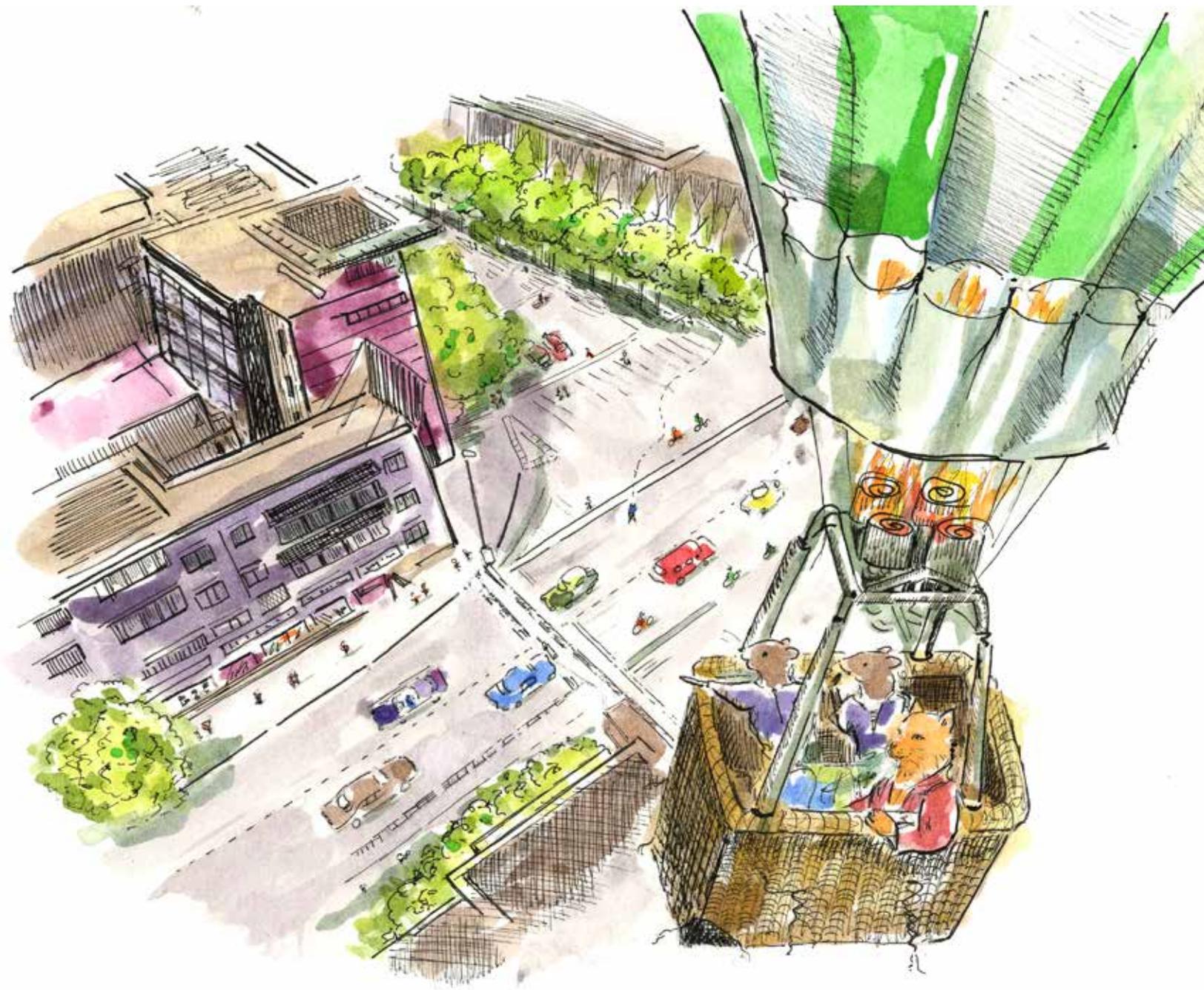


# Ben and the Colonel



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Written and Illustrated  
by Caroline Stellings



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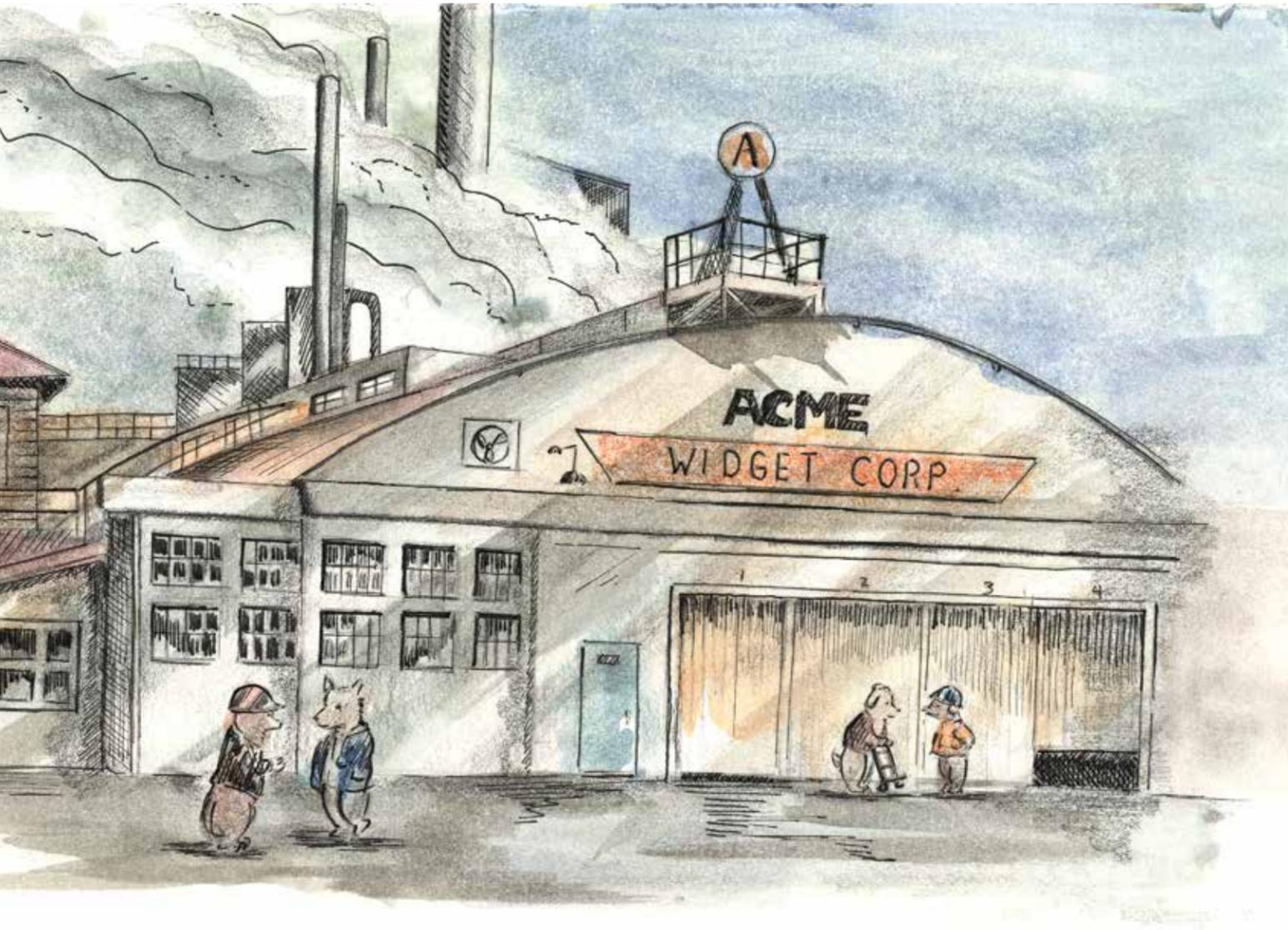
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For my wonderful friend Carol Szuminsky.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE DREARY CITY



It was a Wednesday just like any other Wednesday when Ben packed up his things to leave. He didn't have much to bring with him, only a loaf of bread, a few cans of beans, a cup for catching rainwater, a hat, a couple of T-shirts, and his radio. The pot was old and rusted, the hat was one he'd found, and the radio played only one station. He had quit his job at the factory but had ten dollars left, which was just enough to buy a ticket out of town.

Ben was sick of life in the city. He was sick of making widgets every day. He was sick of the traffic, the noise, the pollution, and the dirty snow in winter. He was sick of the heat in summer. He was tired of walking down the same street, day after day, seeing the same faces stream past him, the faces of those who were caught in the same rut as he was. Nobody cared about nobody in the city. Nobody cared about Ben, and Ben cared about nobody. So he decided it was time to leave.

He figured the quickest way out of the city was by train. Buses were too slow, and taxi cabs were too expensive. He couldn't afford first class, but ten dollars would be enough to travel by coach. There'd be no turning back once he was on a moving train. No second thoughts.

So with his knapsack on his back and resolve in his heart, Ben set out for the rail yard. He hadn't bought his ticket in advance but figured he could pay the conductor once he boarded the next train out. Then when he got to somewhere other than the dreary city, he would find another job. The little bit of food he had left would have to suffice until he got to a place where he could find some work. Something other than making widgets.

It didn't really matter if the train was going east or west; Ben figured that since the world was round, he'd wind up at the same place anyway. He didn't care where he ended up, just as long as it was somewhere other than the dreary city. The city where nobody knows your name.

Ben waited and waited and waited by the track, but as luck would have it — or as luck wouldn't have it — only freight trains sped by, carrying goods in and out of the industrial part of town. There was repair work being done on the railway line that led into the main station, so Ben figured all the passenger trains were being rerouted. Ben clunked himself down on the dusty brown hill beside the rail yard, put his knapsack on his lap, and wondered how much longer it would be before things got rolling again. The air was beginning to cool off, so he took out one of his T-shirts.





Then he noticed an empty caboose sitting on a spur line with its door left open. It seemed like a good place to wait.

It was dusk when Ben climbed inside the car. He was hungry but decided to save his beans for later and instead ate a crust of bread. He wished it would rain so he could have a drink of water to go with it; he'd like to drink water without chlorine added to it. Maybe he'd drink from a pond or a puddle, once he got out of the dirty city. He set his radio down beside him and turned it on to see if there was any word about when the trains would be pulling in again.

Every time a freight train rumbled by, it went through Ben's mind that if he leaped onto one, he could keep his ten dollars and still get out of town. But he quickly put that thought aside. Even though he was a fast runner, he could never jump onto a moving train. It would be impossible.

"That's only done in the movies," Ben said to himself, as he got up to stretch his legs. "I could never ever do that."

He stood there in that musty caboose on that Wednesday evening that was just like any other Wednesday evening, waiting for the track to be repaired. He watched as the sun began to settle down for the night, slowly disappearing on the horizon. And that was when he heard the oddest, most bizarre sound he'd ever heard. A roaring kind of sound. A blasting kind of sound. A sound like you would never hear in the dreary city, even during rush hour.

He turned off the radio, stuck his head out the door, and looked from side to side but saw nothing. The blasting sound got louder and louder, and the roaring got closer and closer. Then he looked up into the sky and there it was. A giant balloon! A giant balloon that was going to land in the field near the old railway tunnel!

While he watched from inside the caboose, the roaring and the blasting abruptly gave way to complete silence as the balloon slowly made its way to the ground.

Ben stared in amazement as the gigantic sphere floated past him, and the basket beneath it brushed across the weeds and shrubs, combing them like the wind over a field of corn.

Ben jumped out of the caboose to have a look. He was so captivated with the sight of the balloon that he didn't notice the basket had landed almost upside down in the middle of the track. It wasn't until he heard an echoing voice that he realized someone was in there.



"Can you give me a hand there, young feller?" hollered the someone who was inside. Ben could only see a pair of orange ears sticking out of a hole in the bottom of the basket. "Pull up on that rope, will you? Heave ho! Give it all you've got."

So Ben pushed on the side of the wicker basket, but he had trouble moving it. "This is heavier than it looks." The weight of the fuel tanks was considerable, especially for a small dog like Ben. He pushed and he pulled and he rocked and he rolled. Finally, he got the basket onto its side — and out stumbled a great big striped cat.

And that was how he met Colonel Dewey.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE JOY OF LIVING



“Howdy there,” boomed the big orange cat. “My name is Colonel Dewey and I am right pleased to make your acquaintance.” He reached out and grabbed Ben’s paw and shook it till it almost fell off. “Now that was mighty kind of you, yes, it was mighty kind. Don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t been there, no sir.” He brushed off his jacket. “When I was a younger feller, I had no problem lifting this thing by myself. Guess my age is catching up with me.”

Ben decided from Colonel Dewey’s accent that he was a southerner, maybe a Texan. The two of them pulled the basket off the track.

“I’m Ben,” he said. He couldn’t think of what else to say, but it didn’t matter; Colonel Dewey was one of those folks who manage to do all the talking for you.

“Ben, you say. Good name, good name. I knew a Ben in Florida. Grew lemons, he did. Or was it grapefruits? Well, it was some kind of fruit.” The Colonel untied some ropes, turned the basket right side up, then put all his belongings back in place. “Nice fellow he was, that Ben. Grew lemons, he did. Or was it limes?”

As Colonel Dewey rambled on about fruit, Ben remembered he’d left his knapsack and radio in the caboose and ran back to get them. He didn’t care if someone took the pot or the hat, or if the train left the track with his beans still in it, but no way did he want to lose his ten-dollar bill. He needed it to get out of the dreary city.

“I declare, that’s a fine-looking contraption you’ve got there, m’boy. Fine-looking,” said the Colonel, champing his gum and eyeing Ben’s radio. Ben held on to it tightly and kept it half-hidden under his arm.

“It’s okay,” he replied. Then he added, “That’s quite a contraption you’ve got, too.” Ben gazed at the balloon, which was deflating gradually as the air inside it cooled off.

“Yes siree, that flying machine is the best thing I own. Okay, it’s the only thing I own, but if I owned everything in this fair city of yours, it would still be the best thing I own.”

Ben decided to check out what this cat had inside the basket, but other than the propane tanks, a couple of cans of tuna, and a change of clothes, there wasn’t anything of interest except a folded-up sandwich board sign. It said: DISCOVER THE JOY OF LIVING — AMAZING FLIGHTS JUST \$1.25.

“You only charge \$1.25?” asked Ben, thinking that it didn’t seem like enough. A dollar and a quarter wouldn’t get you an ice cream cone in the dreary city.

“Glad to see you’re interested, son. And I’d be right pleased to take you for a ride tomorrow morning. I’d fire it up now, but the winds are getting stronger. The best time to fly is sunrise, so—”

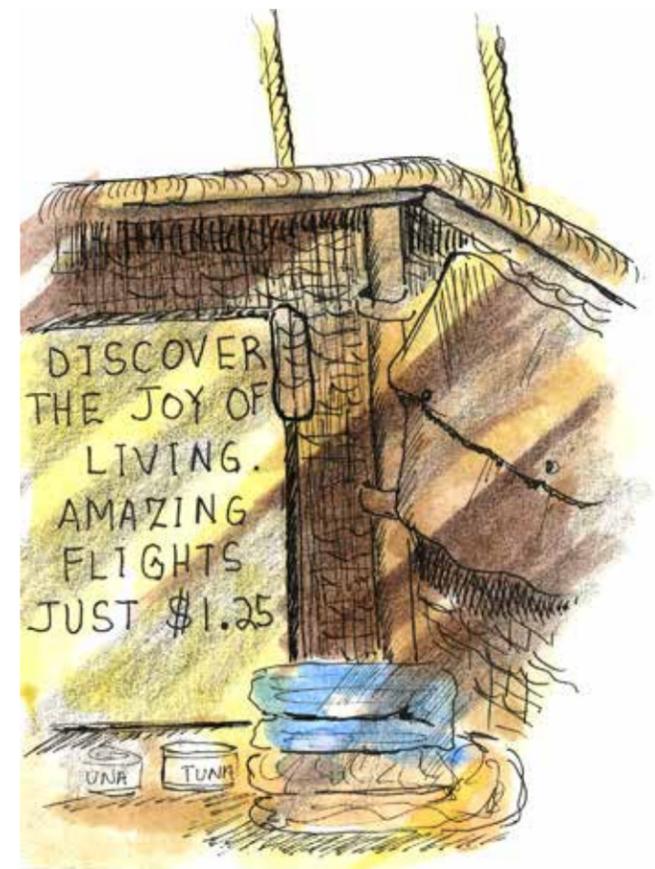
“No, no,” interrupted Ben, “that’s not what I meant.”

“You’d rather go in the afternoon? Well, that should be fine, son, just fine, and I’d be glad to—”

“I won’t go up in that thing,” declared Ben firmly. “Not tomorrow. Not ever.” It wasn’t just because of the ominous-looking patches that had been sewn on the balloon to stop air from leaking or the gaping hole in the wicker that was large enough for a seagull to fly through. It was the general state of disrepair of Colonel Dewey’s flying machine. Simply put, the thing was a piece of junk.

“I know what you’re thinking, son. I know what you’re thinking,” muttered the Colonel. “But you know what we say in Texas: don’t call him a cowboy ’til you see him ride.”

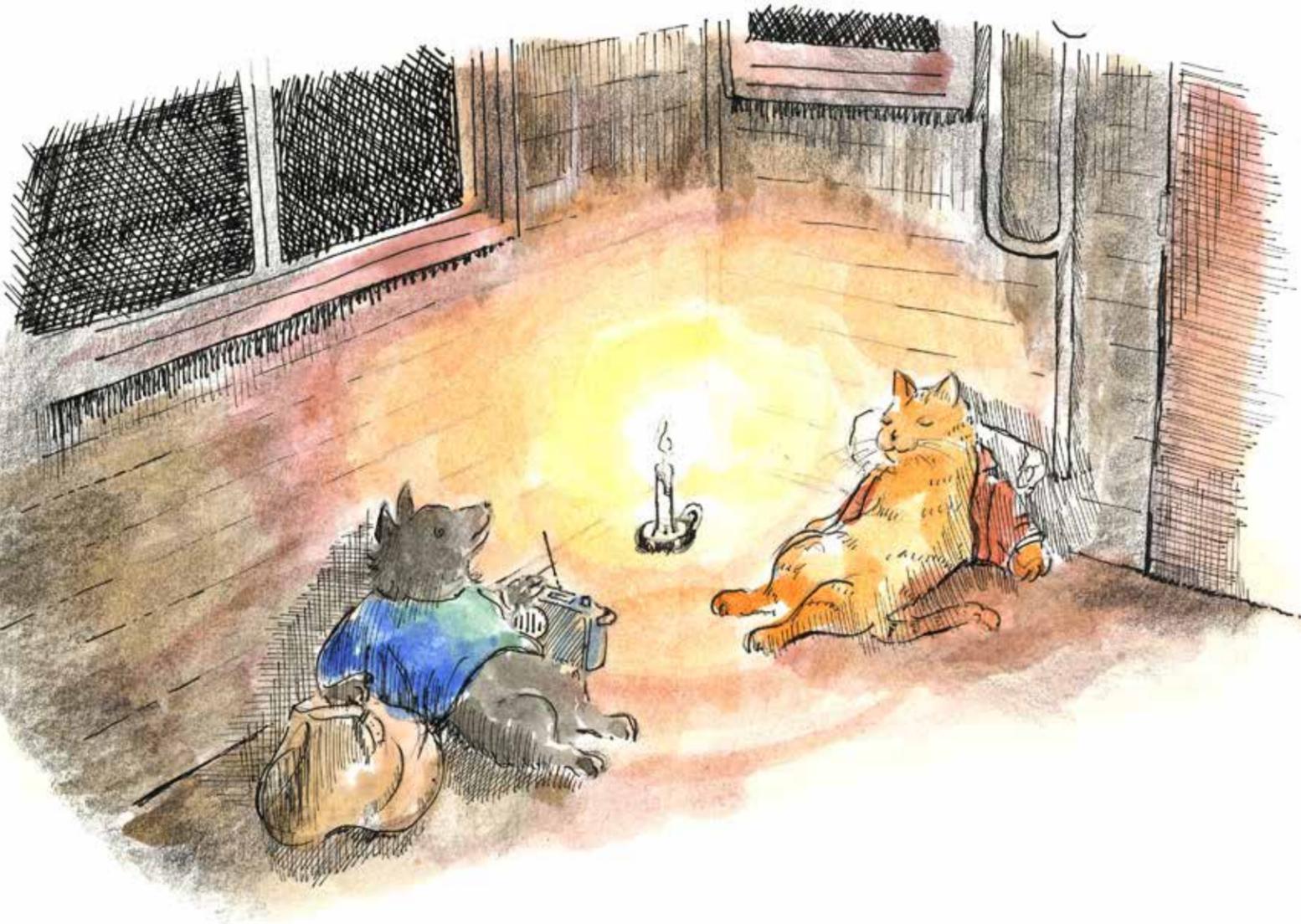
“Don’t what?”



“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” explained the cat. “I can assure you, son, that despite the fact that my machine needs a few nips and tucks here and there, it is in good order. Good order, I assure you.” With one hand on his waist, he walked around the balloon and pointed to a bunch of ropes and stuff, in an attempt to assure Ben of the quality of his machine. “I admit I could use a radio for keeping track of the weather. When you’re up there,” his voice grew louder as he looked to the sky, “you gotta know what the wind is going to do before she does it. You know what I mean, son?”

Ben knew what he meant, all right. The Colonel wanted his radio! Well, he wasn’t going to get it, even if it wasn’t worth anything. Ben hastily walked back to the caboose to put his radio away. It was too late in the day, and he was too tired to go anywhere else; he’d have to stay in the rail yard tonight.

The Colonel scooped up a bundle of clothes, followed Ben to the caboose, and climbed inside. “Hope you don’t mind if I join you here for the night, son. I’ll be setting up shop in the park tomorrow. I need a place to hit the hay.” He plunked himself down, then leaned against the wall and put a rolled up pair of old trousers behind his head. “I don’t need anything special; I can sleep just a’ hangin’ on a nail.”



“Sure,” Ben agreed, somewhat reluctantly. He didn’t like being called “son” but figured he could put up with it for one night. He paused, then put a question to the orange cat from Texas. “So, are you a real colonel?”

Instead of answering this question, Colonel Dewey decided to explain why he only charged \$1.25 for his amazing balloon flights. “The reason I don’t charge a lot of money for rides in my balloon is because I’ve made it my mission in life to give folks a chance to see the world in a different way. To put hope in their hearts and smiles on their faces.” He opened up a pack of gum, saw there were only two sticks left, then sealed it up again.

“Yeah,” said Ben bluntly. His tone implied he didn’t believe a word that came out of Colonel Dewey’s mouth, but the southerner didn’t take notice.

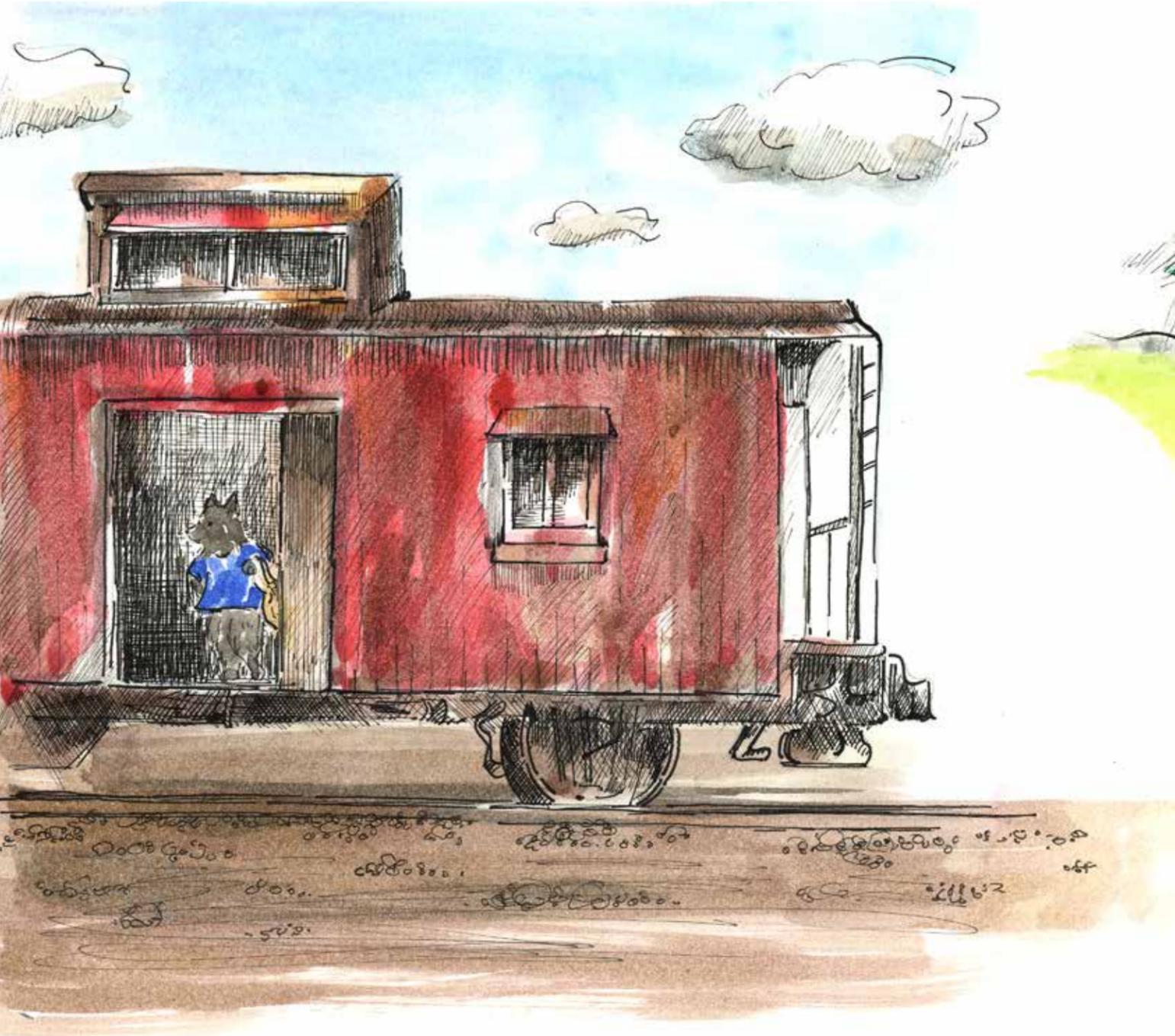
“Problems and troubles look a lot smaller from up there,” he said, and sighed. “A lot smaller.”

And although Ben still didn’t trust this cat who called himself Colonel, and although he planned on sleeping with one eye open, he figured the Texan did have a point.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE CAT'S PYJAMAS

A banging sound yanked Ben out of a dream. It was the crack of dawn, and for a few seconds he didn't know where he was. Once he got his bearings, he reached for his knapsack to make sure his radio and ten-dollar bill were still there, then jumped out of the caboose to see what the racket was.



It was Colonel Dewey. He was checking out his gear and trying to get his balloon up and running. "Mornin', son," he hollered. "Sorry to wake you at this hour, but I've got to set up shop in the city." He reached over the side of the basket and pulled out an already-opened can of tuna. "I wish I could offer you something decent for breakfast, but supplies are low right now, mighty low."

Ben felt sorry for him, having to eat stale tuna, and so early in the morning, so he handed him some bread. Colonel Dewey gave him a chunk of tuna that was so old, it tasted like the tin. While they ate, the cat rattled on about the basics of hot-air ballooning. The first thing you do before any trip, he explained, was test the burners. Next, you secure the uprights to the basket. (He had done this while Ben was sleeping.) Then, you attach the balloon to the basket. Finally, you flap the envelope (that's what they call the balloon part) up and down to get air inside.

"The fancy folks," he admitted, "now, they've got inflator fans to do the work for them. But I believe in doing it the old-fashioned way."

Ben knew it was because he couldn't afford an inflator fan. He decided to give him a hand. The two of them flapped while the Colonel continued to yap.

"Now the parachute top — that's what we call it, son, the parachute top — we keep that closed until we're up there in the sky. When we need the hot air to escape, like when we want to land, that's when we pull the cord and open up the top."

"When you say we, you really mean you, because I'm not going up in that thing." Ben was definite.

"Say, I've got an idea. How'd you like to help me from the ground? I can always use help from the ground, that's for sure." Colonel Dewey slapped Ben on the back and almost knocked him out. "If you could help me for the day, I'll give you a percentage of my sales. How does forty percent sound?"

"What would I have to do?" asked Ben, hoping it didn't involve wearing the sandwich sign. Since a train ticket out of town was going to take his last ten dollars, he figured he could use some extra cash, and what difference would it make to stay one more day in the dreary city?

"Well, now, it would be much easier for me if you could keep hold of the crown line — that's the one attached to the north pole of the balloon — and keep me steady when I set off." The Colonel took out the pack of gum again, remembered he had only two pieces left, and put it back in his jacket. "Then, when I'm taking customers on board, you can help with what we hot-air pilots call the weigh off. You'll be holding the basket 'til the passengers get on. And when we come down, you can grab hold of the drop line and guide me back." He grinned. "It'll make things much easier for me, yes siree. Much easier to fly when you've got a co-pilot."

"And I never have to get in that thing? Not even once?"

"On my word as a gentleman." The Colonel grabbed Ben's paw and shook it until it almost fell off for a second time. "Deal?"

"Deal," replied Ben, though he had the strange feeling that he was getting himself into something he'd regret later. Still, it sounded like an easy way to pick up a few dollars.

"By the way," asked Ben, "aren't you concerned about those patches on your balloon — uh, envelope?"

"No, not at all." The Colonel gazed at the huge circle of balloon that was still laid out on the grass, only partially inflated despite a good deal of flapping by both of them. "Made those repairs myself and they're secure, let me tell you, secure. Used a pair of my old pyjamas to make those patches." He slapped Ben on the back again.

"Well, it's mighty good of you to help me out," continued the cat, stopping for a second to catch his breath. "You know what, son? By this time next month, I'll be makin' my way through the Roaring Forties!"

"The what?" asked Ben, still trying to get air inside the balloon.



"The Roaring Forties. Now, that's what they call the area off the bottom tip of South America, at forty degrees south of the equator. Only the best pilots will take a balloon there, and the reason is the winds." The Colonel reached over and took a bottle of water from the basket. "They're wild is what they are, wild." He poured water into Ben's cup, handed it to him, and took a swig out of the bottle. Then he kept on shooting the breeze.

"It's my goal to circumnavigate the globe, don't you know." The cat sat down in the grass and leaned back on one elbow. "Yes sir, I'm going to see the Road to Mandalay if it's the last thing I do. And soar above the crystal blue Mediterranean. Fly over Loch Ness in Scotland and see if I can spot the monster."

"Sounds okay," said Ben, getting tired of flapping and listening at the same time.

"And Kenya — now there's a place that is every balloonist's dream! No power lines, no phone lines, no fences..."

"No smog," added Ben, but the Colonel didn't hear him.

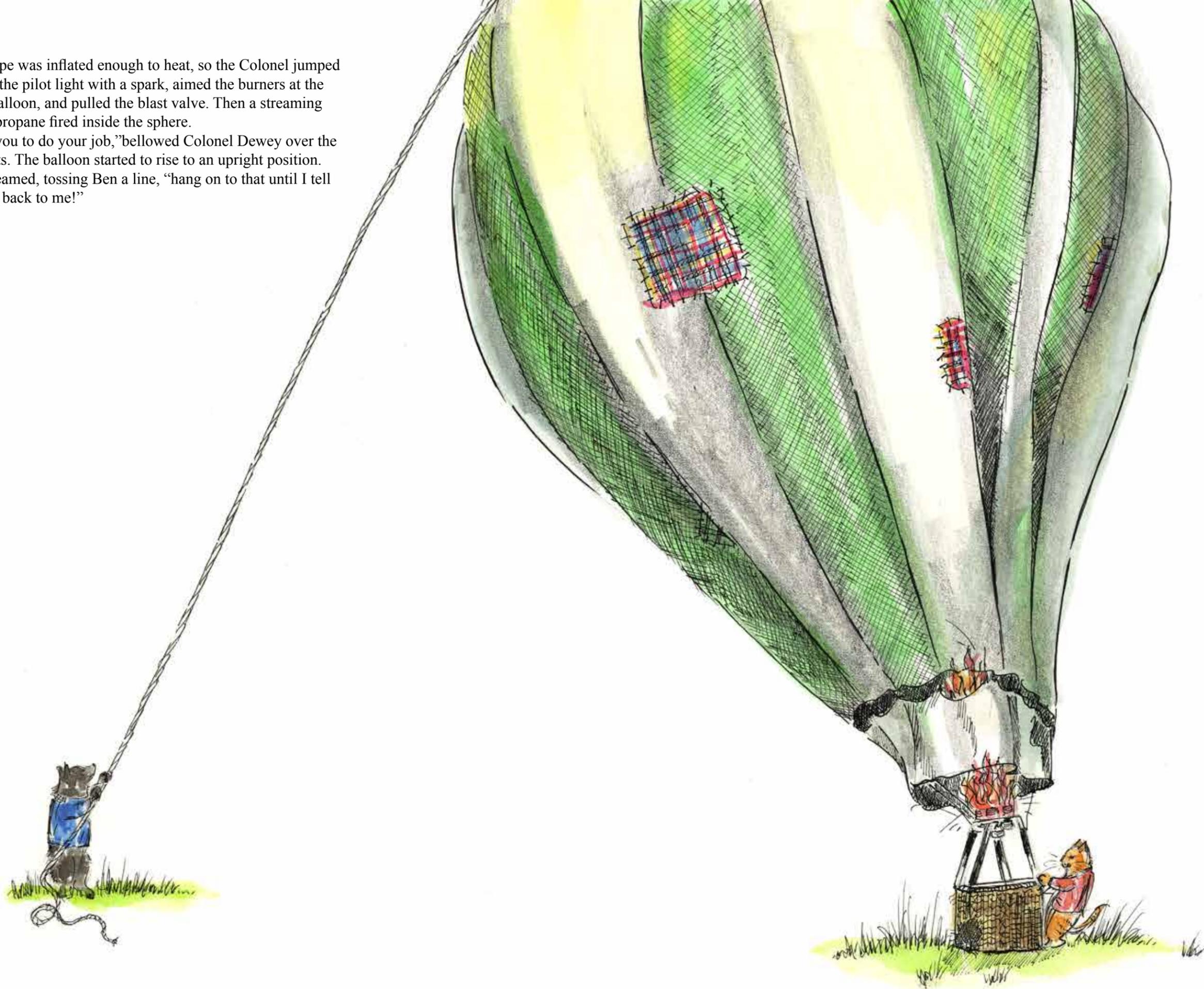
"...and lots of open space." The cat took another gulp of water, then changed elbows. "Of course, you've gotta watch for the cobras. They'll eat you alive. If you land on 'em, that is."

"So when are you leaving for your trip around the world?" Ben was more interested than he'd realized.

"Once I raise the cash," replied Colonel Dewey. "Don't need much, just enough for propane and the occasional meal." He plucked a piece of grass and chewed on it for awhile. "Yes sir, that's what I'm fixin' to do."

The envelope was inflated enough to heat, so the Colonel jumped up and ignited the pilot light with a spark, aimed the burners at the mouth of the balloon, and pulled the blast valve. Then a streaming jet of burning propane fired inside the sphere.

“Time for you to do your job,” bellowed Colonel Dewey over the deafening blasts. The balloon started to rise to an upright position. “Here,” he screamed, tossing Ben a line, “hang on to that until I tell you to throw it back to me!”



Then he licked his paw and held it up in the air. “North northeast at about twenty knots,” he murmured. “Absolutely perfect.”

“Twenty knots?” asked Ben.

“The wind speed. Just an estimate, but a good one.” The Colonel looked up at the huge balloon with pride. “Oh, the fancy folks have got their gadgets — altimeters, pyrometers, and who knows what else. But you know what they haven’t got?”

“What?” asked Ben.

“Instinct. They haven’t got instinct.” The cat threw some gear into the basket. “And that’s exactly what you need to ride the thermals.”

“Thermals?” Ben was getting an education in hot-air ballooning whether he wanted it or not.

“The great winds, the ones triggered by the sun’s heat.” Colonel Dewey climbed into the basket, took the line out of Ben’s paw, and started to lift off. “The birds use ’em, and I use ’em, and that’s how I’m going to circumnavigate the planet.”

The Colonel was moving up steadily, but his raspy drawl was as audible as it ever was. “Better hightail it over to the park....”

As Ben watched him sail off into the sky, he wondered how he ever got himself mixed up in the first place with this loud-mouthed cat from Texas.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PROBLEM WITH DENTURES

Ben surprised himself by the speed at which he made it to the city park. More than a few times, he caused traffic in every direction to come to a screeching halt as he dashed through a busy intersection. (He was looking up at the sky instead of left and right, like the police tell you to do.) But the sight of Colonel Dewey, hanging over the edge of the basket and waving to everyone below, was the most amusing thing that had ever happened in the dreary city.



Ben made it to the park in one piece, although a lot of angry drivers were still screaming at him from their car windows. City folks hated it when anyone did anything that cost them a few extra seconds of time, because time is money. And Ben had made them stop when they wanted to go. They really hated it if you made them stop when they wanted to go. Ben didn't care, though — at least the dreary city folks didn't seem quite as dreary when they were mad. And besides, he'd always imagined what it would be like to stop traffic in every direction.

As the Colonel levelled out the balloon over the treetops, the basket knocked about in the branches. Leaves and twigs (and pieces of wicker, too) fell down onto the crowd that had gathered to see him land. Ben could hear the Colonel's booming drawl, even over all the other voices.

"Ready?" the Colonel hollered down to Ben. Then, not waiting for a response, he tossed down the guide rope, which tumbled earthward and snapped like a whip. Ben was not ready for that, and he jumped backwards with a jolt. With everyone staring at him, he quickly regained his composure and held the line while Colonel Dewey secured his flying machine in the spot where customers were supposed to line up.

But no one did.

They laughed and they giggled and they pointed and they gawked, but nobody lined up for a ride.

Ben thought that maybe once they'd stared long enough, some brave soul would choose to experience the Joy of Living with Colonel Dewey.

But no one did.

An hour went by and no one did.

Ben even wore the sandwich board sign for awhile.

But no one did.

"Is business always this slow?" asked Ben.

"Well, son, it's like this," answered the Colonel. This time, when he pulled out his pack of gum he stuck a piece in his mouth. "Sometimes folks are real anxious to experience life in a different way. You know, to see things they've never seen before." He chewed for a minute, deep in thought. "And sometimes, they make you feel as welcome as a skunk at a lawn party."

Ben figured the latter was true more often than not. But just as he was about to give up hope, the Colonel announced that he had a customer.



"Oh, here comes the dear lady now," he announced, as an elderly corgi approached his sign. She carried a cane and was being helped by a couple of friends. Sticking out of her purse was what appeared to be a flag.

"You mean you have regular customers?" asked Ben. "You didn't tell me that!"

But Colonel Dewey didn't answer. He walked toward the corgi, bowed slightly, took her paw, and kissed it.



“You’re looking lovely today, Mrs. Tudor,” the Texan said sweetly. (Ben reckoned this lady must be wealthy.) “And it’s a wonderful day for a ride, isn’t it?”

“Ah, it’s a luvly day, isn’t it, Colonel? I looked out me window, I did, and I said to meself, ‘I wonder if Colonel Dewey is in town today.’ And just as I said that to meself, I saw your luvly balloon floatin’ past.”

The Colonel escorted her into the wicker basket. Ben had only ever seen him leap over the top, but for her, he opened the gate. When he did, more wicker dropped off, but Mrs. Tudor didn’t seem to notice.

Ben held on to the basket and waited for further instructions, but the Colonel didn’t give any. He fired up the heaters, told Ben to let go of the basket, then tossed him the line. It was only as an afterthought that he yelled something, when he and the lady were already well on their way upwards.

“For Mrs. Tudor, we stay tethered.”

“We do what?” hollered Ben. This was news to him.

“We keep the balloon tethered. Just hold on to the line and use some weights to keep us from going anywhere but up.” The Colonel continued to chat to Mrs. Tudor.

Ben imagined himself rising up with the two of them, dangling underneath, because he couldn’t find anything to tie the cord to. Then one of Mrs. Tudor’s friends spoke up.

“He tied it to that thing there the last time,” she offered, not wanting to see her elderly friend drift off to Neverland with the Colonel.

Ben scrambled to tie the drop line around the spare propane tank, which did seem to do the trick. Then he thanked the woman and struck up a conversation with her and her friend, even though they were city folks, and city folks don’t normally like it when you strike up a conversation.

“So, why does Mrs. Tudor like to go up in the balloon?” he asked, and one of the ladies gave him all kinds of information, none of which answered the question.

“She’s a war bride, you know. Came over with her husband, right after the war. Of course, he’s been gone a long time now, right, Delores?” She screamed into her friend’s ear, “Right, Delores? Her husband’s been gone a long time now.”

“Oh, it’s been years now, Doris.”

Doris took out a roll of peppermints and gave one to Delores. Ben wondered why old ladies always seemed to have peppermints in their purses.

“She lives at the Home for Aged Corgi War Brides over on Elm Street. Lovely home it is. They look after everyone so well there, don’t you think so, Delores?”



“Oh, it’s been years now, Doris.” Delores answered the first question. She didn’t seem to have heard the second question, and Ben still hadn’t received a response to his original question.

He tried another. “Do you ladies all live at the same place?” He figured they were aged corgis all right, but neither had a British accent like Mrs. Tudor.

“No,” said Doris. “We live at the Home for Regular Aged Corgis. But our quilting club meets at her building three times a week. We have over fifty members, and we’re all experts with a needle and thread, don’t you know?”

“That’s nice,” mumbled Ben absent-mindedly. His eyes were focused on the drop line, which was gradually coming loose from the propane tank. He stood on it while the ladies chatted.

“Oh look!” blurted Doris. “She’s going to let it go now!”

That got Ben’s attention.

“What’s she going to do?” he asked quickly. “What’s she going to do?”

“Oh, it’s been years now,” repeated Delores.

If she hadn’t been an aged corgi, Ben would have handed Delores the end of the drop line, but neither he nor Doris could do anything but look up.

For there was Mrs. Tudor, high up in the air, flying the Union Jack and singing something.

“What’s she singing?” Ben whispered to Doris. He already knew what Delores would say.

“Rule Britannia,” she answered. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Why does she do that?” Ben wondered out loud, straining to hear the song. The Colonel had opened up the parachute top and was lowering the balloon, so the words of Mrs. Tudor’s song were getting easier to hear.



“Mrs. Tudor is related to the Queen, don’t you know?” Doris said. The elderly lady’s response didn’t surprise Ben at all. It backed up his earlier deduction that it was Mrs. Tudor’s wealth in which the Colonel was interested. Her accent, however, seemed quite unlike the Queen’s and more like Eliza Doolittle’s was before she learned The Rain in Spain.

“Of course, her husband’s name was Tudor,” continued Doris. “Her maiden name was Windsor.”

“And she’s really related to the Queen?” asked Ben, but by that time the singing was loud and nobody could hear anything over it.

*When Britain first, at Heaven’s command,  
Aro-o-o-ose from out the a-a-a-azure main,  
Arose, arose, arose from out the azure main,  
This was the charter, the charter of the land,  
And guardian a-a-a-a-angels sang this strain:  
Rule, Britannia!  
Britannia, rule the waves.  
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.*



When Mrs. Tudor had finished singing and was on the ground again, Colonel Dewey helped her out of the basket. While she folded up her flag and put it back into her purse, he bid her good day.

"I'll be seeing you again soon, Mrs. Tudor," he said in that same charming voice he'd used before. "I'll be back in town next month."

Ben looked at the Colonel suspiciously, because he had said that he'd be circumnavigating the globe next month.

"Unless, of course, I am on my trip around the world, in which case I may be a little late." Colonel Dewey was quick to correct himself, which made Ben even more suspicious.

"Thank you, Colonel," declared Mrs. Tudor, slipping an envelope into the top pocket of his jacket. (Ben calculated that if there was a twenty-dollar bill in there, he'd get eight dollars.) "It was just luvly, it was. I'd better be on me way, though. They'll be holdin' up lunch, they will. But I'll be watchin' for you out me window."

"Goodbye, dear ladies," said the Colonel, waving to the three of them as they turned to leave. "I don't know when I've enjoyed myself so much."

"Oh, it's been years now," said Delores, and Ben buried his face in the palm of his paw.

"So why do you keep the balloon tethered?" questioned Ben, once the ladies had left. "Doesn't Mrs. Tudor ever go for a ride across town?"

"She used to, son. She used to," answered the Colonel, as he gathered up the lines and threw them back into the basket.

"What happened?"

"We lost her dentures, and never did find 'em," he said. "At least this way, if it happens again, we'll know where to look."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### VIRGIL AND NEWTON

"Is Mrs. Tudor really related to the Queen?" asked Ben, as he and Colonel Dewey got things ready for the next flight. "Or does she just think she is?"

"I don't really know." The Colonel looked at his last stick of gum, then put it back in the pack without chewing it.

"She doesn't sound like the Queen." Ben was hoping that Colonel Dewey would tell him if she was rich or not, but he didn't get the hint. So Ben decided to put it to him. "Is she wealthy?"

"Oh, no," laughed the Colonel. "Whatever gave you that idea? No, Mrs. Tudor is a pensioner. The little bit the government gives her goes for her lodging. She can't afford to pay for anything." He walked over to the basket, took out a roll of duct tape, and started to repair the wicker. "If it wasn't for the occasional ride in my balloon, I don't think she'd ever get out. No, she'd never get to experience the joy of living."

Now Ben was really suspicious. He saw Mrs. Tudor pass the Colonel that envelope. That cat was trying to cheat him out of his forty percent!

"Okay, that's it. I'm out of here. You're not going to give me my share!" Ben pointed at the Colonel's pocket. "I know she paid you. And she probably gave you more than \$1.25!" Ben was livid.

"You can put your boots in the oven, but that don't make 'em biscuits," declared Colonel Dewey.

"What?"

"You can say whatever you want about somethin', but it don't change what it is." The Colonel handed Ben the envelope.



He ripped it open and pulled out a slip of paper. It was a coupon for one luncheon special from Frosty's Fish n' Chips.

"This is how she pays you?" cried Ben. "With a coupon for fish n' chips?"

"It's her way of thanking me." The Colonel tore off the end of the tape and threw the roll back into the basket. "The old dear won it at bingo."

"Bingo? How do you expect to run a business like that?" Ben hated working at the factory, but at least he was paid with real money.

"Anyway, it'll be our lunch. We'll split the order."

"Sixty percent for you and forty percent for me?" asked Ben sarcastically. But before Ben could say much more, the Colonel was on his way to Frosty's.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll be back in one shake of a lamb's tail."

And while he sat there alone, under the big balloon all covered with patches, listening to his radio and waiting for forty percent of an order of fish n' chips, Ben wondered how on earth he'd ever gotten himself into such a mess in the first place. And then, feeling like a heel for accusing the Colonel of cheating him, he wondered if too many years in the dreary city had made him overly suspicious.

The Colonel returned shortly with the fish n' chips, and they split the order down the middle, although the Texan used the whole packet of malt vinegar. It wasn't long after they'd finished eating that they had two more customers, and once again, they turned out to be friends of the Colonel.

"Virgil! Newton!" he called when he spied the two rats heading through the park. "Good to see you! Well, I declare, don't you fellas look right swank in your outfits!"

"Oh, Colonel," said Newton, "I'm so glad you noticed. We've been working on them with every spare minute we have. The jackets are inspired by the latest creations from the top designers from France." He posed like a model, pushing his paw into his waist, then did a little twirl.

Then Virgil started fixing Newton's collar at the back and did up the top button on his jacket.

"There," he said. "That's the way it should be worn, Newt."

"Oh no, Virg. No, no, no," argued Newton. "I think the collar should be left open to give the look that certain ... that certain je ne sais quoi." He looked at the cat. "Don't you think so, Colonel?"

Colonel Dewey was no expert in fashion and didn't like to take sides. Instead, he introduced Ben to the rats and then gave him instructions as to his flight path.



"We won't be tethered this time, so you'll have to follow us on foot. I plan on flying to the lakefront, but we'll have to see where the wind takes us," explained the Colonel. "Then we'll carry the basket and balloon back here again."

"And we'll help!" offered an enthusiastic Newton.

"Yes, yes," added Virgil.

So everything was set into motion. The two rats and Colonel Dewey went sailing off into the sky, and a strong breeze carried them across the city. With Ben running underneath — still stopping traffic and still enjoying the thrill of doing it — the cat deftly guided his balloon up and down to avoid buildings, hydro wires, telephone poles, trees, and small aircraft.





Things went smoothly, except now larger pieces of wicker were falling off the basket. And Ben could see where the balloon had worn thin in several areas — so thin, in fact, that he worried it would collapse at any time. The Colonel wasn't aware of the danger, and the rats weren't either. Even from that distance, Ben could hear them chatting about what was chic and what was not. None of them seemed to be worrying about the state of the flying machine.

The Colonel brought it down without incident. Ben told him what he'd seen, but Colonel Dewey tossed off the notion that there could be problems with the balloon. Virgil and Newton helped to carry some of the gear but argued continuously about something they'd seen while flying. They never stopped talking, all the way back.

"I know that was him, Virg," declared Newton. "I'd recognize him anywhere. Anywhere, I tell you."

"You couldn't see from up there, Newt," argued Virgil. "And besides, even if he did see us, he'd have no way of proving it."

It turned out that when they'd heard Colonel Dewey was in town, the two had taken an extra long break from their jobs at the textile factory. Newton was certain their boss had seen them while driving along in his Cadillac convertible. They were terrified they'd be fired from their jobs.

"Au revoir, mes amis!" exclaimed Newton, as he and Virgil scrambled to get back to work.

"Merci beaucoup, Colonel," shouted Virgil, blowing kisses over his shoulder.

Once they'd gone, Ben had a few questions for the Colonel.

"So did they give you \$2.50? They went for a long ride, and that's the price of two tickets." But Ben knew the answer already.





“Those boys can’t pay me right now. They don’t have ten cents to their name. But they did make this for me!” announced the Colonel, pulling a jaunty red scarf out of his pocket and tying it around his neck. “They work long, hard hours at the textile factory, and that boss of theirs is tighter than bark on a tree.” He started to attach the uprights to the envelope, so the balloon would be ready for the next customer.

“They have enough money to make themselves those fancy outfits they were wearing!” disputed Ben, fed up with the Colonel’s unbusinesslike attitude.

“That’s only because they collect scraps of fabric around the factory. End runs, things like that.” The Colonel sat down on the grass, leaned back on his elbow, and looked totally relaxed, which made Ben even madder. “It’s their dream to design clothes, but life hasn’t given them much of a chance.”

Ben gave him a look that said, Yeah, sure.

“You just don’t understand, son,” continued Colonel Dewey. “Those two fellows have had a hard time, and I like to make it easier for them whenever I can.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Ben, although he was getting to a point where he didn’t even care.

“Well, I don’t know if you noticed or not, but they’re ... well, they’re...” The Colonel couldn’t find the right words to describe Virgil and Newton.

“Fashion designers?” Ben knew what he meant, but was being polite.

“Exactly,” said the Colonel. “And some folks, now they don’t take to fellows that want to be fashion designers, and they’re often given a bad time, which really gets them down.”

He looked Ben straight in the eye. “When Virgil and Newton are up there in the sky, they see things in a whole new way. It’s like I told you before—”

“Their problems look smaller,” answered Ben.

“That’s right.”

And while part of Ben — a very tiny part — was struck by the Colonel’s concern for others, he was beginning to see that the Texan didn’t realize he had a few problems of his own.

Ben decided it was high time to point out to Colonel Dewey that his flying machine was starting to fall apart.

“Well, you know what we say back home?” replied the Colonel.

Ben didn’t, but had a feeling he was going to find out.

“Just because a chicken has wings doesn’t mean it can fly,” said Colonel Dewey. “Which means that—”

“Appearances can be deceiving.” Ben finished the sentence for him. But he wasn’t convinced. To him, the balloon looked ready for the garbage heap, but before he had a chance to argue the point, the Colonel had customers — fourteen customers. And they were all his friends.

“Juan Carlos! Good to see you!” The Texan jumped up and shook the toad’s hand. “And you brought the family!” A whole bunch of little toads hopped all over the Colonel.

“Si. Si, Colonel,” said the father toad. “The children, they want to ride in the big balloon, and I had the afternoon off. So I said to myself, I said, ‘Juan Carlos, let’s go to the park and see if Colonel Dewey is there with his flying machine.’ And sure enough, there you were.”

Next came the introductions. Juan Carlos had eight sons: Enrique, Fernando, Ernesto, Alfonso, Alejandro, Desiderio, Xavier, and Alberto. And he had four daughters: Rosa, Clarita, Juanita, and the baby, Carmencita. His wife’s name was Maria.

“Aren’t they the cutest little pollywogs you’ve ever laid eyes on?” the cat asked Ben.

“Yeah, sure,” said Ben, only because he had no choice. Actually, he thought they were funny-looking.

“I’ve known Juan Carlos for many years. Ever since he arrived from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, with his big family.”

“Si, si,” replied Juan Carlos. “The Colonel is my friend. He takes me and the children up in the air. If not for Colonel Dewey, my children would see nothing but the back of the diner where I work.”

At that point, Ben gave up trying to multiply fourteen times \$1.25. He knew that, like all the Colonel’s friends, they wouldn’t be paying a dime.



So Colonel Dewey took Juan Carlos, Maria, Enrique, Fernando, Ernesto, Alfonso, Alejandro, Desiderio, Xavier, Alberto, Rosa, Clarita, and Juanita up in the balloon. They left the baby, Carmencita, with Ben. He had never looked after a baby toad before — or any kind of baby for that matter — and would have resented it if the Colonel had told him he'd have to run through the city pushing a baby buggy. It wasn't a problem, though, because the Colonel told him to wait in the park. It was decided that the cat would bring down the balloon himself, and Juan Carlos would help him carry it back.



Everything went according to plan and without incident — at least for fifteen minutes or so. Because she slept peacefully, Carmencita was easy to care for, until one nosy woman stuck her head into the baby buggy.

“Oh, isn't she the cootest widdle baby in the whole wide world?” she said in a sickly sweet voice that made Ben cringe. “And doesn't she look just like her daddy?”

Upon hearing that he looked like a toad, Ben almost dropped on the spot.

“This baby isn't mine!” he protested.

“She isn't?” asked the woman. “Well, then where are her parents?”

When Ben told her they were up in the sky and he had no way of contacting them, she took off through the park, screaming at the top of her lungs for the police.



That was how Ben and Carmencita wound up at the police station.

Despite his best efforts to convince the Chief of Police that he was no toadnapper, everything Ben said fell on deaf ears and he was put behind bars. Carmencita was left with a female police officer and wailed like she never had in her life. (Probably because the officer looked scarier than the Chief.)

Next, the police sent out an APB to locate the baby's parents. Ben told them an all-points bulletin was unnecessary, as Carmencita's parents would be returning to the park within the hour, but the bulletin went out nevertheless, to most of North America. The police told Ben to get himself a lawyer, but because he had only ten dollars, he figured he'd wait for Colonel Dewey to find him and clear up the matter.

As luck would have it, the Colonel arrived not long after that, and with him were Juan Carlos, Enrique, Fernando, Ernesto, Alfonso, Alejandro, Desiderio, Xavier, Alberto, Rosa, Clarita, Juanita, and Maria, who swept up the baby from the officer's arms and held her tight.

“The boy was lookin' after the baby while I took the family for a ride. You know, to experience the joy of living,” Colonel Dewey said enthusiastically. But he wasn't so enthusiastic when the Chief of Police asked him if he had a permit to operate the balloon.



“Well, now,” said the Colonel with hesitation. (Ben could tell he was stalling while he figured out what to say.) “Now, I do have something here....” He pulled a rumpled piece of paper out of his pocket. “Yes, indeed. I do have a permit.”

“Let me see that.” The female police officer grabbed it out of the Colonel’s paw, read it, then handed it to the Chief. “That permit expired years ago!”

“Okay,” said the Chief. “Pay up or stop conducting your business immediately. A permit costs ten dollars. And if you give me any more trouble, I’ll fine you for operating without one.”

Colonel Dewey couldn’t pay, of course, so he agreed to leave town the next day. Juan Carlos felt so bad about everything that he asked Ben and the Colonel to drop by the restaurant after his shift ended that evening so he could fix them some dinner.

Ben was let out of jail, and he and the Colonel dragged the balloon and basket back to the rail yard, where they intended to spend the night. They waited there a few hours, then headed to the HI WAY DINER.

“The day is almost over, and we have made nothing. Which means I’ve made forty percent of nothing, which is still nothing. I should have left town this morning, like I’d planned.” Ben was mad about wasting a day, but madder still that the Colonel was foolish where business was concerned. “You know,” he said firmly, “if you don’t start charging for these balloon flights, you’ll never have the money to make repairs on your flying machine, and you won’t be able to pay for a permit to operate it!” Ben looked at the Colonel. “And before long, you’ll be in the poorhouse!”

“I know what you’re sayin’, son. I know what you’re sayin’.” The Colonel opened up his pack of gum, then closed it again when he remembered he only had one stick left. “But that’s not how I live my life. That may be how you live your life, but it’s not how I live mine.”

The cat stopped walking for a minute, then turned to Ben. “No one is ever poor who has friends.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

ADAM AND EVE ON A RAFT



“You know, Juan Carlos came to this country from Mexico with nothing,” declared the Colonel, as he and Ben stood outside the diner, waiting for the supper crowd to leave. Except for the occasional flash of lightning, the sky above them was dark as pitch. “He works here every day to support his family. He wants to give them a better life than they had in Mexico, where they spent long hours weaving baskets to sell in the marketplace. Sometimes, they’d make twenty baskets in a day!” The Colonel’s voice cracked. “Those children had to work terribly hard.”

Ben felt a bit guilty for his “forty percent of nothing” comment, and he was grateful when a booth opened up so he could change the subject. He and the Colonel found a spot near the back so they could see Juan Carlos through the window of the kitchen door. He was sweating over a hot stove, trying to get seven or eight different dinners ready at once. When he saw the Colonel and Ben, he waved to them jubilantly.

“Adam and Eve on a raft! Wreck ’em!” yelled a tough-looking waitress.

“What does that mean?” asked Ben.

“Scrambled eggs on toast,” answered Colonel Dewey.

“Can I help ya, honey?” asked the waitress. “What do you boys want tonight?”

“Nothing right now,” said the Colonel. “We’re waitin’ for our friend Juan Carlos to finish his shift for the night.”

“Okay, honey,” she said. Then she threw open the kitchen door and screamed in a few more orders.

“Two tree-huggers, drag ’em through Wisconsin, hold the grass, and don’t make me cry; one ice cream sundae, throw it in the mud; a cowboy with spurs, paint ’em red; and one Eve with a mouldy lid. And put legs on all of it.”

Ben looked quizzically at the Colonel.

“She wants two veggie burgers with cheese but no lettuce or onions; a chocolate sundae; a western omelette with fries and ketchup; and one piece of apple pie with cheese. And she wants all of it to go.”

For the next hour, Ben’s mouth watered as the waitress went by with burgers and omelettes and French fries and ice cream sundaes and big pieces of apple pie with cheese.



Finally, after everyone had gone home, Juan Carlos carried out two huge plates of food and slapped them down on the table in front of Ben and the Colonel. But it wasn’t burgers or omelettes or French fries or ice cream or apple pie and cheese. In fact, it was unidentifiable.

Then he handed them each a giant glass of murky brown liquid.

“Looks delicious!” bellowed the Colonel cheerfully, while Ben stared at his plate.

“What is this stuff?” he asked.

The Colonel could hardly talk for stuffing forkfuls of food into his mouth. “The hash is everything they’ve got left over, fried up nice and crispy, and that there swamp water is a combination of cola, orange, ginger ale, and root beer!”

“We empty the soda fountain at the end of the day,” said a beaming Juan Carlos. “My kids, they love the swamp water.”

Ben was hungry enough to eat the Colonel’s wicker basket, so he tried a mouthful of hash and was surprised by how delicious it was. The swamp water was good, too, and he drank four glasses of it.

As they ate their meals, Ben watched Juan Carlos at work. He cleaned up the counter, filled ketchup bottles, washed the dishes, and put all the menus into a neat pile. Then he took a large take-out box and filled it with the rest of the hash. Finally, he emptied what was left of the swamp water into a plastic jug.



When Ben realized that he was taking the food to his family, waiting there behind the restaurant, he felt ashamed for being ungrateful at first and greedy for taking so much of the pop.

Juan Carlos turned off the lights and bade the two farewell. "Adios, Colonel and Ben!" he called out the door. "Hasta pronto! Come by anytime, and Juan Carlos will have your dinner ready for you! Juan Carlos is always happy to see you!"

"Juan Carlos?" Ben stopped him.

"Si?"

"What's the diner slang for hash?" Ben thought the expressions used to describe the meals were very amusing.

"If someone orders hash, the waitress says, 'There's a gambler in the house!'"

The three of them laughed out loud — something Ben hadn't done in a long time.

It was raining when he and the Colonel left the restaurant, but they made it back to the rail yard before the heaviest downpour. The cat gathered up things from his basket and brought them into the caboose to keep dry, while Ben listened to the radio.

"Well, I guess you'll be on your way tomorrow," said the Colonel, carrying in some ropes.

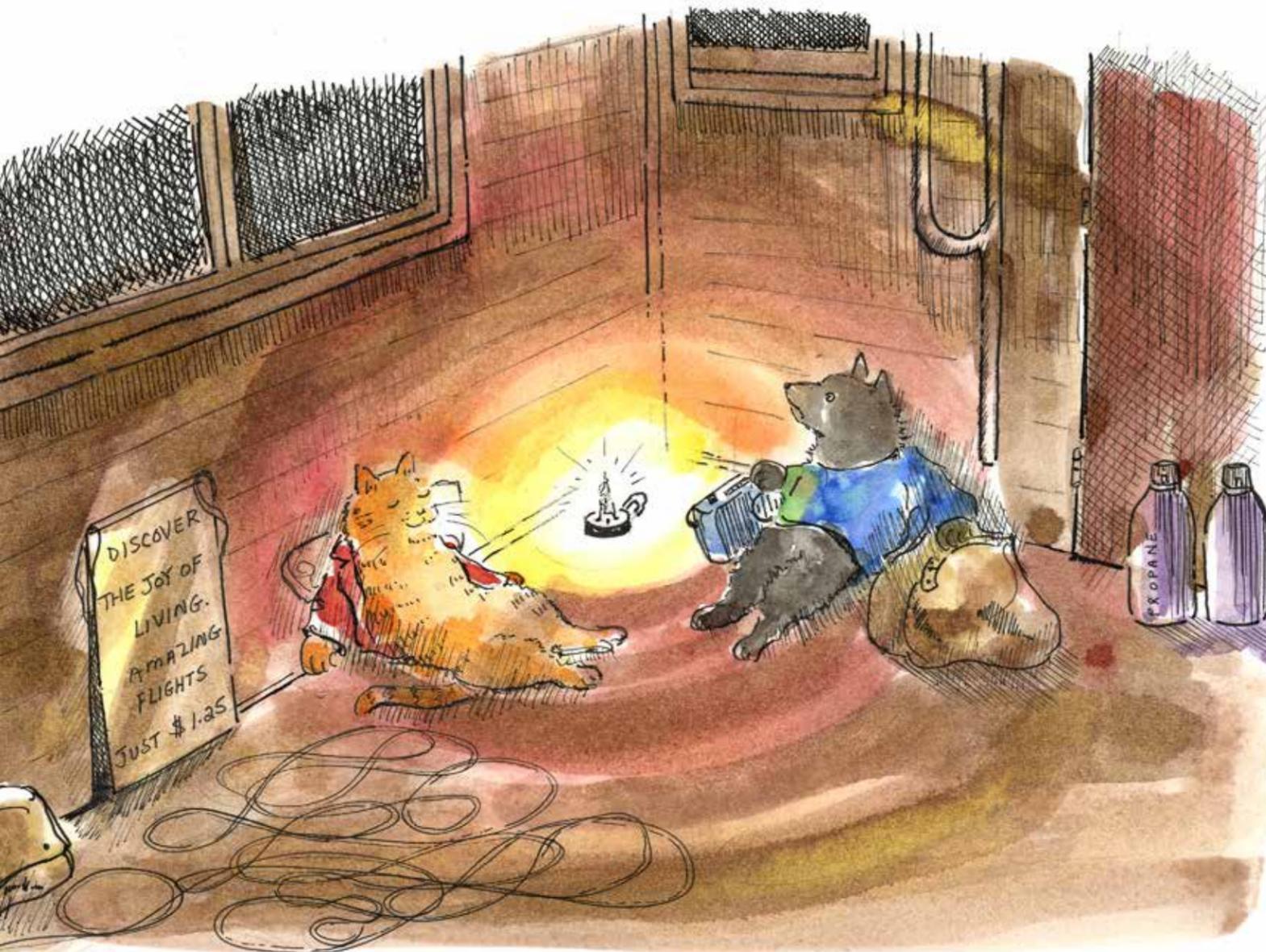
"Yeah, I'll be leaving first thing in the morning. If they're still fixing the main line here, I'll have to walk to the next town and buy my ticket there." Ben handed Colonel Dewey a cupful of rainwater he'd collected.

"I've got to hightail it out of here myself," admitted Colonel Dewey. "Before those police officers throw me in jail." He sat down on the dirty floor. "What about the rain?" asked Ben, turning up his radio so the Colonel could hear. The announcer gave the weather forecast: "A strong low pressure system will continue to predominate over all of our listening area. A severe thunderstorm warning has been issued for tomorrow with potential for high winds, hail, and lightning. Travel should not be risked unless absolutely necessary."

Ben looked at the Colonel. "Do you think you should be flying in weather like that?" The answer was obvious, but it was his way of finding out what the Colonel intended to do.

"I have no choice, son. Being as I can't pay for that permit, I have to leave the city or go to jail." He leaned his back against the wall. "Don't worry. I've had to fly in bad weather before." He took a swig of water. "This ain't my first rodeo."

No, thought Ben, but it could be your last!

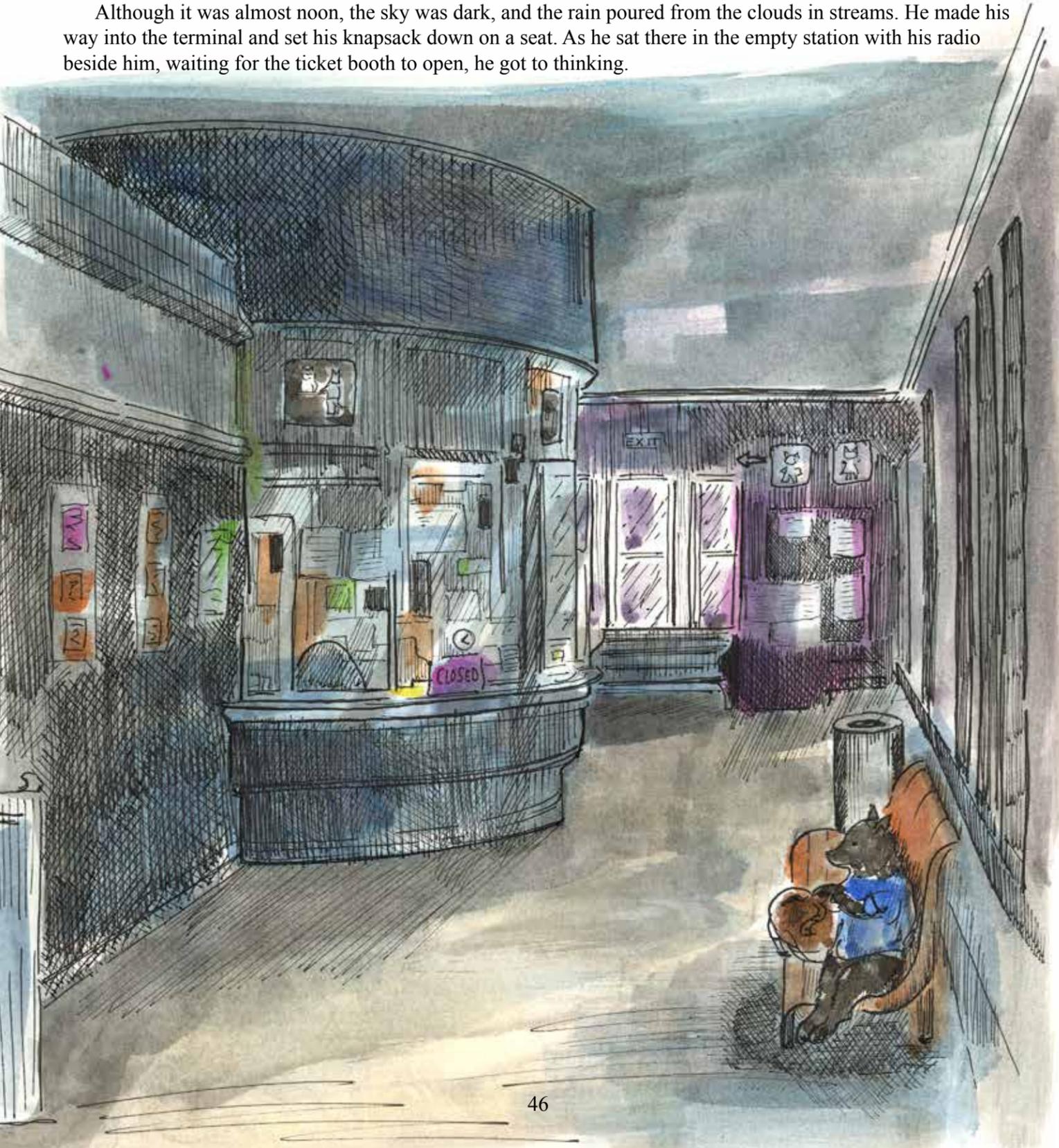


## CHAPTER EIGHT

### TEXAS OR BUST!

It took Ben several hours to walk to the next town. Work was still being done on some of the rails, and there were no outgoing trains, so it was the closest place where he could board. He would have made it to the station faster had it not been for the weather, which was, in the words of Colonel Dewey, “a real frog strangler.”

Although it was almost noon, the sky was dark, and the rain poured from the clouds in streams. He made his way into the terminal and set his knapsack down on a seat. As he sat there in the empty station with his radio beside him, waiting for the ticket booth to open, he got to thinking.



He got to thinking about the Colonel and his sign about the joy of living. He hoped he'd meet up with him again one day. Maybe he'd wind up in some city somewhere and the cat would drop in with his flying machine. Unless he was circumnavigating the globe.

Then he got to worrying that maybe he'd never meet up with the Colonel in any city he wound up in.

Then he got to thinking that maybe the city he wound up in might not be any less dreary than the one he'd just left.

Then he got to worrying that maybe the city he'd just left wasn't dreary at all.

Then he got to thinking that maybe he'd been the dreary one all along and that maybe, after spending a day with the Colonel and his friends, he wasn't so dreary anymore.

Then he got to worrying about Colonel Dewey travelling in the heavy rain. Ben had hoped that the storm would have lessened by now, but it had only gotten worse.

Then, rather than thinking and worrying, he turned on his radio to get the most recent forecast. Instead, he got the shock of his life.

“We interrupt regular programming with breaking news. There has been an accident at the extreme east end of the city. At approximately ten o'clock, local time, a hot-air balloon crashed into a wooded area at the corner of Main and Spruce streets. Sources tell us that the crash occurred during a lightning strike.

“There is no information yet as to the condition of the sole occupant of the balloon. We will bring you further details as they become available.”

“Colonel Dewey!” hollered Ben.

He took off like a shot out the station door.

He ran at breakneck speed down the street, but the rain was blinding, and he couldn't get his feet to go as fast as he needed them to go.



He realized that it would take at least three or four hours to make it back to the city on foot; he still had his ten dollars, but there was no time to wait for a train.

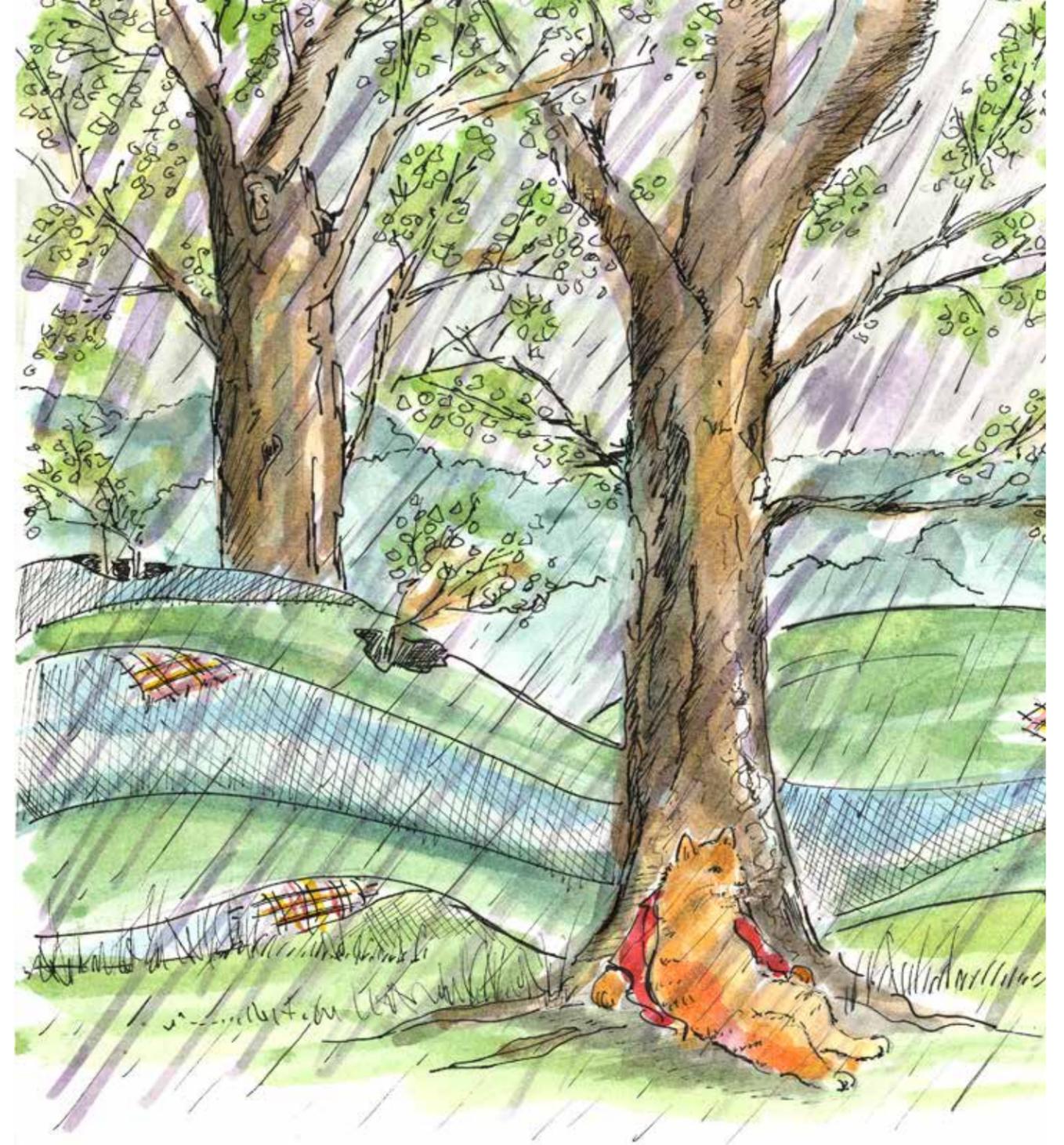
“Why did I ever let the Colonel go up in weather like this?” he asked himself. “Why didn’t I insist that he wait until after the storm had ended? What kind of a friend am I?”

He felt like the worst individual on the face of the earth. He promised himself that if he ever got a chance to see the Colonel again, he’d make it up to him. But how could he get back to the city in time?

Then, as he was sprinting over a bridge, he heard a train in the distance. A freight train that was headed in the direction of the city. Ben looked down and saw that the track went right underneath the bridge. If he leaped onto the train from the bridge, he would be able to make it to town and help Colonel Dewey. But everything was wet and slick, and he could easily slip right off the edge. Still, he had to try. Maybe it wasn’t just done in the movies.

He stood on the bridge, and as the train roared beneath him, he threw all caution to the wind and jumped.

If he hadn’t had four feet, he would have fallen off for sure. But he made it and was on his way back to the city. He never thought he’d be glad to see the smokestacks and skyscrapers again. As the train rumbled through the east end of town, he jumped off. Then he ran down Spruce Street and searched for the crash site.



Because the balloon was still draped around the trees into which it had crashed, it didn’t take long for Ben to locate the Colonel.

“Are you okay?” he asked, completely out of breath, yet grateful that he had found his friend.

“Well,” Colonel Dewey replied, “that depends on how you look at it.” The Texan was completely water-logged and had cuts, scrapes, bruises, and sprains but hadn’t broken any bones. His balloon was destroyed, the basket was demolished, everything but the propane tanks and burners was wrecked, and he’d chewed his last piece of gum. “I’m not fixin’ to fly anytime soon.”

“I’m just glad that you’re not ... that you’re not...”

“Dead?” The Colonel shook the rain out of his fur. “I might as well be,” he said, and sighed. “If I can’t bring the joy of living to folks, it won’t bring any joy to me.”

Ben had never seen the Colonel sad. “What are you going to do?” he asked him.

“Nothin’ I can do, son,” was the cat’s reply. “Guess I’ll go back home and find me a job somewhere.”

“How will you get there?” Ben knew he had no money.

The Colonel turned the sandwich board sign inside out. It read “Texas or Bust!”

Ben couldn’t stand the thought of the Colonel not running his hot-air balloon flights, even if he didn’t make any money at it. Even if his customers paid him with a coupon for fish n’ chips, or a scarf, or a plate of hash.

That gave Ben an idea.

“Will you be here a while longer?” he asked the Colonel.

“I’m fixin’ to stay right where I am for another day, to rest my bones. Then I’ll be makin’ my way south.” He wrapped a cloth around his sore foot. “A police officer came by after my crash and I assured him he wouldn’t be seein’ hide nor hair of me by this time tomorrow.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon, but you have to promise me you won’t go anywhere until I return.”

Ben figured the Colonel could keep dry under what was left of the balloon, and he still had enough tuna fish to last him at least that long. “Deal?”

“On my word as a gentleman,” declared the Colonel.

Ben said goodbye and left, taking all the ropes and gear from the balloon with him, while the Colonel watched silently with a puzzled expression on his face. Ben had learned something about the Colonel. He had learned that although the Texan had no money, and although he had no business sense, and although he no longer had a balloon, there was one thing he did have. An asset that was worth more than all the gold in the city bank.

Colonel Dewey had friends.

## CHAPTER NINE

### BOOGIE NIGHT

The first place Ben went that Friday afternoon was the Home for Aged Corgi War Brides on Elm Street.

A nurse at the front desk noticed he was in a hurry and asked if she could help.

“Can you tell me where I might find Mrs. Tudor?” he panted. “I need to talk to her right away.”

The nurse directed him to the activities room, where Mrs. Tudor was busily engaged with her quilting club. Dozens of ladies were seated around an enormous table. He quickly spotted her and the two ladies who had come with her to the park.

“Mrs. Tudor! Mrs. Tudor!” cried Ben. “The Colonel has crashed his balloon, and I’m rounding up his friends to see if we can help him.” Ben knew that she had no money but hoped she might have an idea as to how they could get him another balloon. “I salvaged what I could from the wreck, but the balloon is beyond repair.”



“Oh, that’s just ’orrible, it is. It’s just ’orrible. I can’t believe me ears!” Mrs. Tudor was in shock.

The room fell to a complete hush as the ladies listened intently to Ben’s description of the dangerous storm that the Colonel encountered when he had tried to leave town.

Doris and Delores were all ears, too, as Ben recounted the events that led up to the accident.

“What can we do?” asked Doris.

“What can we do about what?” wondered Delores, who hadn’t heard a word Ben had said.

“There’s got to be some way we can help!” declared Mrs. Tudor. “I’ll never get a wink of sleep for the rest of me life if I don’t do somethin’ to help the poor Colonel. Why, if it weren’t for him showin’ me the joy of livin’, I’d be pushin’ up daisies by now. I’d be pushin’ up daisies, I would!”

“What’s this about raisins?” asked Delores.

“Not raisins,” said Doris. “Daisies!”



“I’ve got it!” Mrs. Tudor jumped out of her chair, which is saying something, since Mrs. Tudor can’t take two steps without her cane. “I’ve got an idea!”

“What is it?” asked Ben anxiously.

“We’re all expert sewers ’ere, right?”

Everyone in the room yelled, “Right!”

Mrs. Tudor threw her arms up into the air. “We’re going to sew Colonel Dewey a new balloon!”

“That’s a great idea,” said Ben, “but where will we get the fabric?” And then, answering his own question, he declared, “I think I know who might be able to help us.” He drew a long breath. “If I get the fabric over here in the next couple of hours, would you ladies be able to sew a balloon by tomorrow?”

“You get the fabric and leave the rest to us,” said Mrs. Tudor with certainty. “Even if we ’ave to stay up all night, we’ll make sure that luvly Colonel gets his balloon! Right ladies?”

“Right!” they hollered.



Ben's next stop was the textile factory in the industrial section of town. All around him, factories churned out steam into the air and trucks came and went in droves, delivering supplies and picking up finished goods. Inside the factory, giant bolts of rayon and linen went by him on skids. With all this activity, Ben had some difficulty locating Virgil and Newton, who worked beneath the ground, tinting fabrics and checking dye lots.

Finally, he located the rats near a big vat of colourant, where they were matching cotton runs. Virgil recognized Ben right away.

"Look, Newt," he hollered, "it's that dog that works with the Colonel. What's his name? Len?"

"Ben," replied Ben.

"Good to see you again!" said Newton, standing up and taking off his dye-stained gloves. "But what are you doing here?"

When they heard what had happened, the two rats were horror-struck, and Virgil started to cry.

"Oh, it's just too terrible," he moaned. "That wonderful cat doesn't deserve it, not after everything he's done for us."

"He certainly doesn't," added Newton, handing Virgil a handkerchief and wiping his own eyes with his sleeve. "Well, we can't stand around like a bunch of sillies. There must be something we can do!"

"I was hoping you would say that," said Ben. Then he went on to explain his plan for a new balloon — a plan that hinged on them being able to supply the fabric.



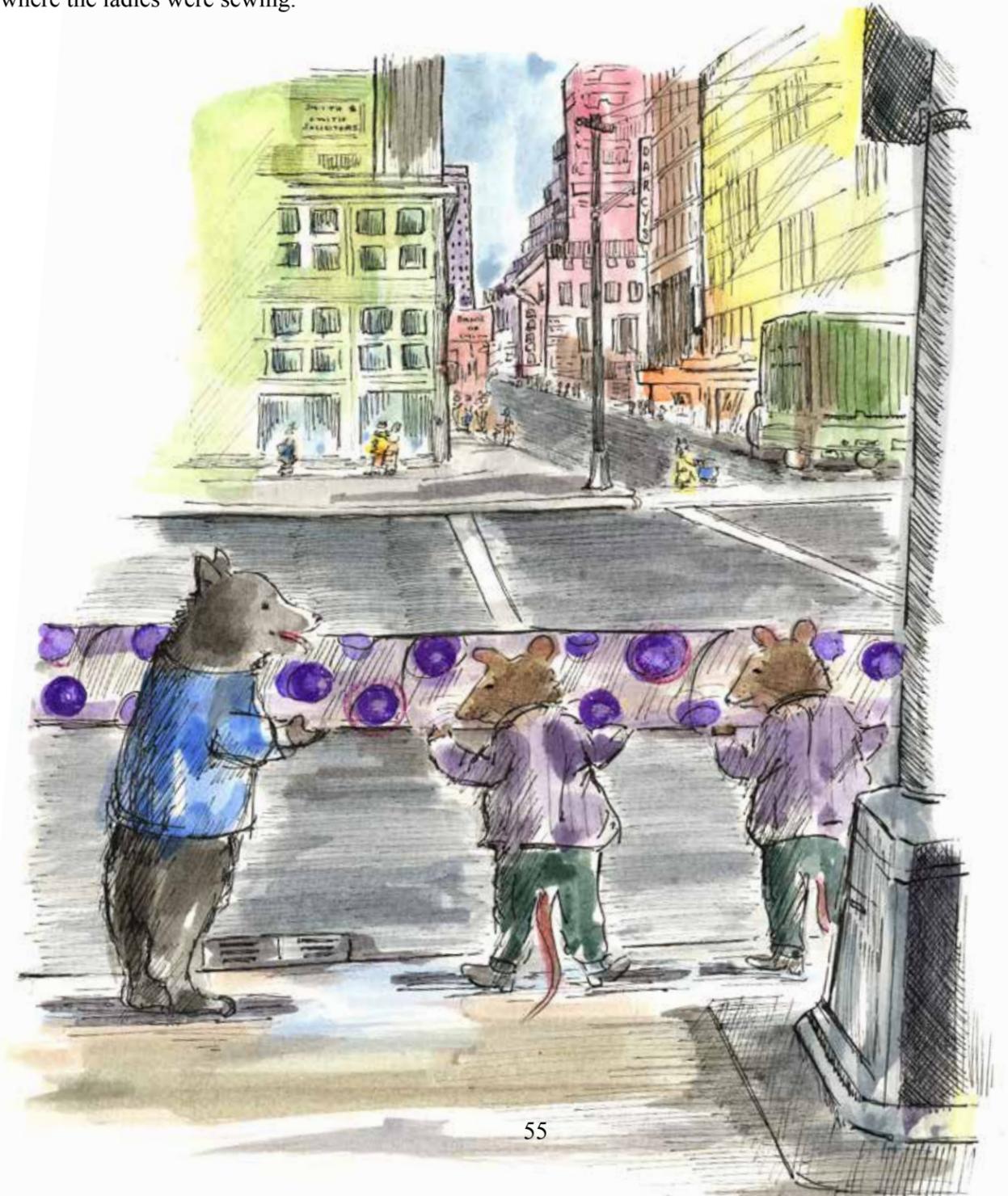
"Wait right here and don't move a speck!" said Newton, and he and Virgil took off to speak to their supervisor. Shortly, they returned with several huge rolls of polyester. The fabric was lightweight, waterproof, and perfectly suited for use as a balloon. The only problem with it? It was polka-dotted!

"What do you think?" asked Virgil. "These are old rolls we've had around here for ages, but they should do the trick."

"It's tacky," admitted Newton, "but it's the only fabric he'll let us have for a reasonable price. We've agreed to work overtime for the next week to pay for it."

Ben wasn't worried about the pattern; he was more concerned with how he'd get the bolts over to the Home for Aged Corgi War Brides. The rain had stopped, but the rolls were too big for him to carry alone.

Luckily, Newton and Virgil were almost ready to clock out for the day, so Ben didn't have long to wait. It took several trips, but the three of them carted the polyester to Elm Street and hoisted it up onto the table where the ladies were sewing.



“Oh, ’ere now, isn’t that luvly,” declared Mrs. Tudor.

Ben wasn’t so sure, but at least it didn’t have any holes in it and would stand up to thorny tree branches, blazing sun, and pelting hail. And with those polka dots, everyone would see Colonel Dewey coming.

The ladies got right to work. Although they were used to making big quilts, this was huge in comparison. Knowing it would be a long night ahead, they made several pots of tea, laid out plates of cookies and squares, and played music to keep themselves from falling asleep. Ben left the room with Newton and Virgil to the tune of “The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy from Company B,” and the rats couldn’t help but do a little swing dance on the way out, which the ladies appreciated immensely.

*He was a famous trumpet man from out Chicago way,  
He had a boogie style that no one else could play.  
He was the top man at his craft,  
But then his number came up, and he was gone with the draft.  
He’s in the army now, a-blowin’ reveille,  
He’s the boogie-woogie bugle boy of Company B.*



“I don’t want to spoil the party,” said Ben hesitantly, once they were in the hallway, “but we still have a major problem. It’s the basket.”

“I know what you’re going to say,” said Virgil. “Those purple polka dots are going to clash with the neutral tones of the basket.”

“That’s right,” agreed Newton. “Maybe we could spray paint the polka dots beige.”

“No, no,” asserted Ben. “That’s not it at all. We don’t even have a basket. And without a basket, the Colonel’s balloon won’t be flying anywhere!”

“A-tisket, a-tasket,” said Virgil, “what we need is a basket.”

“A basket ... a woven basket...” Newton thought too, but came up empty.

“That’s it!” said Ben triumphantly. “Juan Carlos and his family know how to weave baskets!” And with that, he tore out of the Home for Aged Corgi War Brides, running as fast as his feet would take him toward the diner.

Virgil and Newton were left behind, and since they adored the olden days music of the Andrews Sisters, they decided to stay with the ladies, sing a few tunes, and help them with the sewing.

Ben found Juan Carlos behind the restaurant with Maria, Enrique, Fernando, Ernesto, Alfonso, Alejandro, Desiderio, Xavier, Alberto, Rosa, Clarita, Juanita, and the baby, Carmencita. He had worked the earlier shift and was finished for the day.

When he heard the news, he was heartbroken.

“The Colonel, he gives my kids something to look forward to.” He put his rubbery hands over his face. “Without those rides, we are nothing but a family of toads who live behind a diner. But up there...” He pointed to the sky, and all fourteen of them looked up. “Up there, we feel like there is hope for us. Hope for the future.”

“Speaking of hope,” said Ben, “I was kind of hoping that you would agree to help me.” He explained that Mrs. Tudor and her friends were sewing and how Newton and Virgil had obtained the fabric.

“Anything!” cried Juan Carlos, and twelve heads nodded in agreement. (Carmencita gurgled.) “We’ll do anything for the Colonel.”

“Well, I heard that you know how to weave baskets and that you often made twenty of them in a day when you lived in Mexico.”

“Si!”

“Do you think you could weave one big one by tomorrow afternoon?” asked Ben.

In the blink of an eye, the kids were out gathering twigs, Maria was preparing the warm water in which they’d be soaked, and Juan Carlos was off to the hardware store for varnish.

And Ben? He had something important to do at the police station.



## CHAPTER TEN

### UP, UP, AND AWAY!

Over the course of that very long night, Ben alternated between the home on Elm Street, where he helped the ladies and the rats sew, and the diner, where he cheered on the toads as they wove the basket. Because they were experts at what they were doing, and Ben didn't want to get in their way, he spent most of his time with the baby Carmencita, who had grown quite fond of him. She found his velvety ears quite amusing to play with.



Ben watched as Juan Carlos's family soaked the twigs to make them flexible, then braided them neatly into a wide circle. Normally, they would leave them to dry in the sun for a couple of days, but Juan Carlos had to improvise. He put the basket underneath a heat duct at the back of the diner, and it seemed to do the trick. Finally, they varnished the wood.



It was truly gorgeous. A work of art.

Mrs. Tudor's polka-dotted balloon was not exactly artistic, but she and her friends managed to get it sewn — after eleven pots of tea, six plates of cookies, four dozen squares, and sixty-five renditions of "The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B." (According to Mrs. Tudor, had it not been for Delores, who sewed three times as fast as anyone else, they never would have finished in time.)

The ladies were congratulated on a job well done. Then, Virgil and Newton helped Ben attach all the necessary cords and ropes. Next, they went to the diner and fetched the basket. The varnish was not quite dry, but there was no time to wait.

"Oh," declared Virgil, examining the finished product, "it's so nice it makes me want to cry."

"It's the best balloon in the world!" asserted Newton, and everyone agreed.



So Ben and Mrs. Tudor, Virgil and Newton, together with Juan Carlos, Maria, Enrique, Fernando, Ernesto, Alfonso, Alejandro, Desiderio, Xavier, Alberto, Rosa, Clarita, Juanita, and Carmencita, brought the new flying machine to the place where Colonel Dewey had crashed.

He was packing up what was left of his things.

Ben tapped him on the back.

And when the Colonel turned around and saw the brand new balloon and basket, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"This is for you," said Ben. "It's from us — your friends."

And for the first time in his life, Colonel Dewey was speechless.

Then he did what he always did — he invited everyone for a ride in his flying machine.

"Hurrah!" yelled the toads, as they hopped all over the Texan. Mrs. Tudor and Virgil and Newton were also ready to go. Then the Colonel realized there was a problem.

"I'm so sorry," he said, suddenly crestfallen. "I'm afraid I can't take you up after all. I have no permit."

"Yes, you do," said Ben, handing him a receipt that showed the cost had been paid in full.

"I can't let you do that," declared the Colonel. "That was your last ten dollars."

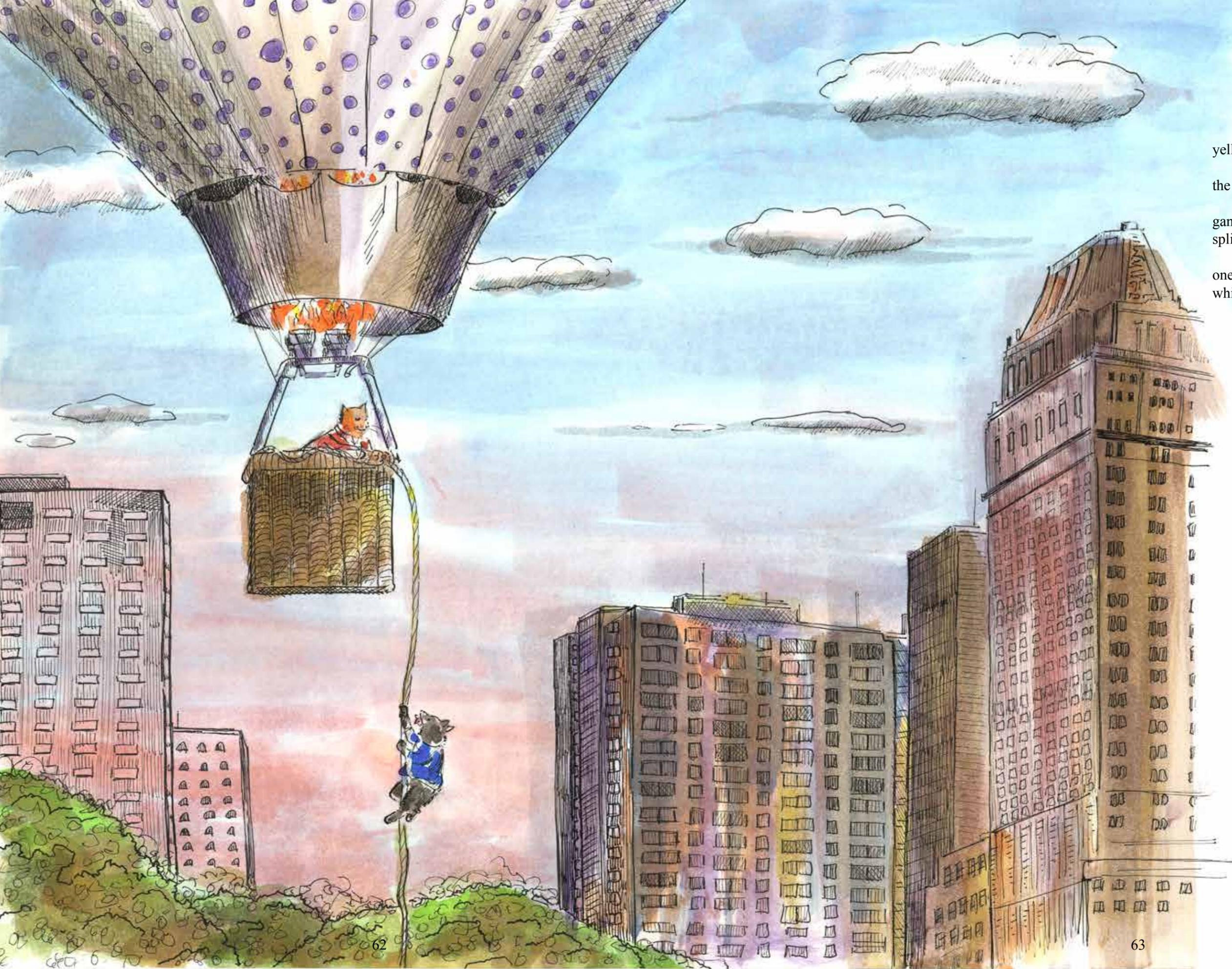


Ben insisted that he didn't need it anymore. The city didn't seem so bad after all.

"You are a true friend, son," said Colonel Dewey, and slapped him on the back. Ben didn't even mind being called son.

So Colonel Dewey's friends went for a ride way above the treetops. Maria held on tight to the baby, Mrs. Tudor held on tight to her teeth, Virgil and Newton held on tight to each other, and Ben ran underneath to help the Colonel guide his new balloon through the city.

It was evening by the time they came down again, and everyone bade the Colonel a fond farewell.



“I’ll be seein’ y’all next month!” he yelled, as he started to drift upwards.

“Unless you’re circumnavigating the globe,” hollered Newton.

And then, when the Colonel began to draw in his lines, Ben made a split-second decision.

Everyone cheered when he grabbed one of the ropes and hung in the air while the cat reeled him in.



Ben knew he'd made the right choice, for no matter where he and Colonel Dewey ended up — whether it was in the next city or halfway across the world — life would never be dreary.