

The Adventures of Balloon Boy

Balloon Boy floated high above a field of yellow dandelions. He had been floating for as long as he could remember; in fact, he couldn't remember anything else but floating. There were the clouds and there was the wind; there were birds and bats and insects. There was the sun during the day and the moon and the stars at night, and down below the houses with light leaking from the windows and smoke escaping the chimneys. It was beautiful and it was lonely. But Balloon Boy didn't know it was beautiful, and he didn't know it was lonely. Balloon Boy just floated, and enjoyed the light he saw—sun and moon and stars and windows—and things that flew or floated, like clouds and birds and bugs. And he enjoyed the dandelions he saw in the field far below.

One day, as Balloon Boy floated just about level with some white puffy clouds and far above the rushing white water of a mighty river, he saw some beautiful mountains in the distance. He had seen mountains before, but never got close to them, because Balloon Boy floated wherever the wind blew him, and the wind never blew him toward the mountains. "I wish I could float over to the mountains," Balloon Boy thought. Just then, a golden eagle happened to fly past him on the way to those very mountains. The eagle's wings hardly moved; instead, it simply kept its wings spread and caught the air currents, moving up with the hot air and down with the cold, swirling in half circles and moving steadily towards the mountains. "Wow," thought Balloon Boy. "That eagle is just floating, like me, and yet it's going where it wants to go. I wish I could do that."

Then Balloon Boy had an idea which would change his life. Because, just then, Balloon Boy farted. Balloon Boy, you see, sometimes farted. Just a little. That is, very tiny amounts of the gas inside Balloon Boy would sometimes escape right through Balloon Boy's balloon surface, and when it did, Balloon Boy would suddenly zoom off in the opposite direction—just a little. If he farted south, he zoomed north. If he farted east, he zoomed west. And just at that moment, while Balloon Boy watched the eagle fly west towards the mountain, Balloon Boy farted east and zoomed—just a little—west, in the direction of the eagle and the mountain. And a big smile came over Balloon Boy's balloon face, as he realized for the first time that he didn't need to just float—he could propel himself in whatever direction he wished to go. So Balloon Boy took a deep breath, squeezed really hard, and let out another easterly fart. This time he zoomed far enough west to catch the same air current the eagle had caught, and the air current caught Balloon Boy and pushed him in a great circle towards the eagle and the mountain.

On and on Balloon Boy went, whirling in a great arc on the air current, heading for the mountain. But the air current went in a big circle, and when he had gone halfway around the circle, Balloon Boy started floating away from the mountain and soon he was right back where he had started. Balloon Boy started to cry, and a big tear squeezed through his balloon surface and dripped down his balloon face all the way to the bottom of his balloon head, and then it dripped down the string tied at his

bottom and finally fell off the string and dropped through the air towards the earth. But then Balloon Boy noticed that the air current was taking him towards the mountain again, and he had another idea. He remembered that the eagle had flown in *half-circles* as it traveled towards the mountain. So when Balloon Boy got halfway around the circle, he took a deep breath and farted hard towards the east. Balloon Boy's fart zoomed him west, right out of that air current and into another one. This second air current whirled him in another great arc toward the mountain, and when Balloon Boy had completed another half-circle, he farted east again and zoomed himself into the next air current. Each half-circle took him closer and closer to the mountain, and Balloon Boy was so happy that another big tear squeezed through his balloon surface and rolled down his face, and down the string, and off into the air, falling towards earth. And Balloon Boy suddenly realized that both happy and sad feelings might squeeze tears out of him.

Finally, after many hours of half-circles, easterly farts, and westerly zoomings, Balloon Boy reached the mountain. First, he passed over the foothills. When he started his journey, the ground below him had been a flat meadow with flowers, but now the ground became hilly and rocky. He passed over a dense forest through which he caught glimpses of swift and churning rivers. Then the forest gave way to an alpine meadow filled with flowers—not the dandelions he had seen before, but blue and pink flowers mixed in with white and yellow. And all around them were beautiful butterflies in a riot of colors. And as Balloon Boy got closer to the mountain, the ground below him continued to change. At the edge of the meadow, the ground became rocky and deeply sloped, and still further along, the rocks were covered with snow. Finally Balloon Boy floated right over the peak of the mountain, and below him the ground was completely white. It was so beautiful and peaceful there that Balloon Boy allowed the air current above the mountain to whirl him in full circles for awhile, before he finally gave one more easterly fart, and zoomed west past the mountain's towards the setting sun.

The western sky was crimson and golden as the sun set on the long flat horizon, and as it set Balloon Boy noticed tiny lights starting to appear far below him. At first he thought it might be reflections of the setting sun on some shiny surface of the earth, but then he realized what it was: lights coming on in people's houses as it began to get dark. One by one the tiny windows on the tiny houses lit up, and when Balloon Boy looked above him he noticed the same thing: tiny lights starting to appear. These, of course, were the stars in the sky, which began to appear as the sun sank lower and the sky became dark enough to see the stars. With every minute that passed, more and more little points of light appeared above and below Balloon Boy. When the sun set completely, the little points of light were all that he could see, and Balloon Boy floated in a magical space between the lights above and the lights below. There was a breeze, but he did not feel it, because instead of rushing by him, the breeze pushed Balloon Boy along with it, still in a westerly direction. / Balloon Boy couldn't wait to see where he'd be when the sun came up in the morning. But for now he just enjoyed the twinkling lights, and he kept his eyes open as long as he could to watch them, until finally he fell asleep.

Balloon Boy awoke to see a very different world from the one he was watching before he fell asleep. The sun had come up behind him, flooding the land and the sky with light, and erasing the stars. The tiny houses were now clearly visible below him. But more than that, the tiny houses seemed a lot bigger than they were when he saw them the day before. This confused Balloon Boy, because he knew that houses don't grow. Then he realized what had happened: Balloon Boy had dropped lower, so he was closer to the houses and they *seemed* bigger. He was glad to have figured that out, but then he started to wonder: Why had he dropped lower? He was so low now that he could hear sounds: dogs barking, a child laughing, an axe smacking into a tree that someone was chopping down. And he began to see people walking about, working in the fields, building things, playing with a ball. / Balloon Boy was so low now that the tallest trees were just a few feet below him, and he began to worry that he would get stuck on a branch if he went any lower. A very tall tree loomed in front of him, so he farted north and zoomed south to avoid the tree. He passed the tree, but sank even lower, and that's when Balloon Boy realized what was happening: All those farts were causing him to lose his gas, and the gas was what made him buoyant, because the gas inside him was lighter than the air around him. Every time Balloon Boy farted, he became a little heavier relative to the air around him, and he sank a little lower. With a shock of understanding, Balloon Boy realized that he would soon hit the ground—if he didn't get stuck in a tree before that. And Balloon Boy started to cry, because he feared he would never again be able to soar in the sky with the eagles, and float with the clouds. A big fat tear rolled down Balloon Boy's balloon face, right down to the bottom of his balloon head and down the string tied beneath, until it dripped off the string and fell toward the ground below.

Only, the tear didn't hit the ground below. Instead, it dropped onto the head of a little girl who was passing underneath, and when she felt the tear hit her head, she looked up and saw Balloon Boy floating just a few feet above her. As Balloon Boy drifted in the breeze, the little girl ran after him. Balloon Boy was so low by now that he was always about to run into things—trees, buildings, flag poles—and as he farted this way and that to avoid them, he dropped ever lower, until finally the girl who was chasing him managed to reach up and grab his string. Balloon Boy was caught!

The little girl tugged down on Balloon Boy's string until he was at the same level as her head. She smiled a huge smile, and there was a gap in her top teeth in the front where a baby tooth had fallen out. "I caught you," she said, "and you're mine!" Then she ran off, holding Balloon Boy's string, while he trailed behind. Soon they came to a house, and she opened the door and went inside with Balloon Boy. "Mommy, Mommy," she shouted, "Look what I found floating in the air!" A voice from another room called back: "What did you find this time, Anna?" Anna ran into the room where her mother was cooking rice—it was the kitchen, of course, but Balloon Boy didn't know that—and said, "It's another BALLOON, Mommy! Isn't he beautiful?"

“It’s an ‘it,’ not a ‘he,’ Anna. But yes, it’s a very nice balloon, though it is a little wrinkly because it isn’t inflated very much, and it’s floating pretty low. You’ll have to add some more helium if you don’t want it to end up on the floor where the cats will get it.” Balloon Boy, who was already terrified—he had never been inside anywhere before, had never been caught by anyone, and had no idea what cats were except that they could “get” him—was trembling on the end of his string. He farted a bit this way and that, trying to break his string free from Anna’s hand, but all that did was to make him float even lower—and closer to the cats, whatever they were. “OK, Mommy, I’ll top him off with some helium and put him with the other balloons in my collection.” And off she went with Balloon Boy to the basement.

By this time Balloon Boy was frantic, but he was so low on gas that he couldn’t fart anymore, and as Anna ran down the basement stairs he drifted just a few inches from the steps. A big furry thing chased after him, and some sharp claws came whizzing by his head, but Anna yanked his string just in time and the cat just missed scratching him. That would have been the end of Balloon Boy. But instead, Anna brought him over to a table where there was a big shiny cylinder, and she untied Balloon Boy’s string, and then untied the knot at the bottom of his head. The remaining gas went out of him, and Balloon Boy thought he was going to die. But Anna hooked him up to a hose attached to the shiny cylinder and turned a valve, and suddenly Balloon Boy was fat again, fatter than he had ever been, chock full of gas. Anna re-tied the knot at the bottom of his head, and as she reached for his string to re-attach it, / Balloon Boy floated free once again and headed for the ceiling, hoping to make his escape. He farted this way and that to elude Anna’s grasp, but she was too quick for him. She grabbed him, tied his string on again, and brought him to another part of the basement where many balloons were kept inside a cage. She put Balloon Boy inside, and shut the gate. Then she turned away and ran back up the basement stairs, leaving Balloon Boy and all the other balloons in the cage with two cats staring up at them.

Balloon Boy had never seen other balloons before. He counted seventeen balloons altogether. Red balloons, yellow balloons, blue balloons, white, black, an orange balloon, a purple balloon, green, pink, and turquoise balloons. Each balloon—including Balloon Boy—was touching the ceiling, and each one had a string tied to its knot that trailed down towards the floor. Balloon Boy was very curious about this new part of the world he was discovering, with people, cats, cages, and other balloons. But he was also so sad that he was caged up inside a basement, and couldn’t see the sun and the stars and the clouds and the birds and the flowers and the butterflies. He decided that he needed to find a way to escape. But how? He noticed that there was a gap between the top of the cage and the basement ceiling—just about the size of an inflated balloon—and he decided to try to squeeze through this gap. He farted his way over to the gap and started to push himself against it, but it was a little too small, so he started pushing even harder when he heard a small voice say, “Don’t!” Balloon Boy stopped and looked around, but there weren’t any people in the basement—just seventeen balloons and two cats—so he decided that he must have simply imagined that he heard a voice, and he started pushing himself

into the gap again. “Don’t!” the voice said again. “If you try to push your way through that gap, you’ll rip yourself and all your gas will come out, and you’ll die.”

“Who is speaking?” asked Balloon Boy, looking out from the cage around the basement.

“Me,” said a voice from behind him. Balloon Boy turned around and all he saw were the seventeen balloons.

“Where are you?” asked Balloon Boy.

“Right here,” came the answer, and Balloon Boy saw that it was the orange balloon talking. Balloon Boy was astonished, because he hadn’t thought that any of the other balloons was alive.

“Who . . . Who are you?” Balloon Boy asked, not sure whether to be glad or afraid, but relieved that he could talk to someone at last. “Are all you balloons alive?”

“My name is Orangey-Parngey,” answered the orange balloon. “And no, almost all the other balloons are just balloons, they’re not alive. Except for this one green balloon. I call him Green Bean, but I don’t know his real name. He doesn’t say much. He’s pretty shy.” The green balloon bobbed up and down a bit and shook his string, but didn’t say anything. Balloon Boy figured that was Green Bean’s way of saying “hello.”

“Well, how did you end up in here?” asked Balloon Boy.

“The same way you did,” replied Orangey-Parngey. “That little girl Anna likes to collect balloons, and she has no idea that any of us are alive. It so happens that of the seventeen—well, eighteen now—balloons in this basement, only the three of us are alive.” Green Bean bobbed up and down a little in agreement. “There was another live balloon, a purple one, name of Purple Thing. Poor Purple Thing.”

“What happened to him?” asked Balloon Boy.

“Well, he tried to squeeze through that gap,” said Orangey-Parngey. “The gap you were trying to squeeze through. And the wood there is very rough, with lots of splinters. A splinter went through his skin, and he popped. Went out with a bang, he did. That’s why I was warning you about trying to go through the gap.”

“He went . . . *out*?” Balloon Boy said, hopefully.

“Just an expression,” said Orangey-Parngey. “He died. He exploded, and all his gas went out of him, and he ended up just a piece of trash tied to a string on the floor, and later the little girl Anna came along and threw him away.” Once again Green Bean bobbed in agreement. Balloon Boy was silent a moment, thinking about how

close he had come to exploding, how his adventures had almost come to an end. Then he asked Orangey-Parngey how long he and Green Bean had been in this basement.

"I'm not sure, but Green Bean keeps count of the time. How long has it been, Green Bean?" Green Bean bobbed once, then twice, then a third time, and just kept on bobbing until he had bobbed twenty-seven times. "So Green Bean has been here twenty-seven days," Orangey-Parngey said. "And that means I've been here twenty-eight days, because I arrived the day before Green Bean."

"I don't want to be down here!" Balloon Boy cried. "I want to be outside, and see the clouds and the birds and the butterflies, and float on the breeze, and fart my way here and there, over the mountains and the rivers and the houses and the animals. I can't stay down here. There must be a way to escape!" Orangey-Parngey didn't say anything, and of course neither did Green Bean. Balloon Boy studied the gap that he had been trying to fit his way through, and he came up with an idea. He farted his way up to the gap, and then he farted some more, letting more and more gas escape from the hole at the bottom of his head. As he did so, he became smaller, and when he was small enough, he was able to carefully fart his way through the gap without touching it. He was out of the cage!—much to the amazement of Orangey-Parngey and Green Bean, who had watched in fascination. The only problem was that Balloon Boy had lost so much gas through this effort that he didn't float all the way up to the ceiling anymore, and his string dragged on the ground, catching the attention of the cats.

"Watch out!" yelled Orangey-Parngey. "The cats will drag you down by the string and kill you!" And sure enough, the cats were staring at him and crouching down, swaying slightly as they do right before they leap. Just as the closest cat sprang into the air toward his string, Balloon Boy gave a mighty fart, propelling himself up to the ceiling, and then he farted himself back over the gap, back inside the cage. He was safe from the cats, but he had lost so much gas with all his farting maneuvers that he floated just a few inches above the floor inside the cage. One of the cats lay on the floor beside the cage and reached its front paws in as far as they would go, trying to grab Balloon Boy, her claws missing him by inches.

Just then, the upstairs basement door opened, and Anna yelled down, "Dinner's ready, kitties! Come and get it!" The cats bounded up the stairs and into the kitchen, and Anna shut the basement door behind them. Balloon Boy, Orangey-Parngey, and Green Bean all breathed a sigh of relief. They were still in the cage, and Balloon Boy was about out of gas, but at least the sharp claws of the cats were out of the basement for now, and the three friends had a moment to reflect on Balloon Boy's daring adventure.

"How did you *do* that?" asked Orangey-Parngey. "Green Bean taught us how to fart like that, and how to move up and down and across. But how did you make yourself *smaller*?"

“Why, didn’t you notice?” said Balloon Boy. “The more you fart, the smaller you get, and the smaller you get, the more things you can fit through.”

“We noticed that we got lower as we farted, but I don’t think we thought about getting smaller,” Orangey-Parngy replied, and Green Bean bobbed in agreement. (Or maybe it was more like a dance.) “I’m glad you told us about getting smaller. It might give us some good ideas for getting out of here.”

“Like what?” asked Balloon Boy.

Green Bean’s dance became more excited, and Orangey-Parngy said, “Well, for one thing it means that we can do what you just did: We can fart our way out of here.”

“Well, yeah,” replied Balloon Boy. “But look what happened to me. What good will it do to get out of this cage, if all it means is that we sit on the floor out there and wait for the cats to come back and kill us? That’s not a plan!”

“No, that’s not a plan,” agreed Orangey-Parngy, and Green Bean rotated a bit to first one side and then the other, as though she was shaking her head. “But it’s the beginning of a plan. Let’s just figure out the next steps.”

“Like what?” Balloon Boy asked. He had little faith that any plan would work.

Orangey-Parngy explained. “Well, if we could fart our way through that gap and then over to the gas cylinder, maybe we can somehow get ourselves filled up so we go up to the ceiling where the cats can’t reach us. Then maybe we can wait until the basement door is open, and float up and through until we find a way outside.” Green Bean was dancing so fast in excitement that Balloon Boy couldn’t see her clearly: She was just a green blurry bean. Balloon Boy began to get interested.

“Well, it sounds like a long-shot,” he said. “But anything’s better than being stuck in this cage.” Then Balloon Boy realized something, and got quiet. “You’ll have to go without me,” he said. “I’m stuck here. I don’t even have enough gas left to fart myself up to the gap, let alone over to the table.”

“We’ll get you there,” Orangey-Parngy replied, and Green Bean floated over and wrapped her string around Balloon Boy’s head, and Orangey-Parngy reached his string out and grabbed Balloon Boy’s string. Balloon Boy had never known that he could move his string, and he was amazed to discover now that he could make his string give a little squeeze to Orangey-Parngy’s string, and he felt a little squeeze from Green Bean’s string around his head, and together the three friends rose to the gap above the cage, propelled by the farts of Green Bean and Orangey-Parngy. Balloon Boy smiled in gratitude, and awaited this next adventure.

Rising quickly on the farts of Orangey-Parngey and Green Bean, the three balloons were soon at the gap at the top of the cage. Now came the tricky part. Balloon Boy was already small enough to fit through the gap, but both Orangey-Parngey and Green Bean had to fart out some gas so they would be small enough to fit through without touching the splintered wood around the gap. “Might as well have some fun with it,” said Orangey-Parngey. Leaving Balloon Boy in the care of Green Bean, Orangey-Parngey farted himself in circles around the cage until he was small enough to fit through the gap. “Your turn now!” he said to Green Bean, and he wrapped his string around Balloon Boy and around the gap framing while Green Bean zoomed around the cage. When Green Bean came back, she too was small enough to fit through. So with one final fart together—PHTHRRRRRT—Green Bean and Orangey-Parngey went through the gap, pulling Balloon Boy behind them. They were out of the cage at last!

But when they had passed the gap, they dropped to the basement floor, because now all three were low on gas. “Now what?” asked Balloon Boy. “If those cats come back while we’re here on the floor, we’re done for.”

“With whatever gas we’ve got left, we’ve got to fart our way over to the gas cylinder on that table, and figure out a way to get filled up,” said Orangey-Parngey. Green Bean danced a bit and then she took off, expertly farting her way up to the table with the cylinder, although of course she lost even more gas in the process. She was just about empty! But she danced a bit on the table to encourage the others to join her.

“Let’s go!” said Balloon Boy, and he and Orangey-Parngey farted off the basement floor and up to the table. All three were really small now, only a few inches in diameter.

“OK,” said Balloon Boy. “Let’s see if we can get your idea to work.” Green Bean gave a little dance, and wrapped her string around the lever that releases the gas, and Balloon Boy used the last of his gas to fart up to the cylinder’s nozzle. He found that he could loosen his knot enough to wriggle his way onto the nozzle, and Green Bean pulled on the lever which opened the valve. Gas came rushing into Balloon Boy, and he started to grow large again. So large in fact, and so fast, that Orangey-Parngey yelled, “Get off! Quick! Or you’ll explode!” Balloon Boy tightened his knot, and the gas pushed against it and popped him off and up to the ceiling. It worked!

Next Orangey-Parngey got filled up, and then he worked the lever while Green Bean filled up. Soon all three friends were fat and happy up at the ceiling, giddy with success. Green Bean led them in a wild dance as they zoomed around exploring the basement, to see if there was some other way out. There wasn’t. Some houses have outside doors that lead to the basement, but in this house the only entrance to the basement was through the door in the kitchen.

“OK,” said Orangey-Parngey. Looks like we’ll have to stick to the plan. When the basement door is open, we’ll get out of here!”

“But we have to have more of a plan than that,” said Balloon Boy. “They might put the cats down here again, and then shut the door.”

“Cats can’t reach us now,” said Orangey-Parngey. “We’re too high up off the floor.” Green Bean began to shake, and Balloon Boy knew what she meant.

“Cats can jump,” Balloon Boy said. “As long as we’re out here, they’ll try to get to us, and if we’re not careful—if we let our string down for even an instant—they will get us. That’s why Anna keeps the balloons in a cage.”

“Good point,” said Orangey-Parngey. “Let’s figure out a hiding place in case the cats come back.” Balloon Boy said that he remembered a coat rack in a corner of the basement with old clothes hanging on it, and thought they could hide behind that if they needed to. Orangey-Parngey agreed, and Green Bean nodded. Just then the door opened at the top of the stairs, and they heard Anna stop and say, “Just the one can, Mom? Or do you want two?” As Anna’s mother replied, the three balloons zoomed behind the clothes rack and hid. Anna ran down the stairs and went over to an old pantry right beside the clothes rack. But she was intent on getting a can from the pantry and didn’t notice the balloons just a few feet away, only partially hidden by the clothes. She started back up the stairs, but stopped and went over to the cage. “Hey, where’s my new balloon?” she said to herself. She kept looking among the fifteen balloons still in the cage, but of course she couldn’t find her “new balloon,” which was Balloon Boy. “That’s weird,” she said, and started looking around the basement. The three friends behind the coat rack were terrified she’d find them! At that moment, however, Anna’s mother yelled down the stairs. “Anna, I need that can of peas for the casserole. Come on!”

“OK, Mom,” Anna replied. “I’m just trying to find my new balloon. It’s not in the cage anymore.”

“I’m sure it’s there, dear,” her mother said. “You can look again after dinner. But right now I need those peas.” So Anna went up the stairs to the kitchen, and shut the door behind her.

“Whoa! That was a close one!” said Orangey-Parngey. “But if she comes back after dinner to look around, she’s sure to find us. What’ll we do?” Green Bean then did the most surprising thing: She zoomed right up the basement stairs to the closed door, and up to the stairway ceiling above the door.

“Is she crazy?” asked Orangey-Parngey. “Anna will catch us for sure if we go up there.” But Balloon Boy was beginning to understand Green Bean’s idea.

“No—in fact it’s a brilliant idea! Anna won’t see us up there, because when people walk down stairs, they look down, not up, so they can see where they’re going. I noticed how she walked down the steps before. If we’re above her head, she’ll never see us. And she’ll probably leave the door open, so we can fart our way out of the

basement!” Green Bean danced wildly in agreement, and so Balloon Boy and Orangey-Parngy zoomed up to join her at the edge of the ceiling above the basement door.

The friends were so fat now with gas that there was just enough room for all three of them in the narrow space at the ceiling at the top of the stairs above the basement door. As they bobbed around in the gentle air currents, they would sometimes rub up against each other as they passed by, with a rubbery “RRRRPZ” sound, which struck them funny. Plus, it tickled! So all three balloons started to giggle as they waited there, and Balloon Boy was surprised to hear sound coming out of Green Bean. As they continued to RRRRRRPPZ past one another, the giggling turned to loud laughter, and soon each was RRRRRRPZing the others on purpose just to make them laugh. Between the RRRRRRPZing and the laughter, it was getting pretty loud, and the three balloons forgot the danger they were in. Suddenly the basement door swung open, and Anna looked down the stairs. Just inches above her head, the three balloons became totally still.

“No, I don’t see anything, Mom,” she said. “Yeah, I heard it too, and I thought it was coming from the basement. But I don’t hear anything here, so I guess it’s coming from someplace else. I’ll check the front porch.” As Anna closed the door, the three friends could hear Anna’s mother say, “Such a funny sound! Like laughter, if mice could laugh. And another sound too, like rubber duckies rubbing against each other. Maybe there’s something wrong with the water heater.”

All three balloons breathed a sigh of relief when the door finally closed. Orangey-Parngy spoke first: “That was close! We’ve gotta be careful, and have our plan ready to put into action. The next time that door opens, we’ve gotta be ready to move out of here—right through the doorway into the kitchen.”

“And then what?” asked Balloon Boy. “Once we’re in the kitchen what do we do? How will we get outside?” Green Bean formed her string into a question mark, and danced in agreement.

Orangey-Parngy thought a minute. “Well, I don’t know what we’ll do next. We’ll have to figure that out once we get through that door and see what the kitchen is like, and try to find our way to a door or a window to get outside.”

“Okay,” said Balloon Boy. “But first we have to get someone to open that door again, and then we need to go through the doorway without being seen. How do we do that?” Before Orangey-Parngy could respond, Green Bean gave a quick fart—PHTHRRRT—and zoomed down the basement stairs. As Balloon Boy and Orangey-Parngy watched, she went over to the cage and opened it, gathered all the other 15 balloons and brought them over to the foot of the basement stairs, where they bobbed against the ceiling. Then she zoomed back up the stairs and started

RRRPZing against Balloon Boy and Orangey-Parngey, making them laugh despite themselves.

“What are you *doing*, Green Bean?” asked Orangey-Parngey through his laughter. “Anna will come back again when she hears us!” Green Bean danced in excitement, and Balloon Boy suddenly understood her plan.

“I get it!” said Balloon Boy. “Anna will come back, see the balloons at the basement ceiling at the bottom of the steps, and go straight down there without seeing us and without closing the door. Then we can get out of here and into the kitchen while she’s collecting her balloons!”

And no sooner had Balloon Boy said these words, than the door opened and Anna appeared. “My balloons!” Anna said as she raced down the stairs to gather them, never looking up. And as she did so, the three friends gave discreet little farts—*phthrt*—and zoomed through the doorway and up to the kitchen ceiling. They were out of the basement!

But not out of danger. The cats were in the kitchen, and they were watching the three balloons. Fortunately, the kitchen ceiling was high, so the balloons were out of the cats’ reach, although they began stalking the balloons and jumping up on the counters and the stove trying to get closer to them.

“OK, we’ve gotta think fast,” said Orangey-Parngey. “Anna will be back up here soon, and when she sees those cats stalking us, she’ll look to see what they’re after and she’ll find us.”

“We’ve got to hide,” said Balloon Boy, “and wait for Anna and her mother to go to sleep. Then we can come out again and figure out how to escape from the house.” Green Bean immediately dashed to a cabinet high up near the ceiling, wrapped her string around the handle, and opened it. It was filled with boxes and cans of food, but the next cabinet she opened was empty, and she danced a dance to beckon over her friends. “Come on!” said Balloon Boy, and with a quick *phthrt* he and Orangey-Parngey zoomed in to the cabinet, and Green Bean zoomed in behind them, closing the cabinet door as she did so, just as Anna’s mother came into the kitchen. She saw the two cats staring up at the closed door of the cabinet holding the balloons, their eyes wide and their bodies taut.

“What are you two so interested in?” she asked the cats. “Silly animals. You’re always stalking imaginary birds and mice.” Then she moved to the basement door. “Anna! What’s going on down there?”

“Somehow my balloons got out of the cage, and three of them are missing.” Anna replied. “I don’t understand it.”

“Well, it’s time for bed now. Let’s figure it out in the morning.”

“Okay, Mom. But it’s so weird,” Anna said as she came back up the steps and into the kitchen.

“Yeah, it’s strange,” said her mother as they turned off the kitchen light and left to go upstairs to bed. “The cats were acting weird too. And there was that funny laughing sound earlier. Sometimes I just don’t understand what’s going on.” The balloons in their cabinet heard the footsteps of Anna and her mother retreating up the stairs, and after a while everything was quiet.

After waiting a few minutes to make sure the coast was clear, Green Bean gave a little fart—*phthrt*—pushing herself against the inside of the cabinet door, and it opened. The kitchen was pretty dark: There was the dim light of a distant streetlight coming through the back door window, and there were deep shadows all along the floor. A cat could be in any one of those shadows. “Keep to the center of the ceiling,” whispered Orangey-Parngy. “That way, we’ll be far enough away from the stove and counters that the cats can’t jump up on them to reach us.” Balloon Boy saw Green Bean give a little shimmer of agreement in the low light, and the three friends *phthrted* their way from the cabinet to the center of the room at the ceiling. Below them they could sense movement in the shadows, and Balloon Boy thought he saw the glint of a cat’s eye in a deep pool of shadow near the doorway to the dining room. He was frightened of the cats, but also worried about the plan. How were they going to get out of this building, back to the blue sky, and the stars at night, and the pink clouds of sunset, and the soaring birds? How would they get back to all that? “What now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Orangey-Parngy. “I was hoping we’d figure that out once we got up here. Or that we’d find something, like, I don’t know, an open door or window or something . . .” Orangey-Parngy’s voice trailed off.

“*That’s* the plan?” Balloon Boy whispered in a strangled sort of voice. “People don’t keep their doors and window open at night! We’ll never get out of here!”

Green Bean floated past Orangey-Parngy and right up to Balloon Boy. She wrapped her string around his head and pulled him close to her, then she farted gently and zoomed right out of the kitchen, right through the open doorway into the dining room, Orangey-Parngy following close behind. “What . . . what are you doing?” Balloon Boy asked Green Bean, although he wasn’t expecting an answer.

“I think she means that we can’t just stand around complaining and whining,” Orangey-Parngy said. “This is our chance, and we have to use this time to explore the house and find a way. Right, Green Bean?” Green Bean let go of Balloon Boy’s head and gave a little dance of agreement.

The three friends were in the dining room by now, which like the kitchen was dimly lit with lots of shadows. Orangey-Parngey had drifted close to the wall when they entered the room, and Balloon Boy noticed that there was a chair against the wall almost directly under Orangey-Parngey, and a little light fell on the seat of that chair. Then Balloon Boy saw one of the cats spring out of a shadow on the floor and up onto the chair. “Look out!” he yelled to Orangey-Parngey. Green Bean turned to see what the trouble was, and when she did she saw the cat too, and she farted so hard—PPHTRRRRRRRRRRT—that she bounced off the wall next to Orangey-Parngey, distracting the cat, who was just about to leap, and giving Orangey-Parngey time to escape by farting his way back to the center of the ceiling. Green Bean bounced so hard off the wall that she ended up back where she started—before she farted—with her two friends.

“Thank you!” whispered Orangey-Parngey in a shaky voice, for he was very shaken up, thinking about how close he had come to getting popped by the cat’s claws. “I forgot my own advice to stay in the center of the room!”

The balloons looked around the darkened room. There were two windows, but of course neither one was opened, and there was another doorway leading to the living room. Staying strictly in the center of the ceiling, the three balloons drifted into that room. The light was still dim, coming from glowing embers in the fireplace, all that remained of a fire that Anna’s mother had built earlier that evening to take the chill out of the air. There were two more windows and the front door—all closed—and a set of steps heading upstairs. “Shall we go upstairs and look for windows?” Balloon Boy asked. But Green Bean was already drifting up the stairs, so they followed her. Upstairs there were two bedrooms—both with their doors shut—and a bathroom, but the bathroom window was shut.

“Well, if worse comes to worse,” said Balloon Boy, “and we can’t figure out an escape tonight, we can go back into hiding and try again tomorrow.”

“Yeah, we can,” said Orangey-Parngey, “but it’s really risky. I think if we’re not out of here tonight, we’ll probably be discovered in the morning. That cabinet we hid in wasn’t totally empty. I saw some cereal when we were hiding there, and Anna will probably eat some tomorrow morning.”

“Okay, then let’s figure it out tonight.” Balloon Boy said. “Let’s see, there’s no way out from the basement, and on the first and second floor all the windows we can get to and all the outside doors are shut. Is there anything else? Is there a slot where the mail comes in? What about a vent in the kitchen? Or a dryer vent? Maybe there’s a little pet door at the bottom of one of the outside doors.” So the three friends zoomed around the house to see if they could find a way outside. There was a mail slot, but it was far too small. There were vents for the dryer and the stove, but no way for the balloons to enter them, and they were too small anyway. There was a pet door for the cats in the back door, but it was too low to the ground, and the cats would get them before they could get out. They gathered in the living room to

examine the door slot again, but by this time the embers of the fire had died out and so there was no light to see the slot. “Too bad the fire went out,” said Orangey Parngey.

“Wait, how come there’s no smoke in here?” Balloon Boy asked. “You know, from the burning wood in the fireplace? How come it didn’t get all smoky in here?”

“Well, it went up the chimney, Balloon Boy,” Orangey-Parngey replied. Suddenly all three friends stopped and stared at each other. The chimney! Of course! If the smoke went up the chimney, maybe balloons could go up the chimney too!

Green Bean, of course, was the first to *phthrt* her way over to the fireplace. There was a metal screen in front of the fireplace, with enough room at the top for a fat balloon to slip through, but with sides that would keep the cats from getting through. “Wait,” said Balloon Boy. “It may still be hot.” Green Bean danced in agreement, and so the three friends waited, and waited, and waited. Every hour or so they checked to see how hot it was, but each time they checked it was still too hot. Finally, just before dawn—they could already hear Anna and her mother stirring, getting dressed and brushing their teeth—the fireplace had cooled down enough.

“Be real careful of the bricks inside the chimney. They probably have sharp edges on them that can pop you,” said Green Bean. Orangey-Parngey and Balloon Boy stared at her in disbelief.

“What?” said Balloon Boy. “Wait. You can talk?” Green Bean nodded. “Well, why didn’t you say something before?”

“Didn’t have anything to say before,” Green Bean said. Just then Anna’s footsteps could be heard on the stairs. “C’mon, let’s go. Stay in the center of the chimney.” And Green Bean *phthrted* her way over the metal screen and down into the fireplace, followed by Balloon Boy and Orangey-Parngey. Just as Anna came into the living room, up they went into the chimney: first Green Bean, then Balloon Boy, and finally Orangey-Parngey. Sensing some movement at the fireplace, Anna turned just as Orangey-Parngey disappeared up the chimney, and she screamed in astonishment. Running outside, she stared up at the top of her chimney, just in time to see her three balloons emerge into the pink light of dawn and up into a sky that was still full of stars.