

Through the Air

People whisper of the small blue house on the corner where Second and Park Streets meet -- or rather the little old man who lives in it. A man obsessed with flight.

Behind the house there is a yard scattered with bits and pieces of a machine. The little man works on a project alone in his yard. He toils every day without talking or even seeing another human. He works on his project tirelessly, adding, removing, fixing. What he seeks is nothing less than freedom, at least that's what he believes. For his project is an air balloon. The balloon's wicker basket lies to the side. The envelope (the balloon itself) hangs on the back of the man's house, sporting an array of bright colors. The man sits at a bench fiddling with a burner, the key to his freedom.

Raindrops begin to fall. He gathers up some odds and ends and brings them inside. As the hours go by, the man begins to slump and finally falls asleep. The metal tool he is holding falls to the floor.

The next morning, the man dresses, looking forward to the day's work. But, as he walks through the house, he notices things he ignored before: laundry piling up, dirty dishes on the table, his cat yowling for its overdue meal. Suddenly, the man feels tired, sad and embarrassed. He reaches for the light switch and realizes that he has no power.

He opens the front door to see if his neighbors have power and feels something furry brush his leg. His cat, his *indoor* cat, has escaped and rushed outside.

The man dives to grab the cat but it avoids his clutches. Then a pair of unfamiliar hands swoops the cat off the ground. The startled little man looks up to see a slim man wearing a lineman's helmet, holding the struggling cat.

The lineman explains he is there to trim branches that are dangerously close to the power lines. He chuckles and attempts to hand the cat over, but the ferocious feline swipes at him and leaves a red cut down his cheek. Satisfied, the cat drops from the lineman's arms and runs back inside.

The little man, flustered, apologizes for his cat's behavior and asks the lineman to come inside to treat the cut. At first the lineman refuses, but as blood begins to trickle down his face he accepts and enters the house.

As the lineman cleans his wound over the bathroom sink, his host nervously ponders what to do. It's been so long since anyone has been in the house! He starts to tidy up while the lineman remains in the restroom.

He quickly clears away the laundry and sweeps up the dirt on the floor. The lineman emerges, thanks the man, and heads for the door. But the little man stutters and practically begs him to stay for a cup of coffee.

The lineman looks at the man: his wrinkled shirt, the unkempt gray mustache, his thoroughly worn pair of shoes. He nods. The little man eagerly sits the worker down and prepares coffee. When he returns, he finds his guest staring curiously at the half-assembled air balloon in the backyard.

Excited, the little man points out various details of the balloon. The lineman listens, asking the occasional question. Finally, thrilled to show someone his project, the man invites the worker to come outside to take a closer look.

The little man begins to show off all the bits and pieces of his balloon, hardly taking any time to breathe. Listening, the worker notices that the man speaks as if his masterpiece was completed. But what the lineman sees is hundreds of parts lying on the dead lawn. Feeling sorry for the man, he places a hand on his shoulder and asks if he can help finish it. The man accepts, and they decide to meet the next day.

In the morning, the lineman arrives holding the hand of a young boy. The man greets them and learns the youngster is the worker's son. The man explains what needs to be done to complete his balloon.

After about thirty minutes, a neighbor and her daughter notice the activity in the yard. Drawn by her curiosity, the girl edges into the yard. Her mother attempts to pull her back, but the little man gestures them in. He hands the girl a tape measure to play with, and the mother smiles.

Again and again, people are drawn to the yard, and many pitch in to help. They work well into the day, helping each other as friends do. The team picks up speed as they add, remove and fix until at last the balloon is finished!

They celebrate with the man and decide to feast on dinner. They bring out the little man's dining room table as others arrive with food. The adults talk and laugh as the children play with the spare parts of the momentous project.

In the middle of the feast, the man approaches the balloon and stares at it. The basket sits upright on the ground. The envelope hovers, its colors glistening. He looks at the burner -- his key to freedom -- but for some reason he no longer admires it so much.

His friends walk up and smile. He grins back. The lineman lays a hand on the man's shoulder and nods. The man steps into the basket. He hears a faint sound coming from the house, and he looks up to see the cat pawing at the window. He lights the burner, and he feels himself beginning to rise. His friends watch and wave as the air balloon lifts off the ground.

The man cries tears of joy as he steers his vessel. As the balloon drifts away from his small blue house he realizes that he wants to return. For he has friends that he knows will be there when he comes back.