

Hot Air Rises



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WE LIFTED OFF at daybreak and drifted away on the first breath of morning. The light from the rising sun spilled over the horizon, chasing away the darkness and scattering shades of crimson, purple, and gold across the fields. Alabama lay beneath us and above us, the sky.

The air was still cool—the ideal condition for a balloon ride. Gerard, our splendid balloonist, fired the burner and we rose up to an altitude of three hundred feet. Standing in the sturdy wicker basket, we could see a patchwork of fields and country lanes spreading out for miles in all directions. Once we reached the desired altitude, Gerard cut off the burner and with it the roar of the propane jet that filled the balloon with hot air, and we were suddenly floating in total silence. I had never experienced soundless flight before, and imagined I was finally embarked on the magic carpet ride I had longed to take ever since I was young enough to read about them.

People were waking up in the houses below us and coming outside to fetch the newspaper, or drink their coffee, or walk the dog. Some didn't even notice us as we coasted past, several hundred feet above their heads, peering down on them from our airborne perch. But some looked up, and their reactions ranged from startled jumps (not a good idea when holding a cup of coffee!) to curious stares and waves. We waved back and drifted on.

The ground crew followed us as best they could in their truck, getting directions from Gerard over the radio and zigzagging down roads and lanes and bumpy trails. Their job was to be as close as possible to wherever the balloon eventually landed so that they might collect us, and the balloon, and drive us home. Their ride was far more erratic than ours, and their views were nowhere near as dramatic.

One of the few facts I seem to have retained from my high-school science classes is that hot air rises. It was thus relatively easy for me to grasp the idea that a balloon goes up when the propane burner heats the air inside it, and comes down when the balloonist opens the valve at the top of the light-bulb-shaped, nylon envelope. Other than those two functions, it is carried along horizontally on the wind. The balloonist's challenge is to find the air current that will take him to his destination, so he goes up and down, looking for breezes at different altitudes until he finds one going in the right direction. When we were high up, we had magnificent views and moved as gracefully and serenely as a summer cloud. At lower altitudes it felt as though we were moving much more quickly, scudding along just a few feet above the tree tops.

The roar of the burner and the sight of the balloon scared every horse we flew over. Whether standing alone or in groups, they all immediately wheeled around in a panic and galloped off at top speed, trying to get away from the strange apparition. Cows, on the other hand, were utterly fascinated and followed us as far as they could, clustering along fence lines and gazing longingly at us as we left them behind. Gerard said this always happened, all over the world. We speculated that cows might feel a certain reverence towards the balloon, thinking they were in the presence of the Great Udder in the sky.

After about an hour or so aloft, Gerard brought us down expertly in a large field. The basket landed with a gentle bump, and we climbed out onto the grass. While we waited for the ground crew to arrive, Gerard opened a bottle of ice-cold champagne he'd brought along. He explained that in the early days of ballooning, in France more than a hundred years ago, farmers were not always pleased to see their fields invaded by strange flying contraptions that dropped out of the sky and threatened their crops. Some took their trusty shotguns and did some threatening of their own. As a precaution, balloonists took to carrying champagne with them, which they were quick to produce as a peace offering whenever they encountered a trigger-happy landowner after putting down in his field. A tradition was thus born, and today's balloonists still pack a bottle of bubbly when they take to the skies. It is seldom used for its original purpose, however, and instead is offered to mildly euphoric passengers like us, to delay ever so slightly their return to the planet Earth. ★