

Balloon

...out of gas

I told Mom the weather balloon I bought at the surplus store would come in handy someday. And the gas grill from our next door neighbor's trash was a crucial find. But just as vital was the tank of helium I 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. We are two resourceful thirteen year olds. Actually, I will be fourteen years old this November 18, 1957.

I am ascending above the ground, like an angel flying off on a training mission. The leaves rustle and the birds chirp and somehow these familiar sounds have a heavenly ring up here. We built our airship in the woods and dragged it out on the grass. Figuring it would carry only one of us, we flipped a coin. I won, and climbed astride for my maiden flight. Up, up and away! As I rise, peering out from the assembled parts, I watch the trees slide down and away to reveal this perfect view of God's creation and the Valley View Golf Course. The damned contraption really lifted off, ever so gently. There's George down on the fairway, waving.

I should let off some gas and go back down. I really hate to. This was supposed to be a short test flight, 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 traveling with them toward the city and the river. The clubhouse gets smaller and the fairway drops away as I head out over the valley. Back there, George is still waving, but frantically now.

This is fun, but I'm too high 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 and try for a landing.

For the hundredth time, I check the tightness of the old medical tubing that runs down from the balloon and snakes into the cooker between my legs. I lean to the right and reach down under my hip and let off a burp of helium by turning the dial from Simmer to Roast. Whoa! I drop like a stone, and the wind whistles through the old fishing net that suspends me from the ancient U.S. Government weather balloon. 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. Much lower now, there are trees on one side of me and power lines on the other. Thankfully, nothing is in my path and I'm maintaining altitude. But as I glide past the edge of the golf course, I look ahead and realize I will hit the top of a rapidly approaching house.

I come sliding in across the roof, my feet touching down and dragging along 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're hoping to find purchase on anything solid, like a drowning man in water over his head. 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. It's moving faster than I ever imagined, and now I'm too scared to land. This is turning into a pretty dumb stunt! I could be home reading my older brother's copy of Playboy.

I look beyond the city and past the river to the gentle green hills in the distance. They seem so far! But if I make it over there, the other side of the valley will naturally rise up to my altitude and rescue me in a safe embrace. A field of soft hay would be a welcome landing spot. That would be the perfect ending to my voyage. I could drop in on my cousins who live in that area. If I master the art of flying in the next ten minutes, I might swoop down and land majestically in their back yard, instead of crashing into a neighbor's swimming pool. Or I could just give up sooner, when I reach the river. Pull the cork and hope to land in shallow water. I don't swim very well, so three feet would be just about the right depth.

However, I have an entire city to cross before I land anywhere. 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 aeronautics since I was twelve.

Damn! I think I'm losing altitude again, but I'm still going too fast and there's nowhere to land. If I can get past South Street, the terrain will drop down rapidly toward the river, a terrific glide path right into the water.

I sail toward the downtown center of the city and feel the heat rise up to meet me. The wind comes from a new direction, then another, as the tall 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 gust pushes me upward and away in another direction, because crashing on a dome and not sliding off could be quite a challenge. Now I'm nudged 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 9th grade this fall, if I live.

I'm a really good Catholic at times like this. I'm promising 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 wanted to do with girls when I found one who would let me.

A persistent 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 when she catches up to me.

I'm moving north again, and soon I cross over the river and the New York State Thruway. I had thought about dropping into the water, but chickened out when 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 if watching Gunsmoke in color was the goal, I probably should have taken the bus.

The land begins to rise slightly, and now I hear a hiss from the tubing. 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 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 to me and I loudly inquire if she wants her burger well done.

A ripping sound tells me the fishing net has begun to part and the miniature airship starts a roll to the right. There's a field of corn below, and I spot my cousin's house close by on Trenton Road. The gas is running out and the ground is now coming up fast. The homemade dirigible George and I spent so much time building ... perhaps two hours ... scrapes into the ground and with a fluttering noise mows down a thousand cornstalks. The craft hits a bump and bounces high, then suddenly drops, slamming the earth with a great thud. My teeth slam shut so hard my entire jaw will hurt for days and I'm flipped off the cooker like a flapjack, landing on my back in the corn. Without my weight, the magnificent flying machine lifts up, struggles for air and soars onward. I jump to my feet and run away, but the backyard grill seems unwilling to call it quits. I'll discover its final resting place 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 without a flicker of doubt. "Well, how will you get back?"

"I think a friend and his Mom are coming to pick me up," I say. "But there's no need to let them in."

"You're green all down your back," she says with some concern in her voice.

"Rough landing," I say. "I'm new at this."

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

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

"Ha ha," she laughs, "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

*Astonished Homeowner
was asleep in hammock*

He Will Keep Grill

*"Not from Mars," say local
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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