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SKYBOUND

A Journey in Flight

PICADOR

Chapter One

Take Off

The ground falls away beneath me at seventy miles per hour and I am swallowed by the sky. The air howls and I glance down at a panel of dials with twitching needles. I don't know what they mean, but I watch them anyway. I'm sitting in the front seat of a glider for the first time. The clear canopy, only inches from my head, is like a bubble over me; I have a 300-degree view and any sense of confinement inside the tiny cramped cockpit has melted away; I'm jutting out into the air, like a carved wooden figure on the prow of a ship pushing forward into the elements: I am right up against the sky. We are attached by a sixty-metre rope to a small plane that's towing us up from the airfield in the Black Mountains of Wales. We are being towed up into the air because this aircraft has no engine, no internal source of power whatsoever. Bo, an experienced pilot and instructor, is flying the glider from a seat behind me.

I stare in astonishment at the shrinking ground below. Bo tells me he will release us from the towplane. I hear a clunk, feel a jolt, the towplane continues forward, but we slow down and tip to the right. The horizon is at thirty

degrees in my view. The towplane disappears and we're left here, suspended in the air, 1,500 feet above the ground, with no source of power.

But the nervousness that beat through my body ten minutes ago, before I stepped into this strange engineless plane, has fallen away with the ground. I left it down there. I feel calm, transfixed by what I can see and where I find myself. This hot spring day in late April, the sky is almost cloudless; it's a big blue empty space, a nothingness above the ground.

The landscape below is clear and strange. Curved fields edged with hedges roll out in every direction from the base of the hills, spreading down valleys to meet rivers and roads that twist and wind as they move from one stony scribble of a village to another.

We move in wide circles, then head straight and level, then tip one way with a wing pointing down at the ground for a moment, then tip the other way. We climb and climb. The ground continues to shrink, and the human world has almost disappeared by the time we reach 6,000 feet. It's as though we've moved back in time while climbing in altitude; I can't see any cars moving through the landscape, there are no tractors ploughing fields, no telegraph poles or power lines.

The shape of the Black Mountains is clear now, and I get an aerial overview of this body of hills for the first time. I thought I knew them, but now I realize that my knowing was on one narrow scale; as soon as I'm above the ground, I'm lost.

In the distance, the dark silhouette of the larger Brecon Beacons looks like a painted backdrop in an old Western movie. The top of Pen y Fan, the highest peak of the Beacons, points up into the hazy sky.

Below me, Llangorse Lake is a slate-grey curve. Every field is at an odd angle to another, and nothing is square or symmetrical or flat. Instead, everything sweeps up or down or sideways, though any idea of what is a 'side', a 'front' or a 'back' makes no sense from up here. Circling, tipping and weaving, the movement of the aircraft through the sky seems to mirror the rounded shapes of the undulating landscape below.

Looking straight ahead to the horizon, the sky is a watery colour, and, directly above, it's a darker Prussian blue.

I'm shocked to suddenly notice that we're flying directly over my home, the place where I grew up and where I recently returned to live. It's a hill farm, tucked into a long, thin valley that snakes between two hills. I've never seen it like this before, all at once, and for the very first time I can look at its overall shape, its body. I trace the boundaries of the farm with my finger from inside the glider. I see how the land rises up and wraps around it on three sides, so it looks like it's held in the cupped hand of the hill. Beyond the farm, I can see how it sits within the wider landscape, and I've a feeling of rediscovering my familiar world, but from a much larger perspective.

On the ground, I know this terrain almost better than I know my own body, but up here I find it hard to make

sense of. I have to re-familiarize myself with it, scanning the land in search of the farmhouse, barns and yard, and the shapes of the road and river that cut down through the middle of the valley. It feels odd, like bumping into someone you know well in a completely unexpected context.

We descend a few thousand feet, and I'm able to make out the animal tracks that criss-cross the tops of the hills above the farm and which I've walked countless times. In ten minutes, we swoop over terrain that takes me six hours to hike. I'm smiling – a broad, natural smile – and I lean back on to the grey parachute I'm wearing, to look up into the blue. I feel on the edge of something.

We weave down to 1,000 feet above the ground, fields enlarge, familiar hills loom above us once again and we head back towards the airfield. My hands have rested on my thighs throughout the flight. Bo asked me if I would like to take the controls and have a go at flying, but I said no; thanks, but no.

We land, roll along the grass, stop still and tip on to the left wing. Bo opens the canopy and helps me out. I'm still grinning. The flight was about forty-five minutes, but it seemed much longer. Time has stretched and deepened. Gary, another pilot, comes to meet us on a quad bike to tow the glider back to the launch point. He looks at me and smiles. He knows what a first flight can be and there must be something in my face – I'm burning with a sense of uplift.

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I made the decision to fly an unpowered aircraft at a time when I was sunk under the weight of grief. It was a giant stone in my chest, lying beneath the scar where the tumour was removed. In my mid-thirties, I was exactly one year out of a year of gruelling treatment for breast cancer. I'd lost four stone and my hair was still wiry from the chemotherapy. When I looked in the mirror, I was reminded of a cornered wild creature. I didn't recognize myself. I was still reeling from the shock of the diagnosis and its appalling treatment. In a sense, the ground had already disappeared from beneath me.

The discovery of the lump and the diagnosis was quickly followed by six rounds of chemotherapy over five months, one every three weeks. Every round would leave me bedridden for a week, feeling like a dying animal trying to crawl forward into the opaque half-light at the edge of the living world, before being taken for the next round. The chemo pushed me to the brink of my endurance and far out beyond it. Bald, thin and exhausted, I then underwent invasive surgery and radiotherapy.

During the year of treatment, the rest of my life disintegrated. I separated from my partner, the brightest, kindest and funniest man, but, for reasons beyond our control, we couldn't look after one another. I also left the rented house and the town where I had lived and worked for a decade. Most of my belongings were boxed up and in storage. A voracious reader and scribbler, I had stopped both reading and writing.

In the midst of this crisis, I moved back to the remote

hill farm in the Black Mountains of the Brecon Beacons National Park in Wales, where, from the age of twelve, I had grown up, and where my parents still live. The farm is eighty acres of steep patchwork fields along one side of a horseshoe-shaped valley, with a river running down the middle of it. The old stone farmhouse, with its metre-thick walls and big fireplaces, is at the top of the valley. It's essentially a rocky outcrop of the mountain above, and the wildlife happily inhabits it: swallows nest in the barn, bats roost under the eaves (and in the bathroom, if you leave the window open at night), bumble bees live in the wool fleeces used for insulation in the walls; wagtails, wrens, flycatchers and fiery bobtails nest in holes in the stonework, wasps nest in the roof and solitary bees creep from beneath the tiles. Several years ago, Mum woke one night to find a hedgehog under her bedside table. The front door is wide open most of the year round and the flagstones on the kitchen floor merge seamlessly with the stone front porch and the yard beyond; there's no real boundary between the house interior and the valley outside. To return to the farm after almost ten years of town-living was to be immersed again in the natural world.

My life had unravelled and I had gone back to what felt like a place to begin again. My loving parents took me in and held me throughout my treatment. First, Mum accompanied me to the hairdressers to have my shoulder-length hair cut off in preparation for chemotherapy. She telephoned the hairdresser in advance to explain the situation and sat next to me as the young woman silently cut

the long locks in rough chunks to get it over with quickly. There was no talk of holidays. Both Mum and Dad accompanied me to every chemotherapy session, sitting with hot drinks as the nurse injected litres of bright red liquid into my blood. Each time we left the chemotherapy room, Dad held the door open for Mum and me and thanked the nurse, as though we were leaving a restaurant.

Back at home, Dad managed lambing alone for the first time, leaving Mum free to commit herself utterly to supporting me through my treatment, barely leaving my side throughout the year of hospital appointments. She made endless squash soups, porridge and anything else soft I could eat. She boiled our untreated spring water for me to drink the regulation two litres a day, took my temperature twice a day, keeping an eye out for infections while I had no immune system, and, her greatest achievement, she hid her own pain from me, patiently getting through the long hours in hospital waiting rooms filling in crossword puzzles, as her only child fought to stay alive. After my operation, surfacing from the anaesthetic and afloat on morphine, my immediate thought was that the first person I wanted to see was Mum, so I kept my eyes closed as I was wheeled back to the ward until I heard her voice and knew she was sitting next to me.

At home, when I fell asleep upstairs in my room above the kitchen, I listened to the reassuring voices of Mum and Dad below, muffled through the floorboards and my pillow, and I was sent spinning right back to childhood. The cadences of their voices created a comfortable cave of

sound in which to fall asleep. I was so relieved to be back at home, in a place that was precious to me, and where I hoped I could recover.

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During that first flight, I thought I'd never seen the farm from the perspective of the sky, but later I recall that I have – in a photograph. Throughout my late childhood and adolescence, a photograph, taken from the air, of the farm and the hills surrounding it, was pinned to the noticeboard next to the telephone. It was an old phone, with a yellow spiralling cord, and you had to stand within a few feet of the noticeboard to use it. I spent many hours talking on that phone, often resting my eyes distractedly on that strange image. So, in many ways, this view of my world from above was always just in the corner of my eye. I vaguely knew that Dad had had a few flying lessons locally. He said something about it at the time, but I didn't grasp properly what it was he was talking about and I certainly had no idea he had flown without an engine; I couldn't have imagined how that was possible.

This photograph of the green valley, hills and blue sky, taken at a slight angle 1,000 feet or so above the hilltops, the altitude that soaring buzzards fly, held its position in our lives over many years, slowly bleaching in the light from the window. I don't know what it meant to Dad. A moment lifted out of the sometimes gruelling business of life on the farm, perhaps. Then, a few years ago, it disappeared from the noticeboard. Mum treasures the

photographic archive of our lives and has, over the years, organized all the loose photographs into labelled sub-sections kept in a huge drawer. I think I have no hope of finding the photograph again, but I look through the drawer and, amazed, I find it under a section entitled 'Nature & Oddities'. There's no evidence of the glider in the picture – no wing tip or canopy is in view. Dad must have stuck the camera lens out of the small air vent in the side of the canopy. But, all those years it was pinned to the noticeboard, I half believed, in the way you can hold a daft idea at the back of your mind, that it was taken by a buzzard.

I must have expressed an interest in the photograph because, on my eighteenth birthday, a blue card with a drawing of a glider on the front and the word *Voucher* appeared. I could go to the gliding centre and exchange it for a trip into the sky. I held it in my hand, stared at it and knew for certain that I wouldn't use it.

As a child, I hadn't been afraid of flying, but as I approached adulthood I slowly became more and more fearful. There was always something emotionally raw and heightened about flying for me; perhaps it was some association I made after, 30,000 feet above the Pyrenees in a commercial jet, aged twelve, travelling to Spain on holiday, I discovered the first spots of blood in my knickers while visiting the loo. This shock of redness was so completely at odds with the white plastic washroom – a stark animal secret that must be kept hidden amongst all the technology. Thereafter, my periods, I noticed, would often

come on during a flight. Perhaps it was the air pressure (commercial jets can only pressurize to the equivalent of around 8,000 feet, hence swollen feet and the threat of deep vein thrombosis).

For me, flying always had something akin to the hormonal sensitivity of menstruation, and my fear of flying dug deeper until each trip abroad became an ordeal. My palms would drip with sweat, leaving damp patches on my thighs, as I imagined that crucial bolt in the engine working its way loose. Flying over the Atlantic, especially if it was a night flight, I'd think about the sea beneath us, the freezing choppy waters, and the giant squid and devilfish waiting for us to plummet into the icy depths. If it was turbulent, images of crashing would fly through my mind as fast as the plane was travelling, and I'd imagine a horror show of melodramatic and gruesome scenes: women screaming in their seats, men falling to their knees in prayer in the aisle as we dived into the sea. In the end, I resorted to taking anti-anxiety medication.

But I couldn't bring myself to throw out the faded blue flying voucher. It remained in my underwear drawer in my bedroom on the farm for many years. On visits back home, after I'd left, I'd open the drawer to rifle around for a clean pair of knickers and there the voucher would be.

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Since the end of the treatment, I've been slowly walking myself well. Two hiker friends, Nick and Polly, who know every inch of these hills, have been guiding me through

ever longer, steeper walks. At the beginning of the year of recovery, I could barely walk a mile on the flat; now, we hike all day.

During these walks, our conversations wind and meander, unlocked by our steady pace. On one particular hike, Nick told me about his skydiving experiences back in the late 1970s, and about the strange obsession that overtook him then and led to him leaving his job to work at the parachute club, even sleeping under the parachute packing table sometimes. He said it was exhilarating to throw himself at the ground from 12,500 feet and miss, to indulge a suicidal urge, but then dodge it and survive.

‘Time alters during a jump,’ he told me. ‘It slows down and expands. A few seconds in free fall feels like the equivalent of several minutes on the ground.’ When you reach terminal velocity in free fall, about 120 miles per hour, he recalled, you no longer have any sensation of falling; you feel like you’re being held up by the air, like you’re flying. You can twist and move your body about. But, once you reach 3,000 feet, the ‘ground rush’ begins; the earth hurtles towards you fast and there’s an acute sense of urgency to pull the cord to open the parachute.

Hearing Nick talk about his skydiving brought me back to the faded aerial photograph by the telephone and the unused flying voucher. By then, my relationship with fear and risk had totally altered: cancer had stripped away any delusion of safety on the ground. Suddenly, I wanted to face fear head on – to choose it, move towards it, become intimate with it – and, in this choosing, I hoped I might

find some freedom from it. I knew I had to find some way of getting into the sky; I had a felt sense that shivered through my body. And so, after the hike, I drove with Nick and Polly up to the Black Mountains Gliding Club, just a few miles from the farm, and bought a voucher to fly – one I knew I would use. The following week, I took that first flight.

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The day after my first glider flight, I find myself climbing a steep hill that overlooks the airfield, and my mind is drawn back to the sky. Today, it is full of glory: an indescribable blue with pockets of fluffy cumulus clouds. Beneath them will be spiralling invisible thermals, reaching up through the sun's warmth – staircases in the sky. Walking on this hill makes me feel as though I am *under* the sky, and I realize that I felt at home during yesterday's flight, more comfortable in the unknown than in the known. What am I doing on the ground when I could be up there again? I rush back down the hill, skidding on stones, almost tripping, and head straight to the flying club. My timing is good; I put on an orange parachute, step into the glider and take my seat in the front. I am in the same sky-blue fleece and child's cloth sun-hat as the day before, and I am still in my mud-covered hiking boots; I'll be taking a clod of the earth up into the sky. Bo and I take off, tow up and release. I see the shadow of the glider crawling over the ground as we fly in circles over the hills and up to 3,000 feet.

Bo asks me if I want to fly and, this time, I say, 'Yes, OK,' a little tentatively. He talks me through it. My legs are stretched out in front of me and my feet meet two rudder pedals. I'm to place one foot on each. With my right hand, I take the stick, which is between my knees. Bo explains that the pedals control the rudder at the rear of the glider. Moved forward and back, the stick controls the elevator, also at the rear, which in turn moves the nose up or down, altering the speed. Moved from side to side, the stick controls the ailerons – long, thin flaps that stretch across the trailing edge of each wing. When one aileron is lifted, the opposite one dips. This makes the glider raise one wing and lower the other to 'bank' – to tip, in other words – and allow the glider to turn. Bo tells me to move my hands and feet in unison when I bank. Stick to the left, press left rudder pedal, and vice versa.

I must look out for any other aircraft at all times. I move my head in circles, scanning the sky above, below and around. I hold the stick in place to maintain speed, or 'attitude' as it's called.

'Look far, far away,' says Bo. 'Look to the horizon and maintain your attitude, the angle of the nose against the horizon.'

I'm amazed once again at the shapes of the ground from above. But this time I'm concentrating on the inside of the cockpit and I've less time to take in my surroundings.

Intending to bank to the right, I move the stick in that direction and notice the temptation to push hard with my

right foot on the rudder pedal. The muscle memory in my right leg wants to push us forward with my foot, as I would by pressing down on the accelerator pedal of a car. So Bo decides to show me in visceral detail the profound difference between flying an unpowered aircraft and driving.

He tells me to come off all the controls. I take my feet off the rudder pedals and reluctantly let go of the stick. I clench my thighs. 'Relax,' says Bo, though I don't know how he can tell I'm tense from where he sits in the back. 'Clap your hands,' he says. I clap and then hear him clapping too. He stamps his feet and I stamp mine, muddy hiking boots clomping on the floor of the fuselage. Neither of us, nobody, is in control. We don't suddenly begin to fall out of the sky or veer off in an odd direction. We continue to fly forward at the same speed. The glider can fly itself. My job, Bo explains, isn't so much to control the glider as to correct its position in the sky.

A glider is always descending unless it finds air rising faster than it naturally glides downwards. Beside the rising air, a sort of downdraft occurs, where the air is being sucked under. This is the trick to soaring: finding air that's going up and then riding on it, surfing the sky. The skill is to manoeuvre inside the sky to find the lift – the energy that's already there in abundance, if you can only locate it. The challenge is being able to read the sky, to work out where the lift is and place the glider in it at the right speed to extract the most energy to stay aloft and soar like an eagle. This is what the buzzards I watch soaring

over our valley are doing, I begin to realize: circling in rising air, which means they don't need to flap their wings to stay up.

'The whole sky is your engine,' says Bo.

I look out at the sky, full of bulbous cumulus clouds, and begin to see it differently. Perhaps it's not an empty space, a vaporous, gassy nothingness, but it takes an act of imagination to see it as a mighty force, a powerful engine.

'Go on,' says Bo, 'clap your hands. Clappety-clap.' We both clap and stamp our feet, and I feel as though we're applauding the very heavens.

I take the stick once again, rest my feet back on the rudder pedals and look ahead at the far horizon, where the hazy sky and hills blur together. I've the curious feeling of taking control and letting go at the same time.

Bo flies us in to land. According to the flight log, we were up for one hour and two minutes, but my sense of time was strange again; the flight seemed to go on for much longer.

On stepping out of the glider, I make a decision that clicks crisp and loud in my head. I want to learn to fly. I can sort of afford it. I have some savings and, for a few hundred pounds, I can join the club scheme, whereby I pay for the aerotows, but nothing for glider hire or instruction. I can fly only Monday to Friday, but that suits me; I am a self-employed writer not doing any writing. Bo is the weekday instructor, so most of my lessons will be with him. Everything in me calls out to do this. I have a deep sense that flying might become part of my recovery, a way

for me to escape the grief of my illness and treatment. How to talk about the experience of cancer? I have been needing to find a language, a context, through which my suffering can speak, to make sense of what happened. Suddenly, in the sky, I have found a space for myself, a place to feel uplifted, so perhaps I will find my language in flying.

I fill in the forms and am given a flight logbook. Legally, I must keep a record of every flight I take, no matter how long or short.

As I walk out of the briefing room, later that afternoon, I have a new sense of direction all of a sudden – and it's up.