

# Fire Balloons

## A Short Story by Rich Michaels

Chrissy looked across to where Sean was standing. He was looking directly into the heart of the bonfire, and she could see the flames reflected in his eyes: orange and red, warm. "Go on! Jump!" she wanted to say, but instead she just made tight little fists with both hands.

Scat wasn't keeping quiet, though. He'd already jumped across the flames "for luck" (everyone said) and was shouting at Sean to follow him across. The fire wasn't very big, after all, much smaller than the stream they had jumped across to get into Hangman's Wood almost every weekend since - how long? Since they had been old enough to jump across little streams.

Scat, the flame-haired, gangly youth bobbing on the edge of the fire, who had leaped from one side to the other, sparks trailing in the frayed cuffs of his jeans, taunted Sean to join him. Scat had frequently done the more dangerous things first. It wasn't that he was brave, it was just that he usually didn't stop to think about the danger, or even consider that there was any risk involved. More often than not, he just didn't think. He started to make clucking noises, distantly related to those a chicken might make, stopping when he realised that Sean had once again retreated into another place, a solitary domain that he seemed to have discovered quite recently. Scat tried to ignore the feeling that he was being excluded, by his best friend, from something important.

Others around the fire whistled their encouragement. The trio of friends knew most of crowd to say hello to but not much more than that. Besides, most of them were old, so why would they anyway? One old woman, a veritable crone indeed - she must have been 40 if she was a day - said "It'll be bad luck if you don't," and winked knowingly at Chrissy. Chrissy blushed, feeling the witch had seen into her innermost chamber.

Sean wasn't hesitating because he was frightened. He'd been jumping the fires every midsummer since he was, well, old enough to jump fires. What had made him retreat into himself was the sudden thought: How can jumping a fire bring you luck, or fortune or friends? For years he'd gone along with the idea, or rather, he hadn't questioned it. But now, at the ripe old age of 14, the question of its validity as a rational act abruptly overwhelmed his senses. Why hadn't this occurred to him before? He glanced sideways at Scat's cousin, Chrissy, and she quickly looked away.

Well, reasoned Sean, even if it won't bring me good luck to jump over the fire, it won't bring me bad luck either. Unless I fall in it. The thought amused him, and he came out of his trance and entered instead into a state of serious cool. He suddenly became stiflingly aware of his own presence and his *élan* and, as a consequence, stepped quickly back, out of the firelight and into the shadow where his blonde, cropped hair appeared to turn to ash.

"See," he said, almost to himself "I was so quick you didn't even notice".

"I noticed," thought Chrissy so loudly the flames burned brighter.

Just as Scat was working up to say something back, a little cry went up and someone in the flickering shadows was pointing out the bubbling point of light that floated above their heads, crossing the dark sky visible between the two lines of houses. It was low enough for them to hear the greasy roar of its paraffin flame. Everyone, including the newly-cool Sean craned their necks backwards to watch the delicate paper-stretched skeleton float its way out of sight. Before this pioneering balloon had disappeared off the scene, another entered, stage right and much higher up, and then another just seconds later. These newcomers appeared as flickering lights, the balloons from which the flames were suspended a vague, ghostly presence above.

"Let's go back," said Chrissy after a silence filled by five more balloons, 'back' referring to the garden behind Sean's house. "We can launch ours."

For the three of them 'our balloon' had an especially strong meaning that year. They had been floating flaming balloons from their hands every 21st June since they could remember, but this year that had decided to put some of the little money they had together and buy one themselves, and informed their parents that they weren't going to be involved in the family event that year. This information had been received with far less opposition than they had expected, only Scat's dad warning about the dangers of fire and, richly, instructing Sean not to be silly. Sean for his part, spluttered with indignation but knew better than to protest.

The garden behind Sean's house was a perfect place to sit and talk, or share headphones and music. It was surrounded by tall houses on three sides, and a line of trees behind a low building on the fourth, all of which conspired to give them each a feeling of peace and freedom. It wasn't the prettiest place in the world, a small triangle of grass, a couple of flower beds with straggly, city-cat plagued

flowers and a stunted apple tree, but Chrissy had always loved this garden. She felt it was part of her home. It was a place of safety.

Sean and Scat had been to school together since fourth grade and Chrissy had joined them in the sixth grade when her parents moved into town. From that moment on they had been inseparable friends, only spending time apart when their respective families insisted on taking them on holiday to different places every summer for reasons they found inexplicable. The overwhelming bond that set them apart from all other groups at school was the astonishing fact, they soon discovered, that all of them had been born in the same year and on the same day, June 22nd and, if family tales were true, all within the same hour. The sun and stars, they knew, had brought them together and this knowledge brought them the security that only indivisible friendships can achieve.

Content in their own company, the trio sat in the dark place that was the garden. "Let's just watch," said Sean. "They'll be lots of other people's balloons going overhead. Then we can launch ours." Already he was anticipating that having only one balloon might be a bit of an anti-climax. They seemed keen to allay that disappointment while, confusingly, also anxious to see their very own fire-balloon ascend heroically into the heavens. Even Scat was content to wait a little and in the quiet universe of his mind he was comparing the conflict of 'waiting' versus 'launching' in much the same way as he confronted his daily dilemma of deciding whether he should eat first what he liked most on his plate, or leave it for a final triumphant taste.

They sat in the garden looking upwards for nearly five minutes and were beginning to get a little bored. Nothing had happened. The sky remained unchanging, and black, and they were getting cricks in their necks. Suddenly Sean shouted "Look, there's one!" and sure enough, just appearing over the roof of the house was a flickering, burning ball of yellows and oranges, suspended under a barely visible paper balloon, and the three of them cheered, with not a little irony. They fell silent again, and watched it as it crossed their tunnel of vision and approached the silhouette of the line of trees on the open side of the garden. Just before it disappeared beyond the tops of the line of trees, the light seemed to flicker wildly, then suddenly went out as if some giant fingers had snapped over it. For a brief second they could see the dark shape of the balloon hanging in the air, no fire underneath to illuminate it or keep it suspended. Then it was gone.

"Did you see that?" said Scat, quite unnecessarily. "Wow! Do you think it got caught in the trees?"

“It was too far above the trees to be caught in it,” Chrissy replied sensibly. You could hear the contempt in her voice.

“Hey,” shouted Sean suddenly, “look over there. There’re three more.” He was pointing to the east, and sure enough three tiny points of orange light were floating high above the houses.

Chrissy’s head was searching the sky for more, and seconds later she also cried out “Over there! Look!” and to the west there were another four. And then three more popped into view. They looked from one group to another. Ten at once. None of them could remember having seen this many fire balloons at the same time from this particular point before. Of course, if they had climbed to the top of Sergeant’s Hill, they would probably be able to see twenty or thirty at any one time, but that was all too easy, and something for the tourists to do. Their own narrow funnel to the stars was their own world, and never before had they seen more than four at a time from this darkened nest.

More balloons passed from the east and from the west, and they had counted a total of twenty six before another one passed overhead. It was quite close to the ground, and they could hear the buzzing hiss of the paraffin wax as it burned in its frail wiry vessel. Then the hissing stopped, quite suddenly. The light went out and even as they looked, the dark shape of the balloon seemed to falter, and then sink slowly towards the broken silhouette that marked the line of trees.

“Must have run out of gas,” Scat joked. “I hope the pilot has his crash helmet on.”

“Come on,” said Chrissy. “We’ve got our balloon. We can do better than that.”

“Great,” said Scat, and he jumped up from his seat and pulled a box of matches out of his pocket, and started to light one.

“Wait on, you great idiot,” Sean said. “Let’s take the thing out of its bag first!”

Within five minutes the balloon was filling chubbily with hot air, and the three friends were tenderly holding its delicate paper folds apart, waiting for that drawing feeling that made it twitch and pull and which would tell them that it was tantalisingly close to being ready to fly. As they waited and watched, the red and pink panels of the balloon became distinct, and expanded crinkle by crinkle. Across half of the surface there appeared the outline of a vermillion dragon.

“There! I felt it tug, let it go.” Scat said excitedly.

“Not yet. Not yet.” Chrissy was concentrating hard. They all waited for another minute, and then looked at each other, except that only two of them could look at each other at any one time, because

the balloon was in the middle of their collective line of sight and large enough to obstruct their view. The message between their eyes, though, as they darted from one pair to the other, was clear enough though, and, as one, they let go of the bright red, metre and a half high balloon with its flaming, fizzing base. The perfect hiding place for a dragon.

It held for a wavering second, as if unwilling to depart on its flight, reluctant to chance its fate to the fickle atmosphere, before it nudged cautiously up into the air. Slowly it ascended, still not sure, hesitant it seemed, until it was caught by the winds that rose above the roof tops and then it took heart and turned south, speeding away upward and southwards as if it had suddenly made up its mind and thrown itself positively into the great adventure. Chrissy, Scat and Sean cheered, their heads held back, staring up into the sky, as their fire balloon soaring away from them, their feelings of possession for the balloon and their desire for it to fly away from them fighting against each other. Away it went, occasionally lurching in an up-current caused by the buildings and within seconds they could no longer hear the bubbling engine of their plucky contraption and they watched as the yellow flames darted sideways and upwards, the separation of owner and owned becoming dissolved in the black air as the flying machine assumed its own destiny. Distance changed their perspective and it would soon become just another fiery floater in the night sky when the unthinkable happened. Just as it passed over the line trees, it burst into flames. It wasn't as if the flaming fuel under the balloon had caught the side of the paper balloon and caused it burn. Nothing like that happened. The fuel actually appeared to explode and caught the balloon in a flower of flame which, for just a brief moment, illuminated the stencilled dragon on the side. Then, in a burning, trailing ball, the remains plummeted downwards with a roar too distant to be heard but too obvious to miss, before disappearing beyond the tops of the trees with a guttering flash.

Chrissy stifled a squeak of dismay.

“Awesome” said Scat

Sean remained silent.

They found it difficult to share their disappointment. They had had great hopes for their first, their very own balloon; in fact, each had harboured a desire for their balloon to break some kind of record. Any record. On the other hand, the death of the balloon had been spectacular – fantastic even. Perhaps Scat's observation was the truth. But, spectacular or not, they were left with a distinct feeling that it could have been somehow different.

Over the next ten minutes the three of them said very little, putting crisps and biscuits into their mouths as if propelled by a conveyor belt. During this time five more fiery balloons passed directly overhead, and all five either died and went dark as they passed to the south, or flared and burnt up as they approached the line of trees.

“Right,” said Sean. “Let’s go and check this out.”

“Check what out, exactly?” Chrissy said.

“The trees. Every single balloon that has passed over this garden has come down into that line of trees. Don’t you want to find out why?”

Chrissy wasn’t sure that she did. Sometimes, she reminded herself, she preferred mysteries to answers. Scat stood up and both he and Sean prepared to leave and hunt down the mystery of the disappearing balloons. ‘Boys!’ she thought, but got to her feet to join them, the group, as always, acting as one.

Scat managed to be in six places at the same time, his bobbing red rag of a haircut popping up each side of both Chrissy and Sean and between them, behind them and, annoyingly, in front of them – all at once, it seemed. Like a frolicsome puppy he bounded between his owners, clearly in a blessed state of innocence, having forgotten both the death of their balloon or their current mission. He was simply happy to be, and to be with the people he knew best and who, if he had the wit to stop and think about it, he loved. He babbled incessantly, meaninglessly, passionately.

Chrissy and Sean, on the other hand, walked silently, close, but not too close, their heads slightly leaning towards each other, a fact which, had they known about it, they would have corrected immediately: Sean performing cool; Chrissy effecting embarrassment.

They found themselves walking down a narrow street that none of them seemed to remember having walked down before, even though it was only a few hundred metres from the homes they had lived in for years. None of them commented on it until Scat suddenly keeled over with a shriek. In his incessant bobbing and weaving he had caught his heel on what he immediately claimed was a sheet of ice. Ice? In June? The others howled with laughter at him, the sound of their derision echoing, fractured, off the blind-eyed houses that lined the street.

A giant sigh caused them to look up. It was as if the sea were drawing breath above their heads. Above them they saw the trees gently swaying in a small wind, long trailing leaves flowing in a whisper as they brushed the air, turning silk audible. In Chissy's imagination the trunks trembled and in Sean's mind they boomed. Scat appeared frozen to the spot, his mouth slightly open, his eyes a fraction wider than usual.

A trick of time caught them into the next moment of their lives and they felt themselves walking again and entering a small clearing beyond the trees. Sean sought the inconclusive thought that here, in this place, there ought to be the supermarket car park which his mum used every week. There were only two sides to a line of trees, weren't there?

And they looked into the clearing.

Scat took a step back, his face now creased into puzzlement. Before him stood a burnt thicket of gorse and stumpy trees, blackened stumps and charcoal above which a greasy shimmer of smoke hung in the air. Here and there slouched the wrecked frames of dozens of carbonised fire balloons; skeletal wire frames poking sharp angles into a humming night air.

Chrissy's face showed no less confusion. The old cottage – how had it escaped the plans of the omnipresent developers? – seemed almost to be lit, if that was possible, by the curious flowers that grew around it and up its walls. While it was palpably night, and she managed to squeeze some dark air between her fingers to prove it so, the cottage emanated light that wasn't quite light either. There was no sense of shadow, no sense of focus, no sense of emission. This attracted her far more than the bright, thriving balloons that clustered around the door, hugging the wall, caressing the lintel and the door jambs. The faintly luminescent outline of a vermillion dragon lightly touched her retina before it was swallowed up in a rhapsody of movement and colour.

Sean was still grappling with the loss of the expected car park, and the ruined cottage didn't seem to him to be in the right place at all. How could it possibly be there? A ruin in the middle of all this new development? For a second he felt let down by anonymous city planners, land speculators and corporations. He felt cheated by a grey, unnamed 'them'. He was, however, interested to see that their balloon seemed to be suspended from the branch of small tree near the front door of the decrepit ruin, too occupied to note his surprise that it had somehow survived its violent immolation and was quite intact, a dim glow still coming from the silent wick, a faint trace of dragon just visible.

Which was strange because there was no light. And it was strange that he could see one or two glowing balloons near the ruin, hugging the ground, close by funereal piles of dead balloons, burned and heaped against the wall. There was no light by which to see so it troubled him to be able to see dead, dark things so well in this black night?

It might have been an age. Indeed, it is quite possible that billions of years washed over the Universe before the three friends turned away from the images that captured them and re-entered the whispering wood. They walked silently, close together but without touching, hearing the rushing wind in their ears, releasing salt tears that coursed the continents of their faces, eyes cast down and ahead.

The sun touched the nadir of its orbit and in its darkness they each said 'Happy Birthday'. They felt a tugging at the core of their certainty, as if some part wished to explore the air, by itself.