inside. Too much beer, too much greasy food, too much smoke had started his stomach roiling like a witch's cauldron that boiled strange ingredients into spells, and he'd hoped the night air would calm it. A cold damp breeze slapped his face and sent shivers all over his body, but did nothing to cool the cauldron. He looked, bleary eyed, into night then down to the quiet street and sidewalk below. The height only aggravated the queasiness in his gut and he felt an urge to rid himself its contents. He clutched the railing and heaved. As he watched his dinner, beer, and God knows what else showered the pavement below Jim's only thought was, "God, am I sick!"

A light drizzle started. Jim held his face to the droplets of water falling from the sky. Though it felt good the spray did little to ease his party induced sickness. His watch displayed 2:47 AM. "It's time to call it a night," he said to himself. He closed his eyes in a failed attempt to quiet the mounting vertigo and suddenly being on the balcony didn't seem like one of his better ideas. He turned to go back inside, but felt a second volley of vomit welling in his throat. He turned back to the rail too quickly and he stumbled over his own feet. The railing caught him in the stomach just below his rib cage causing him to convulse. He threw up with a force that would impress Linda Blair. He lost his footing and flipped over the railing.

Then a strange thing happened. Everything around him slowed as if time itself trudged through a lake of molasses. He was fully aware of what was happening to him. He'd vomited, fallen, and

was about to exit the world of the living via sudden deceleration, but he felt no panic, no concern for his impending fate, just an intense curiosity and wonder. Everything around appeared in riveting detail. Clear droplets of rain looked like tiny crystalline meteors hurdling to earth. He could see the freshly emitted contents of his stomach form globules in mid-air. It seemed that he could reach out and grab one of the pale yellow orbs if he wanted to. He was slowly turning and the sidewalk below came into view. It advanced at such a leisurely pace that it seemed he was a feather buoyed aloft by the slightest of breezes. He looked closer at the hard surface he knew he would impact momentarily, the vomit he had ejected seconds ago was raining on the pavement forming little yellow crowns in the puddles of puke below. And wherever the crystalline meteors landed the concrete would darken as the rain dampened the sidewalk. He was mesmerized.

Even though his fall seemed to have slowed to a snail's pace, he was still falling. Through the dazzle of this new experience a tiny sense of urgency itched at the corner of his consciousness and Jim thought that if there were anything he could do to keep himself from ruining a perfectly good expanse of concrete now would be a good time to do it.

At that instant Jim coasted to a stop a meter above the sidewalk. He was upside down and completely bewildered. To anyone who might have seen him he looked as if an invisible giant held him up by one leg. The vomit and rain continued and splattered against the pavement at a normal and somewhat disgusting speed. Jim, however, simply hung above the liquid mess completely dumbfounded, speechless, and thoughtless save one, "What the literally hell is happening?"

He looked for the balcony from which he'd fallen, but poor lighting made it impossible to see which one it was. He scanned around hoping that someone would see him and prove that he wasn't dreaming or hallucinating, but the street was deserted and the windows of most houses and apartments were dark. He thought to yell and hope someone would hear and then see him. He opened his mouth, but before he made a sound he notice how still everything was, as if God has pressed the mute button for the entire world.

Jim laughed. It was a weak chuckle intended more to hear himself than an expression of joy or excitement. It sounded odd, as if the voice making the noise was not his, but from someone mocking him from some unseen place. Still, the sound proved that he wasn't imagining his circumstance.

"I *am* doing this," he whispered to himself, then much louder he said, "This is so freakin' cool!"

His mind raced with the implications. He would be famous. A celebrity. Jim, The Floating Man! "No," he said to the damp night, "I'm sure I can do better than that shitty name."

Jim, The Levitator. Or maybe just The Levitator. Yeah..., like a super hero."

After a few more minutes of musing over names, it became apparent to him that he was still hanging in the air, upside down and looking rather undignified. Hardly super hero-like. "How do I get down?" He wondered.

Jim immediately fell into the pool of his regurgitated dinner, head first, knocking himself unconscious.

It was still dark and the drizzle had stopped when he came to. The street was damp and still deserted. His clothes were wet and smelled awful. The top of his head throbbed and he reached up and felt that a large knot had formed. He pulled his hand away from the bump and found there was very little blood.

"Good! No stitches," he said to himself.

He sat up and looked around. He was on the sidewalk and sitting in what was his dinner. He could barely hear strains of heavy metal music from somewhere above him. "The Party," he remembered. As he tried to recall how he'd managed to go from a fourth floor balcony to a concrete sidewalk with only a bump on the head and smelly wet clothes to show for it, the lights of a car blinded him. He used a hand to shield his eyes and, as the vehicle approached and slowed, he could make out the silhouette of a police car. The car stopped and a spot light was trained on him.

"Looks like you've had an interesting night," the cop said through the opened driver side window.

"You might say that," Jim, replied while still shielding his eyes.

"We've gotten several noise complaints and someone suggested that there might be some underage drinking involved," the cop leaned out the window and looked up, listening. "Sounds like quite a party. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Umm, no, I wouldn't," Jim lied. "I was walking home from my girlfriend's house and slipped on this puddle of puke."

The cop eyed him for a moment, looked up, then back at Jim. "You ok?"

"Yeah. I hit my head, but no blood so I guess no real damage. My clothes are a mess though," Jim replied while slowly standing. The spotlight made it impossible for Jim to see the policeman, but he imagined the officer weighing whether to detain him or investigate the party.

"Go straight home," the policeman commanded. "If I see you out here again tonight I'll arrest you along with your buddies upstairs."

"Absolutely! Heading straight home," Jim replied without hiding his relief.

The spotlight winked out and the cruiser moved down the street towards an open parking spot.

Jim shook his head, attempting to clear the remaining alcohol fog, but he only succeeded in making his head hurt worse. He started walking, away from the party and cop, trying hard not to stagger and give the officer a reason to call him back.

He glanced at his watch, 3:11 AM. He hadn't been unconscious for long though it felt like he'd been out for hours. As he made his way through the maze of parked cars, dark alleys and dank empty streets Jim couldn't help but relive the seemingly miraculous events that had occurred earlier. It all seemed like a vivid dream where the details were already beginning to fade. "It had

to be real," he muttered. "I floated. I fell off the balcony four floors up and I should be dead..., but I'm not." He reached up to feel the bump on his head and winched at the very real pain that exploded from his touch.

"That's on the top. If I were on the sidewalk and slipped that knot would be on the side of my head," he reasoned, as he tried to find real evidence to prove it wasn't a dream. "The bump and its position is real, that means I did fall on top of my head and somehow managed not to break my neck, but how?"

He rounded a corner. A large truck sat in a lot in front of a food store across the street. As Jim passed the lot he kept eying the truck. He stopped and faced it. "Maybe...", he started, then crossed the street. He looked around, no one appeared to be in the truck or the store. "Maybe...", he said again and began climbing on the truck until he stood on its roof above the cab. He looked down at the ground below. While it was certainly a lot closer than it was from the balcony the distance to hard wet concrete still looked injury inducing.

"Maybe...", he said again as if trying to convince himself that being up on the truck and jumping off wasn't as crazy as it sounded. He steeled himself, looked at the ground again, then closed his eyes. "Ok, ok...on three..."

He pulled his arms back then swung them forward as a broad jumper might. His heart pounded in his chest like a trapped animal trying desperately to free itself. "One..."

He swung his arms again and rocked forward on the balls of his feet. He inhaled then exhaled in short bursts as if doing so would increase his chances of survival. "Two..."

He swung his arms back, settled on his heels and was about the leap forward...then said aloud, "This is nuts!!!" He turned away from the edge of the hood. He already had a painful bump of his head and was soaked and covered in vomit, adding a broken leg to the mix just didn't seem like a good idea.

Jim stood on the roof of the truck for a moment as the simple clarity of logic took hold. "No one can levitate. You were either high, drunk, hallucinating or all the above," he said as if his mirror image stood, fully fleshed, in front of him.

He sighed, disappointed at the realization that what he'd experienced was most likely a dream, and disappointed at himself for not having the guts to prove that it wasn't.

He started to climb down, lost his grip and fell backwards off the roof of the truck.

He clamped his eyes shut and clenched his jaw, bracing himself for the inevitable impact..., which never came.

He opened his eyes and saw stars, and the nearby street lights, and the remnants of the rain clouds. Jim lay horizontal, face up, and floating at about the same level as the truck's door handle. To a passerby Jim looked frozen in mid-fall, arms and legs splayed and a tight grimace on his face. The only detail that might ruin the image was the medallion his father had given him. The coin sized metal peace sign, a survivor of his father's youthful days, now hung

backwards from Jim's neck, swinging slightly and, as opposed to the rest of Jim, was definitely under the influence of gravity.

A potbellied, bearded man appeared from the rear of the truck, head down, fumbling with his keys and humming to himself. He looked up just in time to avoid bumping into Jim's right foot. "WHAT THE FU...!!!" The man never finished the sentence. Both Jim and the man regarded each other with wide eyed surprise. The man backed away slowly at first, then turned and ran with a speed that belied his girth.

Jim thought about lowering himself and his body obeyed, gently drifting downward. He landed on his back, touching the ground like a snowflake on a still winter's night. He stood feeling excited about what just happened. "I can fly!" He shouted.

He stretched his arms up over his head, stooped, then pushed off the ground with all his might. Jim shot straight up like a slow moving missile. After about 100 meters, however, he began to slow down. He drifted to a stop about 300 meters into the night sky. "Must be the air that's slowing me down," he thought. Every so often a light breeze would push him and he'd drift in that direction, validating his theory that air affected his flight, otherwise he just hung there. When he tried to move in any direction except down, nothing happened. So, he allowed himself to drift back to the ground. "Ok," he amended, "I can float!"

As Jim continued to make his way home the events of the night replayed in his mind like the preview of an upcoming action movie with him as the hero. But as the encounter with the driver was reviewed it became clear that his newfound ability was not something he should widely advertise. He'd read too many books and seen too many movies where anything different was met with fear and hostility. He didn't want to become a curiosity or squirreled away in some government lab to be poked and prodding by scientists bent on figuring out how he was able to do what he apparently could do. He wanted a normal life, or a life as normal as one can expect. He resolved not to tell anyone, not his parents, not his best friend or his girlfriend. But he also decided he would explore his newfound talent as much as he could, in secret.

End of Part