

BEYOND THE INVISIBLE

a novel about fresh air

by

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Other titles by the same author

The Fresh Air Site Guide
The Riddler's Gift

Beyond the Invisible

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DEDICATION

to my friends
who help me to fly.

FOREWORD

The sky offers many things to pilots. In its tumbling crumbling castles of cumulus I find myself challenged - time and time again - as I strive to break through my fears, to grow, to fly!

Fear limits me, it forms an invisible boundary to my life. Within this boundary, the world becomes known, controlled and comfortable. This novel is about pushing through the fears, to discover what lies beyond.

Whatever wonderful craft you fly, be it a paraglider, hanglider, balloon or the armchair of your imagination, I hope that you will join me on a journey into the wild freedom of the sky.

In many ways this is more of an anthology than a story, where impressions and moments of insight are threaded together to capture the esoteric nature of flying.

Surely I blur the line between fact and fantasy. What matters is what you believe is possible, for this creates much of what you will find when you take your step off the edge of your known world; a step beyond the invisible.

Believe, and you will fly!

Greg Hamerton
Cape Town, South Africa,
February 2007

BREATHLESS

Reach out, leap off, accept the dare!
The exhilaration of suspension in air
swirls in our blood, our minds, in our senses
ecstatically cold as the sunlight drenches
the jagged peaks warm in consummate bliss
and we taste the high cloud's vaporous kiss

Transcend the limits of your imminent scare -
Reach out, leap off, accept the dare!

BIG SKY LIFE

The wind sighed through the pines above my head. Another thermal was passing, carrying its rising promise to that special high place where it would become sky. The air smelled as clean as the clear stream which gurgled by the path. A squirrel scolded me from the boughs above. I shouldn't be carrying such a big backpack up the mountain, it would be the death of me.

"Don't worry, little guy," I said cheerfully, "it's worth it."

It most certainly was. How many hills had I carried my paraglider up, how many steps had I shared with her, only to be repaid one-thousand-fold when she carried me? My backpack had become a part of me, this was the sixth week since leaving town.

There was more time to think, out here, I mused. It was fun, just drifting from one adventure to another, looking for new places to fly. What was it that had kept me in the city so long? I couldn't remember. Another thermal gust brushed the path ahead, swirling the forest scents about, filling me with excitement.

There had always been some commitments in town, and no matter how fast I met them, they would be replaced, just as demanding as before. Go to work, strive, stress, fight, succeed, bring home more money, but hey! I worked so hard I deserve to enjoy my

time off, so I buy this, and one of those, and some of that, I need to be over there now! I need a faster car, a better cellphone, I want new clothes I want a new image, I'd better rush, there's a meeting at four. There are better things out there for those who work harder, what about the future? You can never tell if there is a big disaster on its way so save up loads of money, stash it away, you need to be safe, back to work, strive, stress, succeed, bring home more money, but hey! I worked so hard I deserve to enjoy my time off.

Outside of that rut the world was scary, unknown, full of risk and uncertainty, offering no security, no escalating financial rewards to match an escalating desire to spend. I had felt the dis-ease, I was sick in spirit, but how could I stop when the city was my only source of sustenance?

It was as easy as pointing my car out of town. And thus the Big Sky Life had begun, or so I called it.

"Twit!twittwit!" a blue-green flash of feathers teased me as it cannon-balled past.

"So I was, but I'm learning now!" I shouted back, but the bird was gone, leaving me alone with my thoughts. A stile straddled the fence ahead, providing a good rest. Standing on the top step I could see the soft grass of the landing field bending in the breeze far below. A shadow appeared in the corner of the field and yes, there it was, peering through the trees I could just make out the fluffy beginnings of a cumulus cloud, the ideal gliding cloud, beckoning to me to come out and play. I scrambled down the stile and up through the bracken.

All days in nature are fantastic, I thought. Sometimes I just lacked the perspective to see it. So many times I had visualised this scene - the fresh air, the sunshine, the excitement of exploring. At last I was living the dream. I crested the hill and strode out through the wildflowers.

This was what I was created for! To be outside, in the wind, breathing in the effervescent scents of spring. I tossed my backpack onto the grass and ran in wide circles under the brilliant blue sky. I chased startled butterflies from bush to bush. Beetles scurried into the undergrowth. With the weight of my backpack removed I felt that I could float away. I leaped through the grasses; an astronaut on the moon. Mad, or sane, I felt alive.

A thermal murmured through the grass. I hurried to prepare my paraglider for a flight. The yellow fabric crinkled loudly as I

shook the knots out of the thin suspension lines. The design still amazed me. Such light fabric, such a simple concept - the cells sewn together in an aerofoil canopy with the pilot's harness far below. There it lay, a triumph for all the dreamers who for centuries believed that one day, it could be done. My eagle-body in a bag.

The glider snagged on a little bush as I pulled her up and I let her fall back gently, playing with the wind. I cleared the lines. It was quiet, even the birds had stopped singing for a moment.

My glider came up smoothly the second time, pulling at the harness, wanting to rise, eager to start the day's adventure.

Wait for the moment, I told myself. There's a perfect time for every beginning, I had to wait until it felt right.

There it was! That butterfly-happy-scared squirm in my stomach, my intuition's eager nudge, so I let my glider go and she flew me skywards.

How beautiful the sky was, up close. The lifting air was smooth. Every day it seemed easier for me to find, amidst the shifting air currents. I turned to the right on reflex, and flew into a thermal pushing its way towards the heavens. And to think that the thermal would have gone to waste if I hadn't been flying that day! How many go wasted every day?

The ground sank further and further away, and the colours of the forests and grasses melted together, swirling into a green pool as I gained altitude. The wind whistled softly through my lines, causing them to hum in tension. And I flew, high over the world, hanging by a thread.

I watched the earth drift slowly by. How beautiful it was! Suspended in the elemental majesty of the wind, even time seemed to loosen its grip and I was alone in the poetry of flight.

In silence.

We had been there forever, it seemed. But after a time, I noticed the thinness of the lines, and sensed the fluttering fragility of the wing above my head. I saw the light carabiners that connected my glider to the harness. I felt gravity yawning up at me. Pulling me down, down to the solid ground that would break me if I fell.

Suddenly the ground was coming up to join me and I was swinging around to make a difficult landing between the gnarled tree and the tumbled rocks and the air was rushing out of my glider in a reluctant hoosh! Gone, the thin cool air of altitude, full of dreams and sights unseen. Having offered me just a taste of

freedom, the sky had become even more alluring, by escaping from my grasp.

“I am a better pilot for today,” I whispered to my glider.

Better, because I wanted to fly again.

That feeling, that passion is worth a lot. I sometimes wonder if we only live because we want to live. If we lost the passion for it, we would cease to be. Certainly this is true with flying. We fly because we want to fly. It’s the desire that makes it possible.

WILDLIFE!

Later, as the sun was setting in a bronze sky, I set off to find a campsite. I had walked a long way to retrieve my car, after flying so defiantly away from it. I was tired, elated, and very hungry. So I spun my wheels in the gravel and drove off in search of the perfect place.

I turned off the main road and onto a winding track that led into a narrow valley. I could just make out a little lake in the gathering gloom. Beside the lake stood a forest of oaks, subtle shades in the twilight. I love forests, they are always quiet, so secretive and protective. I was looking forward to a cosy night.

My campfire cast a flickering light against the trees. Something good bubbled under the lid of my billycan, escaping in steaming tendrils to flavour the air with herbs. My mind drifted back to my flight - the gentle thermals and clean, clear air.

I was lucky, I reflected, to be out there, so free. There seemed to be more substance to my life in the wilds, more possibilities for growth. I felt as if I was awakening from a long sleep; the sleep of technology, of modernity, of suburbia.

“Pah!” scoffed my billycan as a puff of steam blew the lid off. It was time to eat. I tested the steaming broth and smiled in satisfaction. Hunger really was the best sauce. It was an instant pasta from the supermarket, but it tasted great. I settled down next to the fire and enjoyed the evening meal.

The flames waved and twisted in the coals, creating faces and shapes. The wood crackled. I tossed another log on the fire, and the sparks swirled up into the thickening night.

By the time that I had finished supper, my legs had become numb. Sleep crept upon me. I knew I should douse the fire and pitch the tent and get into my sleeping bag, but I just didn't have the energy.

A cold night breeze came down off the hills. I scraped some leaves together for a pillow. I wrapped my jacket around me and settled with a sigh onto the forest floor. I slept for some hours, and the night drew closer.

I was vaguely aware that I was cold. The jacket just couldn't cover enough of my body; there would always be a small patch where the cold would creep up my back. I tried again to pull the jacket further down, but discovered again that it was caught under my body because I was lying on it. There was something digging into my hip. My neck was stiff. I was cold.

Slowly I lifted myself off the squashed leaves. I saw the ashes of the dead fireplace; the fire had burned out. The night chill had crept into everything. The trees loomed out of the forest, blocking the stars. The ground was knurled and bony, making me feel vulnerable and soft. I shivered.

CRACK!

A branch, broken like a gunshot. I looked about in panic, searching for some clue in the darkness. The night pressed in on me, and the trees tilted towards me, from all sides. I couldn't see. I couldn't see!

Surely it couldn't be a leopard, crunching through the forest towards the scent of my campsite? It had to be just a branch, old and weak which had suddenly, for no reason at all, fallen off the tree it was on.

CRACK! CRACK! CRUNCH!

Whatever it was, it was enormous! I was on my feet and running. I fled for the car. Images of slashing claws and wolverine jaws chased me from behind. I was at the car in seconds, and just needed to pull out the keys to unlock the door. But I couldn't find them. I searched my trouser pockets, then my jacket, frantic. At last I found them, in a pocket I was sure I'd checked.

The key jammed in the door.

Oh pleasepleaseplease open you damned thing!

I squinted at the key. It was the wrong one of the bunch. I fumbled for the correct key, my hands shaking.

CRACK! Another branch. CRAAAACKKKK!

By the sounds of it, the beast had just pushed over a whole tree. I ripped the door open and slammed it shut behind me, staring into the dark. I breathed with short gasps and my heartbeat pounded in my ears. I tried to see what was coming out of the forest but a mist had appeared. It took a while to realise the mist was on the inside of the windowpane. I smeared the window dry and peered out into the night.

I didn't want to leave all my cooking gear and food out, but if the beast was big enough to push down trees, then I would high-tail out of there and may the cooking gear rest in peace. I started the car's engine, revved it mercilessly. I turned the headlights on, and swung the car to shine its light into the forest.

Nothing emerged. I couldn't be sure if the branches had stopped snapping; the car was making a lot of noise.

A calm voice sounded in my head.

Not much of a hero, are you?

"I didn't say that I was."

What about stepping into the unknown, releasing your fears, releasing the need for security, for safety?

"But this is different! There is a great big creature out there in the dark, pushing trees over!"

Observe your body.

"My body?"

Just observe it.

"My body's fine, I'm not hurt. Well, it is all tensed up, my muscles are knotted, my heartbeat's too fast, my breathing is shallow, but I am ready to run when that beast comes for me."

Yet you haven't seen anything. Nothing has come out of the forest. What is it?

"I don't know what it is!"

Ahh, the Unknown.

"The Unknown?" I paused. My inner voice was playing a game of analogy with me. It led me to thinking. Was the forest somewhat like the world of adventure I had stepped into? And that my fear of the hidden beast was somehow the same as my fear of any unknown thing which might challenge me. I'd already conquered my need for security, I'd left the city life behind, but here I was, clinging to

safety once again.

I glanced into the night. Surely the beast was about to tear out of the forest toward me?

Your mind is as tense as your body. How long do you think you can live like this for? How well do you think your mind operates when clenched in fear? You'll soon tire, and think feebly.

"I still don't see the parallel," I challenged my inner voice.

How long did part of your mind stay clenched in fear in the city? Fear of losing security, fear of losing comfort?

"Well, forever, it seems."

And you felt alive only when you released these fears?

I was beginning to understand.

I was in the Unknown, the forest. I had heard a noise, I had reacted in fear, and allowed my mind to create substance for the fear. I had run for my old security, the car. And so I had lost a chance to live fearlessly, and had become my Old Self once again. Locked up, fearful, safe.

"But there's a big animal out there!"

Is there?

The only fact was that there had been a noise. The rest was unknown.

So step out the car and live confidently, urged my inner voice. Explore reality, don't make it up in your imagination.

"But what if it really is a big animal?"

What if it isn't?

"I will still be safe in the car, either way."

Safe. But smaller, somehow. Less.

The beast had still not shown its head. The car purred along, having warmed up to a constant idling speed.

Eventually I summoned up the courage to get out of the car. The cold air rushed to meet me as I poked my head out of the door. I stepped gingerly onto the ground, not wanting to make too much noise, lest I be spotted. I kept my hand on the car door.

CLUNK! CLATTER!

I was back in the car, my face glued to the window. The beast! It had made a sound from the campsite. A beast that could knock down trees! I was shivering again, but I was overcome with a morbid fascination. I wanted to see what it was that I feared.

But to do so I had to first put aside the fear itself, and leave the car.

I spent the night creating a face for my fear, imagining what it could be, giving it flesh, giving it menace, giving it power.

Some hours later the sky began to lighten from the east, an agonising, gradual shift of paler shades that never released the forest from its gloom until the sun finally pierced the horizon.

The daylight dissolved the creatures of my vivid imagination. Had I really heard such loud sounds? I cracked my door open, and eased myself out on stiff legs. There was dew on the grass. There was a forest with some trees.

Clunk! Clank!

My billycan. In the rocks beside the path. It was moving.

Kedunk! It fell over onto its side. It wriggled. Then it rolled back onto the path and revealed a furry tail, and a grey-brown body. The small creature chased the billycan and butted it. Then it stopped as it made eye contact with me and stood on its hind legs in surprise.

A meerkat, a burrowing creature related to a mongoose. Height: maybe 50 cm on his hind legs. A shy scavenger. Special skills: preys on snakes.

The meerkat was probably developing its own definition. A human. Big clumsy hairless thing with funny smell. Too slow to catch me. Watching me. His food, maybe?

Thanks for the supper, the meerkat seemed to say, before it scampered into the grass. I watched where it had gone. A twig snapped as it passed through the bushes, then all was quiet.

Surely the little meerkat was too small to snap the branches I had heard breaking in the night? There had to be tracks in the forest of the real beast, the great hairy tree-rending ogre. I was fighting to justify my night of fear, but I was losing ground against the advance of reason.

The campfire was untouched, a grey circle on the forest floor. I could see the imprint of my body in the leaves beside it. A packet of cereal lay scattered over my cooking gear. A nibble had been taken out of the bread. Everything else was in its place. No swathe of destruction, no vicious gouges in the ground, no flattened cooker or exploded boxes. I began to search further from the campsite, wandering into the woods.

All I could find was an old tree, a collapsed jumble of rotten limbs some distance away from the campsite. The broken trunk suggested it had fallen in on its own weight. I blew the dust of fine wood splinters into the air. It smelt old, dry.

I cursed under my breath as I tested one of the branches. It was rotten to the core and fell away without resistance.

CRACK!

I walked slowly back to the campsite; my stiffness easing, my doubts fading away.

“Oh if someone had been watching this,” I hooted to myself, “how they would have cried with laughter!”

Oh but I am watching you, my inner voice answered.

We laughed for some time, myself and I, as the colours and scents of the new day gathered and the sun climbed in a brilliant blue sky. I have had many teachers in my life, but none so memorable as the knee-high meerkat.

I went flying again. It was flyable that day and the next, soft flying with gentle winds. I travelled slowly east, moving on every evening to a new town, meeting new people. By the end of a week I had reached the towering Drakensberg Mountains. The flying would be dangerous amongst the dramatic cliffs and steep-sided valleys. I knew my ability to transcend my fears would be tested here more than ever.