

Survival

Young Adult Story

by

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To say that Justin knew clearly and precisely exactly what was happening to him would be an exaggeration. Nerves, fear, excitement, tension, all were a mixture of forces making a play with his emotions and distorting all sense of reality.

A minute ago, his heart hammering like the pistons of a runaway train, he'd stood on the edge of the precipice strapped beneath a small multi-coloured dart made of sailcloth and pieces of aluminium tubing. He was aware of Cathy holding down her broken-down straw hat with one hand, the other covering her mouth, and Tom yelling something he did not catch. Suddenly it was as if the world had been whipped away from under him. With a fierce cry he launched himself over the 1000 metre drop.

The delta-wing glider shuddered, reared like a horse spurred. Hot burning air surging up the valley from the Warmbokkeveld hit the rock face forcing it skyward and for one horrible moment threatened to somersault its rider back to earth. Then Justin was through the turbulence with the mountain falling away as he lifted higher and higher. Tom and Cathy waving below.

For months Justin had thought and dreamed of this moment, soaring a mountainous wilderness where no one had done it before. Now it was an actuality, the brittle clarity he had captured so many times was absent. It had happened so quickly. The terrible tense moments before the launch, the agonized faces of his two friends, Tom and Cathy - Cathy especially had caused him nearly to quit; what was he doing here? One wrong body move on the control bar meant suicide. It would be over for him.

Justin, born of flesh and blood sixteen years ago in the Volk's Maternity Hospital, Cape Town, and the Rogallo glider born in a garage work-shop to an eccentric whim of a mad-cap flying enthusiast - another Otto Lilienthal? - in-God-knows-where USA, had nothing in common. The fact that Justin had a fine athletic body, loved a bluesy guitar and Hobbit movies; that he was short sighted and wore reading glasses, was of no interest to this man-kite of pieces of aluminium tubing, wire bracing, and Dracon sailcloth; a deadly killer that neither knew, or worshiped life. It demanded only one thing from Justin's sixteen years; skill, accurate, instant. Was that asking too much? The paucity of connections, slender wires, a meagre harness and control bar and the cocoon-like shell in which his body was suspended were his only life lines to the glider. Together they lived only as long as the other survived.

He was surrounded by a cloud of darting cliff swallows feeding on the swarms of insects carried up by the warm rising air from the fynbos below. Four or five Cape vultures joined the thermal and they all circled together.

"I'm a manbird," Justin shouted. "What do you think of me Mr vulture?" He climbed higher leaving the vultures far below.

The lift was good. The air colder now, rushed past his face. He was dressed in soft-soled canvas *takkies* and no socks, wearing shorts with deep pockets to just above the

knees, with rubber knee pads; a long sleeved buttoned down woollen shirt instead of his usual cotton T-shirt with the words: *Manbird*. On his belt a Leatherman. The multi-tool always went everywhere with him when he was outdoors.

He could see over the top of the Sneeuberg the highest peak in the Cederberg range. What a view! This is what he had dreamed about. Wow! Wait until he told Tom and Cathy. Looking south he could see a smudgy grey sugar-cube on the horizon, Table Mountain and specks of ships at anchor in Table Bay. The *old Mother City* - Wow! more than one hundred and ninety kilometres away. How's that for vulture telescopic vision? To the south west, Saldanha and the Langebaan lagoon; and beyond that, a green sea of darkness all the way to Patagonia. For Justin this was the closest one could ever get to being a bird.

A black mushroom cloud had appeared above him reaching unbelievable heights drawing him in. Too late Justin saw its danger.

On the ground Cathy shielded her eyes against the glare as the sun broke through the great mass of dark cloud.

"Can you see him Tom?" A tight pitch to her voice. Her brown eyes searching for the familiar delta-wing shape she knew to be somewhere up there. Even the vultures were nowhere to be seen.

"You can't go into cloud in a hang glider." Tom shook his head slowly, concerned. "It's suicide. Justin knows that."

"But I can't see him." She was aware of her fingers plucking holes in the straw hat. "If he's not out in ten minutes I'm going for help."

"How're you going to do that" said Tom gruffly. "It'll be dark before you get down."

"I'll run," she said firmly.

Cathy was fifteen; with short blonde hair cut off just below the ears, brown eyes, a lovely smile, and a tight runner's body, a sport she excelled in. Hang gliding wasn't her scene. Far too dangerous. She preferred playing the clarinet, listening to Justin Bieber, and *Of Monsters and Men* on her iPod. Justin and Tom were her friends. She fancied Justin. Very much. If only Justin knew. And now he was in trouble, she was sure.

High above Justin was aware of intense cold and a state of inertia that clawed at his brain. Lack of oxygen?

Onward to the stars Justin Harper, but don't let stardust get in your eyes. What would Cathy think of you now? Walking with angels. Would she be jealous?

For a moment a picture of a childhood incident on his Oupa's farm, Rietfontein, accompanied Justin's thoughts. He remembered *Fleur*, Oupa's new horse and how he had pleaded to ride it. At last permission was given with strict promises that Justin, just ten years old at the time, was to take the animal along gently. Once out of Oupa's sight he was unable to restrain his enthusiasm and with a joyous whoop, dug his heels in the horse's side. *Fleur* reared up. The disobedient boy was thrown from the saddle and only woke up in hospital with a fractured skull three days later.

Justin felt that was happening to him again, his recklessness - not listening to others. Cathy especially. This time it's for real. It was going to be much, much worse. He had to get out. Terror gripped him, his screams swirled around clawing, suffocating - nothingness! He passed out.

How long he plunged through the cloud's darkness he did not know. He had come through dangers in his glider beyond the reach of bird or beast; or of anything else anyone would ever read in a *Popular Mechanics* mag, or *Soaring With Eagles*.

Suddenly bright sunlight. He was flying again. Where was he? A startled Klipspringer ran along a rock ledge as he swept past. That low? A wall of rock ahead. The hang glider stalled, turned into the cliff and proceeded to hit, tail sliding backwards; turn in an attempt to fly.

"WHOOAAA! What's happening? Noo. Nooooo!" WHAM! The glider hit the rock face again, and again. WHAM! WHAM!

A wing folded over like a Cocker Spaniel ear and he was spiralling down, bouncing off ledges taking an avalanche of rocks and dirt with him. His shrieks echoing all the way to the rocky floor below.

Thrown from his cocoon, still in shock, his movements slow and clumsy like that of a drunken man, Justin attempted to climb to his feet. What's wrong with his legs? Why couldn't he stand? He lay on his back. Something in his back hurt badly. Blood dripped from deep cuts to his arms and face. His shorts and shirt torn ragged were covered in blood. He padded his body warily. He had lost his watch, knee pads, *takkies*. The Argus Tour cycling helmet he wore when flying. He realized he wouldn't be able to walk far without *takkies*. He must try and get up. His Leatherman was pushing into into his hip. It was his Leatherman, wasn't it and not a bone? He was beginning to realize the enormity of what had happened - what was still happening - and with that realization came the chilling fear; this was only a beginning; that he was going to die.

Take stock of the situation, Justin. Take stock.

So he couldn't stand-up. Number one! Lying on his back, rolling his eyes sideways and up, he saw he was surrounded on three sides by mountains, one side open to a limitless horizon where nothing moved. He realized he was at the bottom of an amphitheatre. The vegetation was different - sparse - patchy little grey *bossies*. He must have crossed the mountains? Where was he? Would anyone searching for him know where to look? The temperature was close to forty degrees Celsius, but his skin was clammy and he was shivering.

A girdled lizard on a sun-split rock lay watching, nearby a dazzling *vygie* smiled back. Surreal situation. Sun dancing and flicking. Two *toktokkies* locked in battle with each other like armoured gladiators. He rolled his head and vomited blood.

Take stock of the situation, Justin. This is serious-serious.

Broken bones?

1. Broken collar bone? *Hmmm!*
2. Broken ribs? *Whole body's hurting.*
3. Broken jaw bone? *Can still talk. But mouth's full of blood. Lost some teeth?*
4. Skull? *Can think? Talk? Talking to myself!*
5. Spine? *Don't want to think about it.*

Blood ran from a wound in his thigh where the shattered bone poked through. If he didn't stop the haemorrhaging he would soon bleed to death. That was the first thing.

Justin pushed torn fingers under his hips, relieved when he found his Leatherman on his belt and that it wasn't his femur coming out his bum. He could start by cutting up his tattered shirt for bandages. He removed his belt for a tourniquet. It took some time to get the belt around the thigh and by the time it was tightly fastened he was shaking and faint from exhaustion. The bleeding stopped.

In the distance, above the craggy peaks, a dozen tiny dots appeared and began to circle. Round and round. Lower. Lower. Cape vultures riding the thermals as they scanned the scene below with their telescopic eyes ever watchful for prey in distress. Justin was prey. Weak from his injuries and loss of blood he prayed for night to come quickly. The vultures would stay away until morning giving him a little more time.

Cathy visited him in the night, her lovely face up close to his. He felt her tongue wet on his cheek, snuffling, tracing delicate patterns over his nose, ears; his skin, aware of the sweetness of her breath that quickly turned fetid as she took a bite. Justin screamed out loud just in time to see the shadowy form with triangular head disappearing in the moonlight. Jackal!

What other scavengers were out there? Brown Hyena? Crows that peck the eyes out of sheep. Writhing, unable to assuage his pain, Justin wept. He lost consciousness.

How long he was unconscious he did not know. The veld was flooded with early morning light. He'd thought he'd heard the engine of a prop plane passing overhead, but he must have been dreaming and that is what had woken him. He remembered his unwelcome night-time visitor. If it was any consolation, he thought, the bite marks on his calf must be a positive sign? He still had some feeling down there. He had felt the bite.

A vulture sat on a rock. It glided down to settle on the ground nearby tucking its scrawny neck and head down on its shoulders, waiting. When Justin next looked there were six or seven vultures sitting in a circle!

He had to get a signal out to his searchers. But how? This was a wild wilderness area. Rugged mountains, and a hostile Tankwa Karoo. The nearest town over the *Bloukrans* was Calvinia. He'd been to the dorp once in the *bakkie* with *Oupa* on a tyre-shredding gravel road to buy goats; a depressing

place, he'd thought. Calvinia? After John Calvin and his wacky ideas on pre-destination! How far must he crawl on his elbows with a broken back to be accepted as one of the *Chosen Elect*? What a laugh when he was about to become a breakfast for some ugly bird?

As if in a gesture of embrace a vulture spread its wings, stretched out its head and wicked beak and skipped forward.

"Fuck off," he croaked. Weakly he waved the Leatherman's puny 7cm blade at the evil bird. The knife slipped from his fingers. *Now I'm finished*, he groaned as his fingers raked the sand.

What's this? His scrabbling fingers had closed on something hard. His buckled and smashed spectacle case! One of the lenses had sprung from the frame. For the first time he felt a mad rush of hope. *Cathy I love you. I love you for insisting I take my glasses with me. I'll take you to the next Bieber concert - yes, yes, I will, although he's not my favourite performer.*

Whimpering like a wounded animal, dragging himself to-and-fro on his elbows, he set about making a fire. It was hard work under the burning sun and even the vultures kept their distance. Using the lens he coached a thin wisp of smoke from the *Kankerbos* tinder, blowing gently until the tinder became flame. Thick smoke curled into the sky. The flames and smoke would keep him safe until the fire died down and went out. He lay back exhausted too tired to think about it and shut his eyes.

A mad storm of noise, wind and swirling dust brought him back to consciousness. Dust hung heavy in the sky blotting out the sun. Two paramedics jumped out before the landing skids of the hovering Air Force helicopter touched ground. Already sprinting ahead was Cathy crying his name.

Justin weakly lifted a hand.

End

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