

# Balloon

*...more stories*

I told Mom the weather balloon I bought at the surplus store 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 the tank of helium we stole from the welding company on Lincoln Avenue. I'm sure the workers still haven't missed it from where it sat on the back dock. George and I will return it, with only a little gas missing.

I ascend above the ground, like an angel rising to fly off on a mission. The leaves rustle and the birds chip and somehow these familiar sounds are different up here. As the contraption rises, I watch the trees slide down and away to reveal this perfect view of God's creation and the Valley View Golf Course. Up, up and away! The damned thing really lifted off, ever so gently. There's George down on the grass, waving. We built our airship in the woods and dragged it out on the fairway. It would carry only one of us, we figured. We flipped a coin. I'm the winner, up here on my maiden flight.

I should open the cock to let some gas out and go back down now. But I really hate to. This was supposed to be only a short test, but being aloft is so wonderful, even if it is quite breezy. Big white puffy clouds push their way across the huge 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 the city's crowded neighborhoods. It would be dangerous to drop down among them.

I let off a small burp of helium through the gas jet. Whoa! I drop like a stone, and wind whistles through the contraption I sit astride, my legs wrapped tightly around it. 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 much lower now, with trees and branches on either side of me. Thankfully, nothing is

dead ahead, and I'm maintaining altitude. But as I glide over the road at the edge of the golf course, I look ahead and realize I will hit the eaves of a house that is rapidly approaching.

I come in sliding across the roof, my feet touching down and dragging across the shingles. I try to skid to a stop, but I'm moving too fast. Lunging desperately to the left, I grab for the chimney. It's out of reach, and then I'm slipping off the far end of the roof, back into the air. I see the homes below fall away as the street runs downhill and my height above the ground increases.

My feet are treading air, as if they were hoping to find purchase on anything solid, like a drowning man. I feel nauseated, but I'm in one piece, heart pounding in my ears. I don't know how to get this thing on the ground, and I'm too scared to try landing again. It now strikes me this was a dumb thing to do.

I look beyond the city and past the river to the soft green fields in the distance. They seem so far! But if I can make it over there, the other side of the valley will naturally rise up to my altitude to gently meet me. A nice soft hay field would be a welcome landing spot. I could drop in on my cousin who lives in that area. If I master the art of flying in the next ten minutes, I might swoop down and land majestically in my aunt and uncle's back yard. Or I could crash into their swimming pool. Or I could just give it up when I reach the river. Pull the cork and hope to land in shallow water. I don't swim very well, so four feet of water would be just about right.

Beneath me, hundreds of rooftops drift under my toes in the afternoon silence, broken only by an occasional car horn or a bus roaring up the hill. Along James St., a woman waiting for the bus near Zalatan's Grocery Store looks up at me and screams. I wave nonchalantly and force a devil-may-care smile. No need for her to worry, I've been reading up on air travel since I was a kid.

Damn! I think I'm losing altitude again, but I'm going too fast to try for a landing. If I can get past Rutger Street, the terrain will drop down rapidly toward the railroad tracks, making a terrific glide path right into the river.

I sail toward the downtown center of the city and feel the heat rise up to meet me. The winds begin to come from a new direction, then another, as the taller buildings cause a confusion of breezes. A moment ago, I was well away from the large gold painted dome atop the city's major bank, but now it's coming my way. It's hard to tell whether I'm slightly above or below the flag on its pinnacle.

I'm certainly relieved when a zephyr whisks me upward and off in another direction, because landing on a dome and not sliding off could be quite a challenge. Now I'm pushed east toward the twin spires of St. John's Church. They're quite tall and definitely in my way. Next to the church sits the high school, where I'll begin the 9<sup>th</sup> grade this fall. If I live.

I'm a really good Catholic at times like this. In need of help from above, I begin to promise more rosaries than I could ever say in a lifetime. If I survive, I'll be on my knees until I'm 80. I might as well plan to become a monk and forget all those things I planned to do with girls when I found one who would let me.

A persistent auto horn blares below me, but I keep my attention on the two steeples until I'm elated to find myself pushed between them unscathed. Then, I peer down at the scene below. It's George in his family's old Buick, driven by his mother. I didn't think she knew how to drive. She doesn't seem to be managing very well, and people are running in different directions as she slowly steers the car down the street, sticking her head out the window and peering up at me, occasionally driving up over the curb. I feel bad she is so worried, worse to think what will happen if she catches up to me.

I'm moving north again, and soon I cross over the railroad tracks and the New York State Thruway. I had thought about dropping into the river, but chickened out as I passed over it. It looked deeper than I expected. I'll wait for the grassy hill near my cousin's house. I suppose all of this might be worth the trip, since they just bought the first color TV in their neighborhood. But I should have taken the bus.

The land begins to rise slightly, and now I hear a hiss from above. Helium is escaping from the balloon and I'm losing altitude fast. I'll soon be out of gas and really out of luck. The winds are getting stronger and I can see dark clouds on the eastern horizon. I'm blown west along Riverside Drive for a short distance, then pushed up a side street. I'm so low now I can hear kids yelling. A girl my age looks up and waves. She seems completely unfazed by a boy flying over her house as he sits beneath a weather balloon, hugging an outdoor grill between his legs. A silly thought occurs and I loudly ask if she wants her burger rare.

A field of corn appears below, and I spot my cousin's house close by on Trenton Road. The gas is running out and the terrain is now coming up fast. The homemade airship scrapes into the ground and with a fluttering sound mows down a thousand cornstalks. The craft hits a bump and bounces high, then suddenly drops, impacting the earth with a great thud. The crash flips

me off the cooker like a flapjack and I land in the corn. Without my weight, the magnificent flying machine lifts and soars onward. I jump to my feet and run away, while the backyard grill continues on without me. I'll discover where it comes to rest 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," she says doubtfully. "Well, how will you get back?"

"I think a friend and his Mom are coming to pick me up," I say. "But we don't have to let them in."

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

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

"Haha," she says, "you've got more stories!"

In the local newspaper the next day:

## The Utica Observer Dispatch

### CONTRAPTION NOT FROM SPACE!

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**Launched By Persons  
Unknown, says Sheriff**

-----  
*Astonished Homeowner  
Asleep in Hammock*

*Will Keep Grill*

-----  
*"Not from Mars," say firemen,  
"maybe from K-Mart."*

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

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