

Balloon

...more stories

I told Mom the weather balloon would come in handy someday. And the gas grille from our next door neighbor's trash was a crucial find. But just as vital was my 13 year old genius in stealing a tank of helium gas from the Indium company on Lincoln Avenue. I'm sure the workers still don't know it's gone from the back dock. I'll return it, with only a little gas missing.

So here I am, ascending above the ground, listening to the sound of chirping birds. As the contraption rises, I watch the trees slide down and away to reveal this perfect view of God's Creation. Up, up and away! The damned thing really lifted off the ground. There's George down on the grass, waving. We built the machine in the woods and dragged it out on the fairway. It would lift only one of us, we figured. So it's me up here above the Valley View Golf Course on this maiden flight.

I should open the cork and let some gas out and go back down now. I really hate to. It's so nice up here, but it is breezy. Big white puffy clouds are pushing their way across the deep blue sky. I'm moving with them toward the city and the river. The fairway drops away below me, running downhill as I head out over the valley. Back there, George is still waving, but frantically now.

This is fun, but I'm too high for comfort and the edge of the golf course is coming up. If I

don't land now, I'll soon be over the rooftops of Cornhill, a crowded section of the city I'd be crazy to land in.

I let off a small burp of helium through the gas jet. Whoa! I drop like a stone, and wind whistles through the contraption between my legs. I'm going to crash! I don't know how far I plunge before leveling off, but far enough to scare the crap out of me. I'm down lower, now between the trees.

Thankfully, nothing is dead ahead, but I'm still losing height. As I cross over the road beside the golf course, I look up and realize I will hit the top of a house that's rapidly moving toward me.

I come in sliding across the roof of a home on the corner of Pleasant and St. Agnes Ave. My feet touch down and I try to skid to a stop, but I'm moving too fast. I'm trying desperately to go left, so I can grab on to the chimney. It's out of reach. My toes drag across the shingles, and then I slip off the other end of the roof, back into the air. The streets and houses drop farther down the hill, and I'm still airborne.

I'm in one piece, heart pounding in my ears, but I'm not on the ground yet, and I'm too scared to try landing again.

I look over to the other side of the valley. It seems so far. But if I make it over the city and past the river and the swamp, the terrain will rise up again. Over there it's more rural, so a nice soft field might come up to meet me when I arrive. Or maybe I will just give it up and pull the cork over the swamp and hope to land in shallow water. We'll see.

I pass over hundreds of rooftops on Cornhill and drift along James St., where a woman waiting for the bus near Zalatan's Grocery Store looks up and screams. I wave, nonchalantly, and force a devil-may-care smile for the poor woman. And myself.

Wait a minute! I think I'm losing altitude again. If I can get past Rutger Street, the terrain will once more drop down toward the

New York Central railroad tracks and the swamp, giving me a little more height above the ground.

As I sail toward the downtown retail and industrial center of the city, I feel the heat rise up to meet me and the winds begin to come from different directions, first one way and then another. Well away from the Gold Dome Bank a minute ago, it's now coming my way. It's hard to tell whether I'm slightly above or below the huge dome.

I'm below it, but the wind changes and I'm pushed east, headed now for the twin spires of St. John's Church. They're quite tall and very definitely in my way. Next door to the church sits the high school, where I'll begin the 9th grade this fall. If I live.

By now I've promised the Blessed Mother more rosaries than I could ever say in a lifetime. If I survive this, I'll be on my knees until I'm 80. I might as well plan to become a priest. Forget all those things I planned to do with girls when I found one who'd let me.

There's a persistent auto horn blaring below me. After I miss the steeples of St. John's church by a half city block, I'm able to peer down and it's George in his family's car, driven by his mother. I didn't think she knew how to drive. She doesn't seem to be managing it very well.

I'm moving north again, and soon I leave behind the railroad tracks and the New York State Thruway. I thought about dropping into the swamp, but chickened out as I passed over it. There were more trees down there than I had anticipated. I guess I'm waiting for a safer spot to come up and hug me.

The land is rising slightly, and I hear a hiss from above. I'm losing altitude quickly. Blown sideways along Riverside Drive for a short distance, I'm then pushed north up a side street. I'm so low now I can hear kids screaming. A girl my age looks up and waves. She seems completely unfazed by a

boy flying past her house sitting on a gas grill under a weather balloon.

The land begins to rise steeply and a field of corn rushes up at me. Just as I scrape into the ground, mowing down a thousand cornstalks, I spot my cousin's house close by on Trenton Road. The machine bounces back up and I flip off the cooker, landing in the corn. Without my weight, the homemade airship lifts and continues to soar. I'll discover where it lands when I read tomorrow's newspaper.

My cousin is not at home, but my aunt welcomes me at the back door.

"Did you walk all the way from home?" she asks, incredulously..

"No, I flew."

"Uh huh. Well, how will you get back?"

"I think a friend and his Mom might be coming to pick me up," I say.

"Well, come in and have a cookie while you wait for them. Do you hear sirens?"

"Yeah, I saw a flying saucer crash out back."

"Haha, you've got more stories!"

In the local newspaper the next day:

The Utica Observer Dispatch

CONTRAPTION NOT FROM SPACE!

**Launched By Persons
Unknown, says Sheriff**

***"Not from Mars," say firemen,
"maybe from Oriskany."***

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dedicated to my Aunt Toot, who believed
everything I ever told her. So she said.*

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