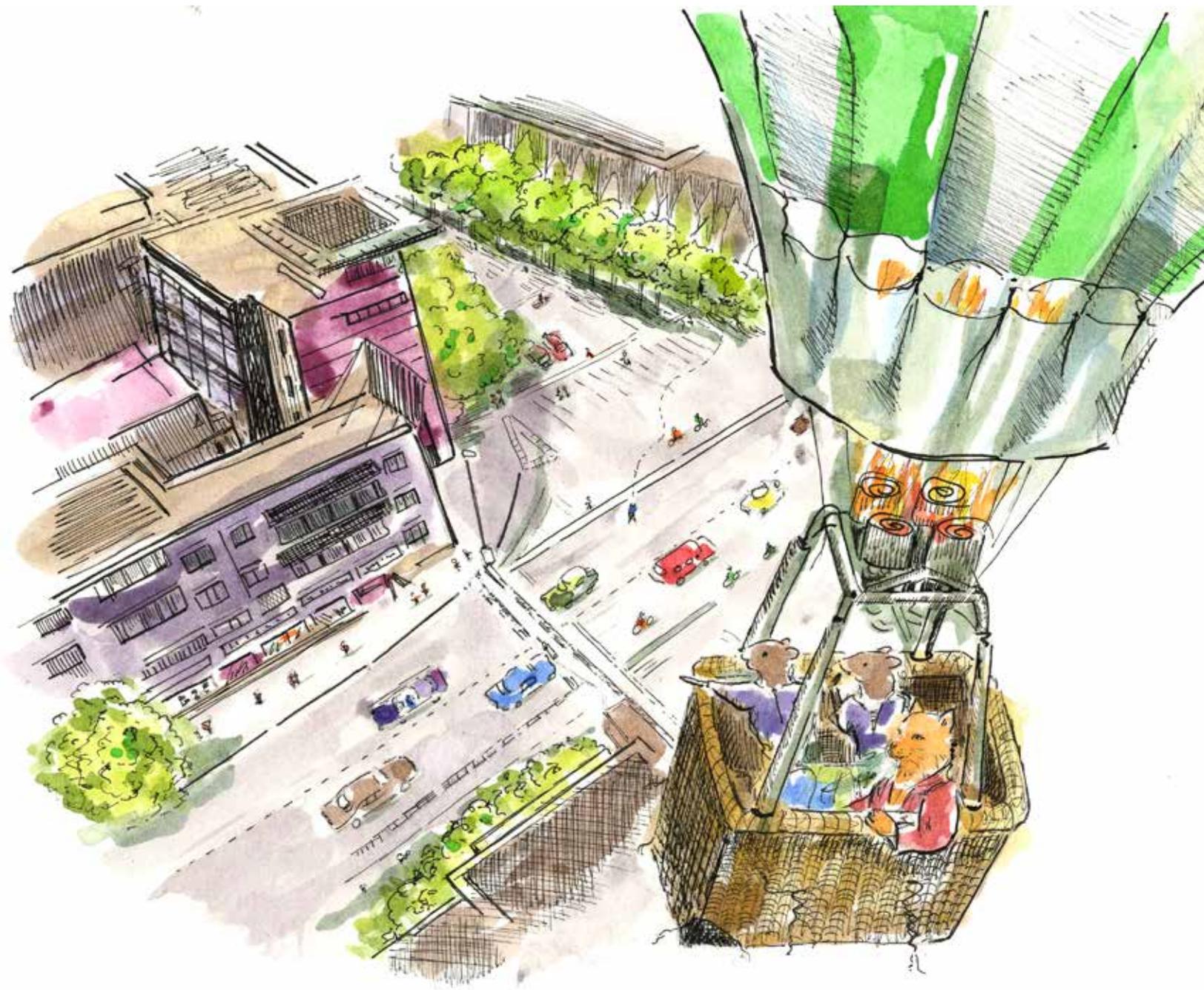


# Ben and the Colonel



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Written and Illustrated  
by Caroline Stellings



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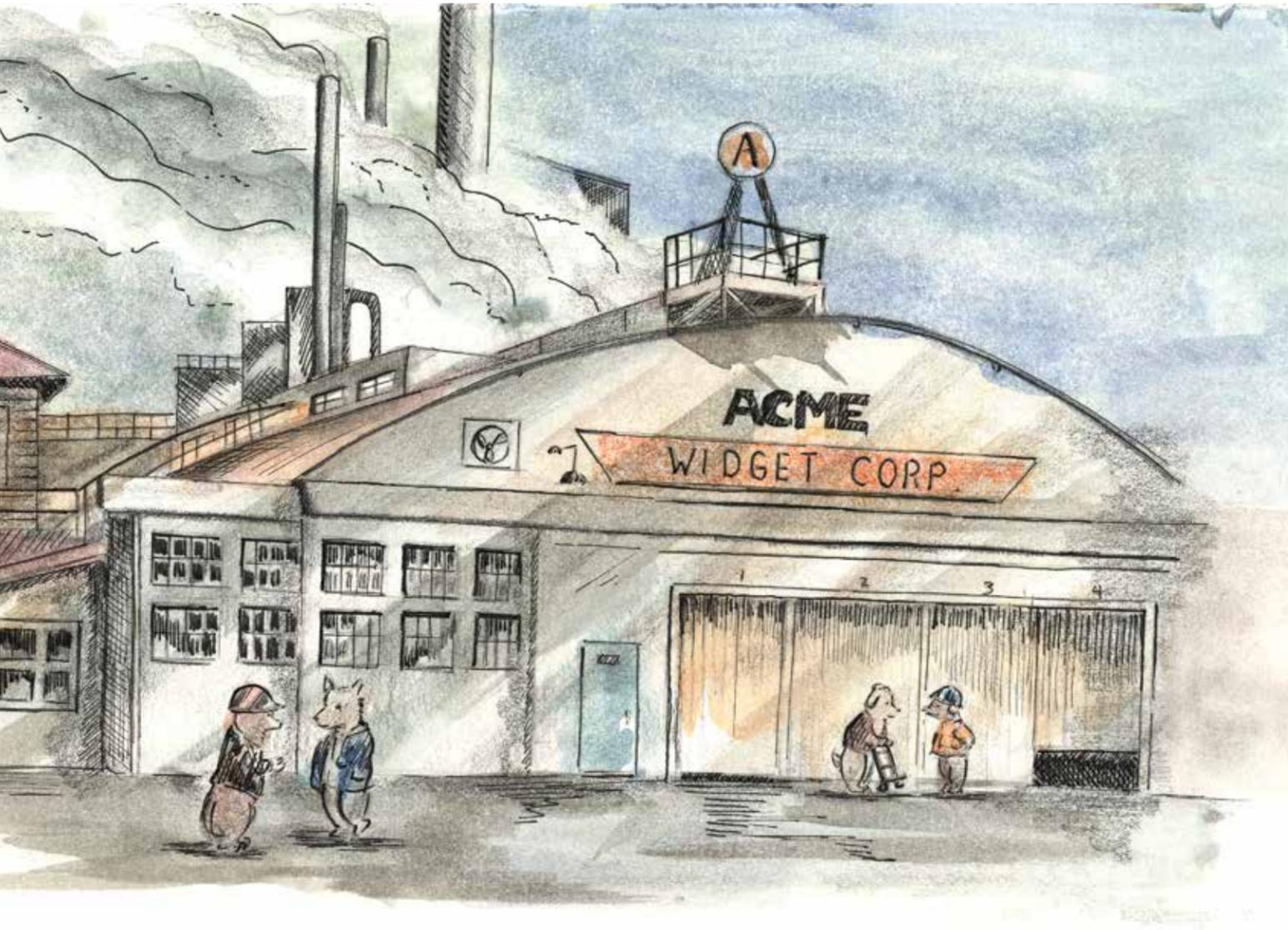
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For my wonderful friend Carol Szuminsky.

## 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—”

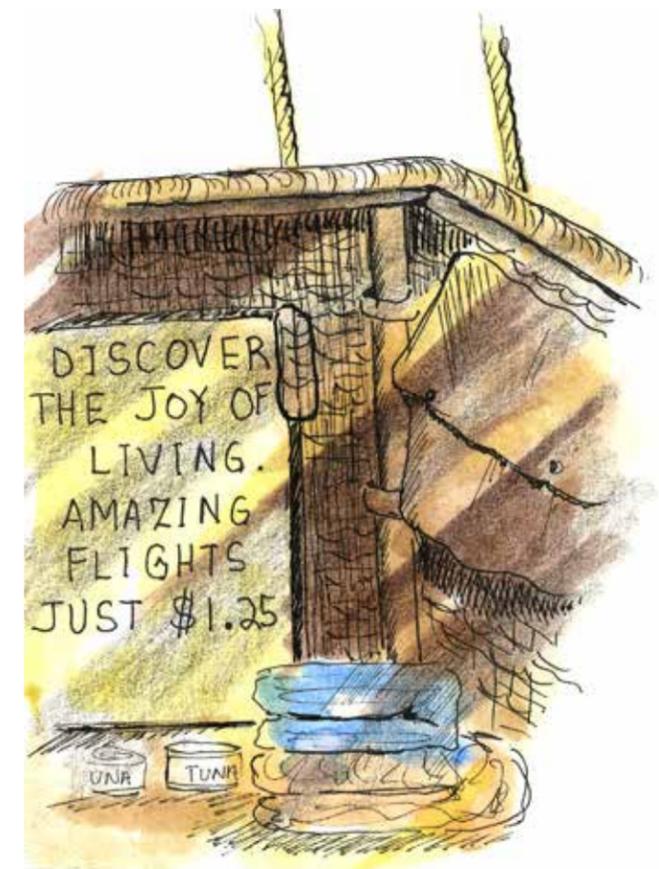
“No, no,” interrupted Ben, “that’s not what I meant.”

“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.”

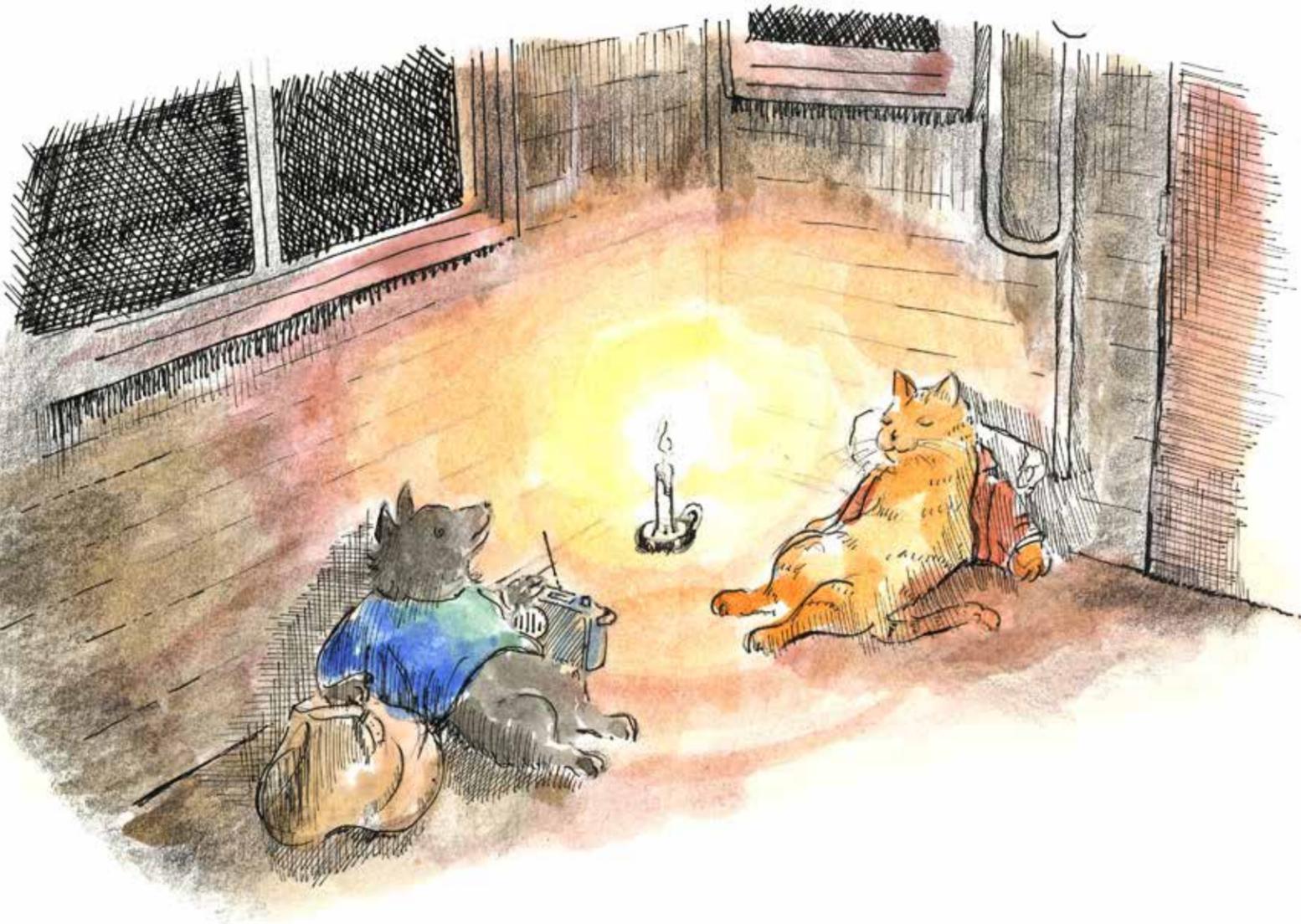
“Don’t what?”



“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.

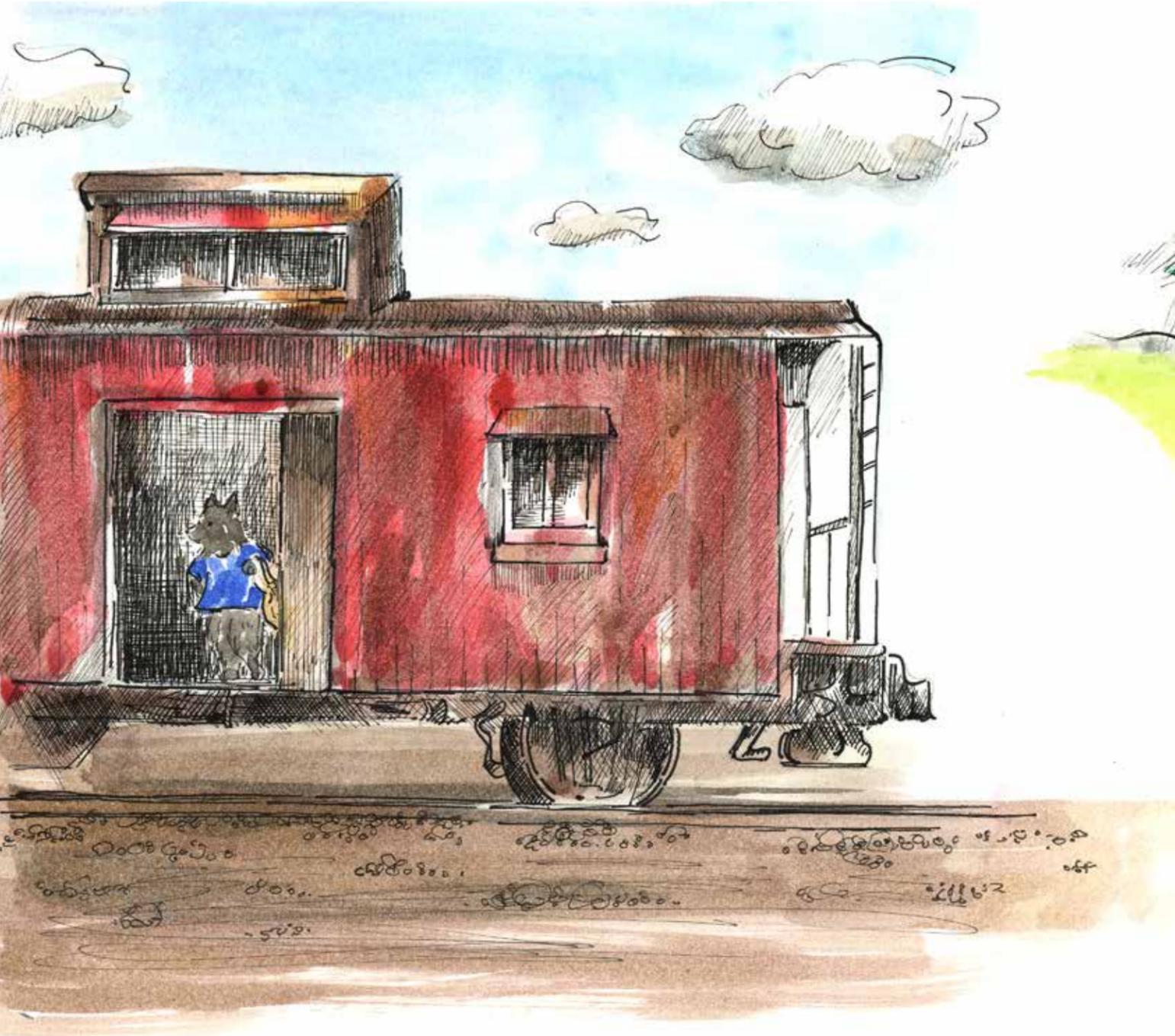
“Problems and troubles look a lot smaller from up there,” he said, and sighed. “A lot smaller.”

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.

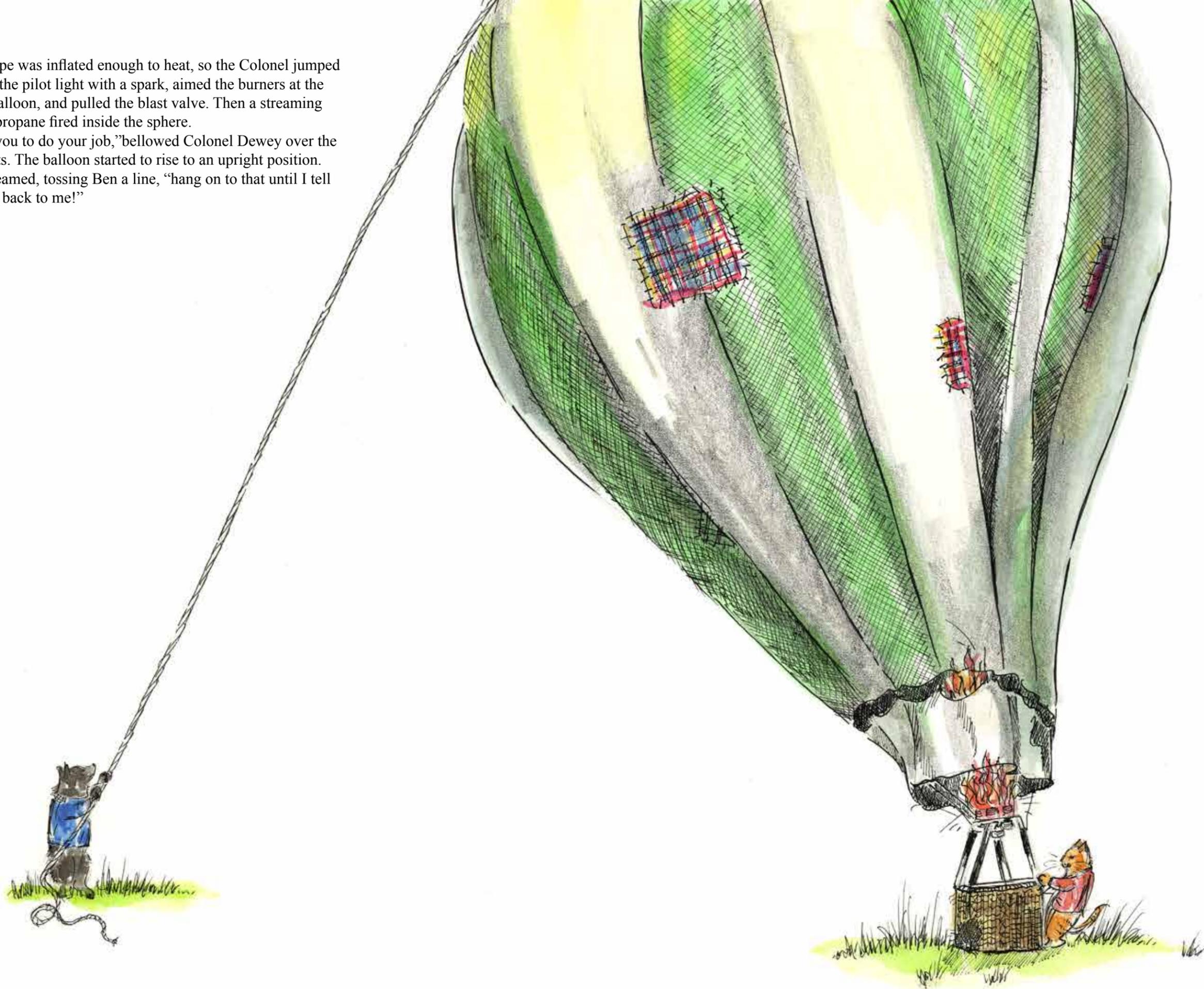
"...and lots of open space." The cat took another gulp of water, then changed elbows. "Of course, you've gotta watch for the cobras. They'll eat you alive. If you land on 'em, that is."

"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 lovely 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 lovely 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.

