

Learning To Fly - By Gavin Burgess

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Parental Note:

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Learning to Fly

Ernest was not a popular boy. He was the sort of boy who was always chosen last for any sports team, and then kept on the sidelines unless there was no other choice but to let him play, and no-one ever bothered to teach him the rules of the game so he'd never be quite sure what he was meant to do which made him slow and hesitant in the game and just made the whole thing worse. Ernest was the boy who, when everyone was sitting in a great circle to eat their lunch, would be sitting slightly further back, with those sitting near him having turned their backs, and when he tried to join in their conversation they just talked over him as if he wasn't even there. Also he farted a lot and he couldn't help this but he was just a gassy child and that was all there was to it, but he hated it when the kids called out to him 'farty pants, farty pants' on the way home after school when there were no teachers to know what they did.

One day, for his homework, Ernest had written a short story as part of a class project. His English teacher, that is to say the teacher who taught English and not just a teacher who happened to be from England, had praised him for it and made him read it to the whole school at assembly. Afterwards the other kids had surrounded him, taunting him and telling him how stupid his story was. He'd cried then and torn the story up into little pieces until it ceased to exist, scraps of confetti drifting away in the wind, and no-one would ever read it again, and when the teacher asked him to hand it back to her so that she could give him his final mark he told her no, it was a dumb story and anyway, he'd thrown it away and so she couldn't have it and would have to give him zero and it didn't matter because he didn't care. And then he cried a little

more from the hurt of what the other kids had said and then, angry with himself for the crying, he turned his back and ran away.

There was something different about Ernest though, something the other kids could never understand, and that most of them would never experience. Ernest had a dream, a lifelong ambition. Even more than that Ernest felt driven, as if all he'd been created for was one thing, and that one thing was to fly. Not flying in an airplane, you understand, or in a hang-glider, or even like a bird, all flapping and struggling, but to simply rise from the ground and soar, swoop, rise or descend at will. At night he dreamed of flying, of rising and soaring over the heads of the other kids, watching them gawk in amazement, or run in fear. Sometimes, in his dream, he went too high and this made him frightened. It wasn't the being up high so much as the thought of losing control and coming down too fast. In his dream Ernest still hadn't quite mastered the art of controlling how high he went, or of remaining stationary, or of gentle descent. In his dream the best he could do for descent was a sort of swooping fall, levelling off as he approached the ground and ending in a somewhat ungraceful running landing with far too much waving of arms and legs and flailing about. He knew he needed a lot more practice on the landing and was working toward the day when he could simply descend, floating with arms at his sides and legs quite still, and reach the ground at a stop, sort of like a film of a rocket launching being played backwards. That would be the day indeed!

One night Ernest had sat up with his Dad and watched a documentary on television about airships and the Hindenburg disaster. He'd seen the beauty

and grace of the giant Von Hindenburg Zeppelin arriving in America, and the ropes being thrown to tether it to the ground like a giant floating cigar on the end of a fishing line and gasped in horror at the old black and white film showing the flames suddenly leaping out and running around the surface of the zeppelin, and the smoke billowing out, and the giant cigar leaping and bucking from the heat, and the mooring ropes not quite secure, and the men hanging on to the ropes as they rose and dropping off one by one as they got too high and one man, both hero and fool, holding on much too long, and as the flames engulfed the cabin of the zeppelin and all hope was lost this poor unfortunate last hero letting go and falling, falling, falling, only falling left for him until the end of his life when he kissed the ground with the whole of himself.

But to fly, to fly and not to die in a fireball in the sky, this would be so wonderful and one day Ernest knew he'd find the way. It was his destiny and his plan.

At school Ernest went to science classes. He loved science. He loved the ideas of physics and the knowing things of biology and the chance to make explosions in chemistry when the teacher wasn't paying attention and he didn't mind at all the trouble he got in for this. He was used to people hating him at school so what difference did it make if the teacher hated him too. This proved to be a very sensible attitude as the teacher really did hate him because of the day that Ernest's dad, who was also a teacher, had caught him doing something illegal or immoral, or maybe just illegal for teachers, and the teacher liked to get his revenge in slow steady remorseless steps by

making Ernest feel small or foolish whenever he could. How, then, could Ernest make it worse by letting off a few little explosions, which anyway were a whole lot of fun, and, in their own way, were Ernest's counter revenge against the teachers revenge. Because of science class, or maybe just because of the teacher, Ernest had learnt very early a lesson that most of us only learn much too late for it to be any use to us and this lesson was that bad teachers have weak minds. They can punish you all they like, or make your life difficult sometimes, but if you remember how weak they really are they have no power to do you any real harm.

Another thing Ernest learnt in science class was that there was a gas called methane and that some gasses were lighter than air. That is to say, he reasoned, that if you had air and methane in a box the air would go to the bottom and the methane would go to the top. Something else that Ernest also learnt, and he wasn't sure if he'd learnt this at school or from somewhere else completely, was that methane was pretty much the main ingredient of fart and Ernest, as we have already said, was well acquainted with fart. Yes sir! Very well acquainted indeed! So this gave Ernest the beginnings of a little plan, not the sort of plan that comes upon you suddenly and makes you jump up like the man who leapt from his bath and ran through the town butt naked shouting 'Eureka Eureka' which means 'I've got it' in crazy running naked through the town type people talk, but more of the type of plan that creeps up on you in slow easy stages like the cat who sneaks onto your lap while you are watching television and suddenly you find you are patting the cat but you don't know when the cat arrived or when you began to pat.

Ernest's plan was simple, once he had it, and it was simply this. If methane was, as he assumed, lighter than air then it must help hold him up, or to put it another way, every time Ernest farted he must lose a little bit of the lightness of the methane in the fart and therefore become, himself, slightly heavier. So, he thought to himself, if he could simply contain his fart the methane would eventually be enough to overcome the air around him and he would begin to float. He thought carefully about this because everyone knew you could light fart and one boy at school had told how his older brother had lit one without any trousers on and the flame had burnt him on his buttocks and in other places and he'd had to go to the doctor for creams and to be laughed at by the nurses while they all took turns peering at his butt even though they had no need to. As a consequence of this story Ernest thought, if fart was so flammable, then he ran the quite serious risk of becoming a human version of the Hindenburg zeppelin in full flame and this was something he really wanted to avoid. In the end Ernest decided that he would have to enforce a ten metre no smoking zone all around himself once he was fully gassed up. He also decided that he would reveal his scientific discovery as his presentation at the school science fair in three weeks. This would be better than light bulbs running off lemons and cardboard cut-out models of hydro electric dams and even better than the experiment he'd presented last year when he'd strapped his mother to a chair with headphones on her head and measured the amount she sweated when he played her Mozart tape through the headphones and compared it to the amount she sweated when he played Marilyn Manson. Ernest began asking his mother for extra helpings of fried onions and potato and beans and began practicing the clenching exercises that would enable

him to contain the huge pressure of the methane he was manufacturing within his own insides. He had twenty days to go.

Well, did it work? No, of course it didn't, but many years later, when Ernest had become a successful scientist and made much more money and shaken the hands of many important people and was much more famous than any of the boys who teased him at school (because boys who tease other boys at school almost always end up as petrol station attendants or supermarket boys or digging holes for the council, which is why, maybe, they need to spend so much time pretending to be better than everyone else at school in the first place), Ernest remembered his dreams of flying and invented the anti-gravity suit which works on the scientific theory that objects always attract nearby objects, or, as the scientists like to say, matter attracts matter, which is the whole theory behind how gravity works with the earth being so big that it can attract all of us and hold us on the ground. So, by making it out of negative matter, Ernest created a suit which repelled itself from other things, and was one day able to put on his new suit and simply float away. I'd like to tell you more about what he saw from way up there in his suit, or where he went or what he did next but you see, although there were some rumours going around in Laos, and later on in Angola, the truth is, he just disappeared into the distance and what happened after that, no-one really knows.