

## A Festival of Lights

Every year, when winter is at its stillest and coldest, a flock of glowing lights floats above the far reaches of the Northern Moors. In the early years people thought it a celestial chandelier come to illumine the darkest days of winter; or if heading North, a flight of Phoenixes bearing light to the frozen moors. If near to Christmas time, children thought it their letters on the way to fabled Lapland; or if heading South, some exotic birds bound for warmer shores. Of each onlooker, what they thought was the truth behind the lights was as varied as the countries of a continent. I know the truth. I was there at the beginning.

A physics lesson is what began it: a lesson about heat and thermodynamics and the mathematics of convection. Our village was remote and isolated, and bordered only by vast expanses of heath and lonely moorland. There was only one schoolhouse, where the schoolmaster taught us from diagrams on the chalkboard. In the later days of autumn, one year, he taught us our very first lesson in physics. Myself and my friends Alice and Benjamin - an inseparable trio - walked home from the school together every day. For many days after, Benjamin would speak constantly of the wonders of heat and air currents and meteorology, and would share with us his fantastical visions of flying ships and of gliding on the winds. He talked of living an entire lifetime aloft in huge balloon, drifting forever on the uppermost stratospheric air currents, and there seemed no boundaries to his imagination. Before long we began calling him the mad scientist, and scorned his tall delusions. Even the adults, who always wore a veneer of sympathy for us children, soon began to weary of his incessant enthusiasm. His ideas were too grand for our little village. You cannot mix mathematics with poetry.

But he was persistent, and from day to day his excitement grew stronger, just as the winter came, and grew fiercer. He loved to share his every idea with whomever he could - for there were no strangers in our village - and when he began to be shunned by those whom he approached, he did not falter in his invention, and instead committed his fantasies to paper. Countless volumes of sketchbooks and notebooks; innumerable designs and drawings told of his relentless imaginings. It would not be fair to say that we were unsupportive of him, but none of the other children, nor Alice nor I, could conceive such visions as he did. True, we often shared amongst ourselves our vivid dreams of travel and exploration; of all the places not we, nor any in our village, had ever visited. But Benjamin saw what we could not, and as fervently as he tried, he could not make us see as he did.

He built small engines that did not run, and a miniature steamboat that sank. He even built a device which he professed was a mechanical plough, but in fact looked nothing of the sort, and succeeded only in seizing up at the first trial. One day he decided to send to the Royal Society in London, his greatest ideas and his proudest designs. After a few weeks he received a reply, but it was not favourable.

We all thought the rejection would mark the end of Benjamin's scientific career. But his resolve was yet unshaken. Somewhere along the way he had lost his love for the impossible and the fantastical. He thought more broadly, and more technically, incorporating in his designs mathematical exactitude and scientific reasoning. His dreams of cities amongst clouds were now replaced by visions of great flying constructions; of dirigibles of grand proportions; of airships that never tethered the ground. I recall a certain time when he spoke to us very little, and we could not understand his seclusion. Yet he when we saw him he spoke with such excitement, that something, some great idea, had clearly sprung upon his mind. It was only a few days later that an unexpected visitor arrived at the village, and left not in a hurry. Pneumonia, it was called. Four of the youngest children died.

I include in my account this event not because I cherish these memories: the deaths of the infants, in an age of advanced medicine and pharmaceuticals, could not be accounted for. Their parents blamed the doctor; the doctor blamed the incomprehensible; and despair and frustration shaded the village entire for many days after. They should not have died.

When it came time for the funeral it had not snowed for many days, and the air was so still it seemed the wind itself were in mourning. When it finally blew past our silent houses and deserted streets it was as if passing through a flute, in a low and melancholic register, at once both discordant and hollow. The chapel choir sang in despairing tones, and the church bells tolled gravely, in solemn anticipation of requiem. I remember that day there being a power failure, which lasted through the night and into morning. Shorn of our electric lights we lit candles and fireplaces, and burnt what little coal we had. But even then the village looked, from afar, dimmer than usual. And it snowed. And the snow buried our homes, cheerless as morning frost, beneath a soft blanket of white.

I do not know quite exactly why, but the death of the infants fell harder on Benjamin than perhaps any of us other children, but he felt as if science had failed them. Before long he approached Alice and I with an idea that, despite the sorrow that enveloped our little world, made us smile. We would build a contraption that could take to the air, and rise so far as to brush the highest Himalayan peak; a vessel that would traverse the vastest oceans, that would voyage to the exotic, to the Orient, and to every place we visited only in our imaginations.

Benjamin, of course, designed it. He made sketches and blueprints, and calculations of variables, whilst Alice and I took to the task of assembling the materials. One by one, and in great secrecy, we collected bundles of silk paper from many schools in the county. From the tobacconist we obtained glue, white spirit, a small burner and cotton; and from a neighbour, an old and blackened soup pot. Assembling it took three days, as we glued together the great sheets of silk paper, as soft and as fine as eiderdown, into a sprawling canvas that grew larger and larger, until finally a giant balloon. From Alice's mother, the seamstress, we borrowed a spool of fine taffeta thread, and used it to weave strengthening patterns in the seams of the balloon. We fashioned a crude basket from the pot, and a built structure that held the burner in place

beneath the mouth of the balloon. Spread fully out on the ground it measured twenty by twenty foot. We named it Aurora.

We did not delay, and as soon after completion as possible, we prepared to launch our balloon. Benjamin picked the exact time and day with the precision of a chronometer. He said that in order for the balloon to have enough lift, the air had to be freezing cold, and the burner burning hotly. When it was wind still and quiet, we brought our balloon to a field just beyond the village border. It was late evening, the temperature was twelve points below freezing, and not one cloud marred the night sky. First we pumped cold air into the balloon using a large bellows borrowed from the blacksmith. When it was inflated enough we lit the burner, using white spirit and cotton for fuel. The canvas of the balloon rose steadily, until it was fully round, and tugged at the ropes which tethered it to the ground. The flame of the burner illuminated the balloon entire, and the blazing light lit up the heath around us. I remember glancing over at Alice, and seeing the orange glow brighten her cheeks to the colour of pale gold. When Benjamin severed the ropes, Aurora rose, gradually at first, then faster and faster, upwards towards the stars. As it rose a wind caught it, and it set a course for due South. Benjamin, for all his drawings and imagination, finally saw his dream aloft. We stayed there until the balloon was but a small speck in the sky, soon lost amongst the stars.

That first year our balloon caused a sensation. It had floated above many of the neighbouring towns and villages, where the inhabitants thought it in equal measure a fallen star or a strange new species of bird, and stories of it were printed in newspapers throughout the county. Of course we never owned up to it, and soon speculation turned to myth. The next year we made five balloons, aided by some other boys in the village. And when five fiery lights floated in the sky that year people all across the moors stopped, and crowded the streets, and bore witness to what they thought was an unearthly migration. It is said that wherever the lights passed overhead, it was as if time itself stood still and held vigil. The following years others made balloons as well, inspired by our first winter launch.

Thus began a tradition that exists to this day. Every year, when winter is at its coldest and stillest, people flock to our little village, and launch their own balloons; their own lights, which are borne always by a gentle wind to whichever corner of the compass the air fancies to journey.

Of Benjamin, we know little beyond those early years. His family soon moved away, and we lost all contact with him. As for Alice and I, we went our separate ways, moved away. But every year, on the night when the balloons are launched, we go back to a hill overlooking the same field, and watch the lights take flight, and think of a little boy named Benjamin, whose dream still burns brightly in every flame. For there is not, I think, a dream so fanciful, or a world so remote, that a child cannot imagine it, and in his own mind inhabit it.

And so we sit there together, like a binary star, and watch the lights rise high, and an envious time pass us by, beneath a timeless starlit sky.

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