

Into the Clear Blue

Hannah Nyhart

On July 2, 1982, Larry Walters flew to sixteen thousand feet in an aluminum lawn chair, hoisted by forty-five weather balloons. He took a BB gun to pierce balloons for a gentle descent, and a parachute, just in case. He also brought a packet of sandwiches, a camera, a six-pack, and a radio. That last one he used to call for help after the tethers connecting him to his Jeep broke, and he shot up so fast his glasses fell off, and so high he went numb. Larry was aloft for forty-five minutes, during which time he got reported by pilots from TWA and Delta, violated four sections of the Federal Aviation Act, and caused a three-hour blackout in the tip of Los Angeles County. He also dropped the BB gun. When he finally climbed down from his chair, which had caught in the power lines outside 432 East 45th Street, Long Beach, cops and press were waiting. He told *The New York Times*, “Since I was thirteen years old, I’ve dreamed of going up into the clear blue sky in a weather balloon. By the grace of God, I fulfilled my dream. But I wouldn’t do this again for anything.”

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Larry Walters and I don’t have a lot in common. He was a Vietnam vet, a truck driver from Los Angeles; I’m a college kid from a Connecticut town nobody’s heard of. We were only alive at the same time for a six-month period over the summer of 1993. But when we were thirteen years old, we both wanted to fly.

I can’t remember a time I didn’t. As a kid at night I’d dream up a big field with crisp air at that perfect temperature that comes twice a year. I’d take off like a plane, arms out, legs churning until I’d launch.

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In another dream, I fell off the banister of a multi-flight staircase to land lightly on the floor, and race back up. I spent that night falling and falling and laughing. My flying dreams were the first I remember that weren't nightmares.

I was seven when my parents gave me a fat book of Greek myths for children, the wrath of the gods punctuated by full-page watercolor illustrations. Among the immortals—Prometheus and his cliff, Athena bursting from Zeus's skull—there was Icarus. I could never keep track of why father and son were imprisoned on that island, and the warnings of the parable were lost on me. I didn't care that Icarus had flown too close to the sun, that he'd ignored his father's warning. I didn't care that he fell, drowned, that his father wept over him. It was the flight itself that intrigued me. Men borne aloft by their own arms. If they could fly with wax and feathers, I could do it with paper plates and duct tape.

And so I tried. I made babysitters help me strap on the paper plates, even though the duct tape hurt like a thousand Band-Aids when we had to pull it off. I raced in loops around the downstairs, leaping on and off the window bench. When friends came over we spent afternoons making parachutes out of garbage bags. We jumped off my front porch over and over, swearing we'd felt a little more lift that time, running in to add more tape, more bags. When there were no friends around, my little sister became my dubious second. I remember telling her very sternly from my window-bench perch that I was in this for the long haul, and that she could only participate if she intended to see it through.

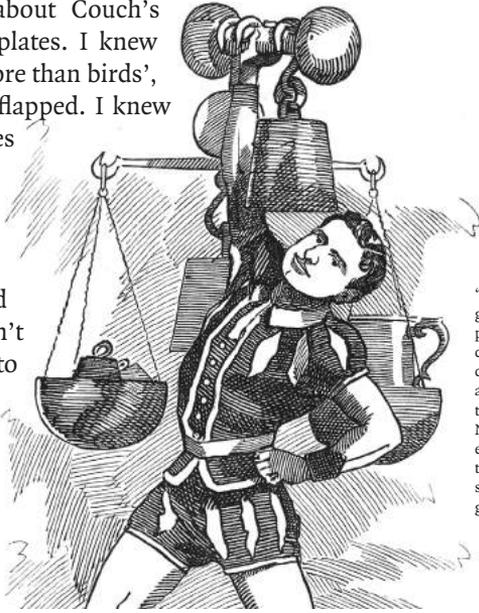
My belief was unflagging in a way I now find unbelievable. I thought that if I made the seams of the parachute a little tighter, if I flapped harder, it would work. I thought that the only reason nobody had flown like that before was that they hadn't wanted it enough.

Larry wanted it enough. He's the first result when you google "Lawnchair balloon flight," but he wasn't where I got the idea. That was Kent Couch, who flew a lawn chair in September 2006. He used 150 helium balloons. Like most of Walters's emulators, Couch was middle-aged. A gas station owner, he's made multiple successful

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flights in the past eight years. Another copycat was not so lucky. Suspended by one-thousand party balloons, Father Adelir Antonio de Carli crashed off the coast of Brazil in 2008, off course with a GPS he didn't know how to use.

By the time I read about Couch's trip, I'd shed the paper plates. I knew human bones weighed more than birds', no matter how hard you flapped. I knew plastic bag parachutes were best suited to little green army men. But here was a solo flight that had worked. My plan included precautions. I'd make a seatbelt; I wouldn't drink and fly; I'd be tied to a strong tree in my front yard, with a friend to let the rope out bit by bit. Spring of my sophomore year, I stepped up my research and blanched at the financials. The weather balloons cost



“Stop the garden-party? Of course we can't do anything of the kind. Nobody expects us to. Don't be so extravagant.”

\$80 each. I'd need forty. And that \$3,200 didn't even cover the helium. If it hadn't been money, it would have been time. I was eyeing a newspaper editorship and staying up late writing instant-coffee-fueled papers to impress my aging English teachers. When exams loomed before one winter break, I spent two weeks sleeping on the downstairs couch so that I could wake up steps from the coffee machine and the Christmas tree. It felt like I didn't have time to brush my teeth, much less build an airship. I tabled the flight plan. My best friend Julia, the would-be-rope-holder, was not surprised.

Senior year, I thought back to flying as I tried to come up with an entry for my boarding school's annual speech contest. I got the reminder to submit in the middle of the school's first snow day in seven years. It was a month or so before everyone would find out

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where they'd gotten into college. There was something about the sudden childishness of all of us tromping through the snow. Snowball fights, and my young trials at flying, seemed so apart from—so much better than—all of our confused striving.

That day in late February, running around with stolen dining hall trays felt like play after months of only work. I wanted that back—the kind of childhood missions that stretch across summer break or snow days and feel more important than anything you're told to do. So that's what I wrote about. I sat down in my friend's living room and wrote a tongue-in-cheek account of all the ways I'd tried to fly, and a lot that I hadn't tried, but that sounded good: seeking magic carpets in furniture stores, and pixie dust in the spice cabinet. Larry Walters didn't make an appearance, and neither did Kent Couch. I think I'd forgotten where the balloon idea came from. I wondered aloud why, as I was being urged in essays and interviews and meetings with my college counselor to declare a passion, I couldn't find one as compelling as the quest for flight.

I thought the speech was funny and maybe even stirring, a self-deprecating call to step back from the grim race for achievement and try to figure out what we were all really doing here. Before I sent it in, I read it to my little sister, a junior. "You were a sophomore when you wanted to do that balloon thing?" She wrinkled her brow. "You shouldn't say that—they'll think you're retarded."

A few weeks later, I'd made it to the finals, an exhibition round in front of our thousand-person school. The other speakers were our student body president and two juniors, one of who would discuss the differences between the Chinese and American education systems, the other his spring break trip to Haiti, and how it had changed his outlook on life. My speech was called "Fly Me to the Moon." I was glad I was first, because I didn't want to follow Haiti with all of the things I had jumped off of as a child. My adviser had told me I gestured too much, so I gripped the podium. I made it through the first three quarters of the speech without incident. I changed sophomore year to eighth grade. The crowd laughed at a lot of the places I thought they should, but not all.

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Then came the final paragraph. This was where I was really going to sell it, the serious, poignant, reflective part that told them why I had a right to be onstage alongside international education systems and Haiti. It was about not knowing what I wanted, but knowing how I wanted to want it: with passion. The line read, “I’m not sure what I want to do, or who I want to be.” I looked up from the text and tried to hold the audience with my gaze. “I’m not sure who I want to do—“

Nine hundred teenagers erupted into laughter. My face fell hot into my palm. They laughed through the end of the speech and as I walked back to my seat. Haiti leaned over and said ruefully, “That’s it—you won.”

I came in third, just ahead of Chinese Education. At least once a week for the month and a half before I graduated, boys I didn’t know would ask me, grinning, if they were on my “to do list.”

Larry shot himself in the heart on October 6, 1993, in the middle of Angeles National Forest. In the ten years after his flight, he’d broken up with his girlfriend, spent a little time as a motivational speaker, and hopped between security guard jobs. He was featured in a Timex ad, but he never made much money off it. On his Wikipedia page, a small grey box lists his birth and death dates and locations, forty-four years and fewer miles apart. Below that, it says “Known for: Flying a lawn chair with weather balloons.”

Here was a man who’d dreamed of flight since he was a kid. He’d come up with the balloon idea when he was thirteen, staring at weather balloons in an army-navy surplus store. He finally did it two decades later. The kneejerk wry shrug here is, “Where do you go from there?”

My speech was about not knowing where to go, but it had a neat ending no one heard. “If I don’t find what I’m looking for,” I wrote, “I’m sure I can dig up those paper plates.” On the cusp of college, the wink of the line was that of course I would find what I was looking for; I had time. A few years later, the line rings a little more hollow. I had always assumed college was a place you went to figure things out. Instead, I realized that I wasn’t even sure what the things to be

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figured out were.

Being lost at the end of college isn't any less a cliché than being lost as you enter it, but it's scarier. Last fall, the high school adviser who ran the speech competition died before I'd known he'd retired. I didn't feel old enough to call him anything but "Mister." Around the same time, adulthood stopped feeling like something I was waiting to grow into, and became instead something I'd entered carelessly, without realizing it.

I think there's a fear, especially among twenty year olds who have been lucky: the fear of a small life. It's there even as we realize that our parents' lives are good ones, so good that they might actually be unattainable for us, not the baseline we'd always taken them to be.

My parents raised me in a town of seven thousand that I've always joked had more cows than people. It also had one of the best school systems in the state. They've never liked to talk about money, but when I was young enough to ask them if we were rich, they'd tell me we were very lucky. They've aged into that luck gracefully, in a way I think aligns with their ideals. A parish minister for more than twenty years, my mom once sparred on air with Bill O'Reilly over clerical opposition to prisoner torture. My father has spent thirty years fighting toward campaign finance reform. Forty years ago at Stanford, they were chaining themselves to doors in protest. A couple years back they went down to New York to spend a day at Occupy, and to try a new restaurant my dad had heard about in Greenwich Village. I don't know if it's just because they were my parents that I decided their lives were small, but some part of me always assumed that mine would be just as good, but different. Bigger.

Spring of last year, I sat across a table from a woman who had just rejected me for an internship. She said, "It just doesn't seem like you've ever made anything for yourself." That's the exact quote. It's the kind of total indictment of your life so far that's hard to shake.

This is one of the big differences between Larry and I, one of only two that matter. With no head start or special skills, he made a flying machine for himself. To me, that broke Larry out of the small life.

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I don't have a working definition for what makes a life big, but in looking for a path toward one, I think I've come up with some prerequisites. Chief among these is that the life be built for oneself, toward something that lives apart from external shoulds. Call it the brothers in a bicycle shop model: Orville and Wilbur constructing a plane among the strewn parts of old-fashioned fixed gears. Amid and out of the ordinary, by the same materials and methods, they built something unbelievable. And so there are two parts: the dream, and the lasting drive to pursue it.

In the spring of 2002, I came in second for John Lyman Elementary School's Jonathan Howe Reading Award. As a high school senior in 2011, I was deferred and then denied from Columbia University. Those are the only two times I can remember having a dream I got close to. When I told Julia, the would-have-been-rope-holder, that I was writing about flying, she texted back, "I REMEMBER! You also had grand ideas for a pudding-in-ice cream creation that was going to make you millions."

I'd forgotten that—shaking her awake in the middle of a sleepover: "I just had the most brilliant idea." I had also planned a cooking blog for us, and a national political movement, (LYON—Liberal Youth for Our Nation) that never made it past a dozen chalk signatures on the walls of my basement. Getting that text, I had the sudden uncomfortable thought that my dreams of flight might be more a fiction than I'd realized, one more brilliant idea I'd woken Julia up for.

As a student at the University of Chicago, I spend a lot of time studying things that will never directly correlate to a paycheck. The rest of my days are spent at one of two jobs, as a barista in the Divinity School's coffee shop, and as an editor for the *South Side Weekly*, an independent paper with a lot of energy and an ongoing identity crisis. The first pays, the second doesn't. Both are located in basements and routinely feel more urgent than classes. I live with three of my favorite people, two of whom are the right size to share clothes with. The apartment only has one bathroom, but it's good for parties, and when we have them it's full by midnight. I have a big family whose love I have never doubted. This is all a messy way of saying that even

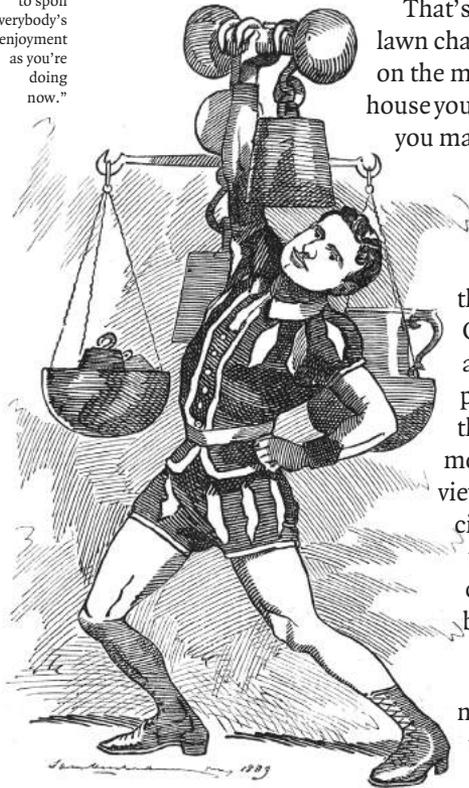
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when it's winter in Chicago, I feel lucky.

And yet. At least a couple of times a term I come home from a long-but-good day and steal a glass of milk from my roommate and stand in the kitchen thinking, "Is this all there is?" Because it is a good life, but it feels like a small one. And I wonder, if I'd picked it out and strived toward it, instead of falling into it the way it feels I have, would it feel bigger? Or would it only look big from afar, and shrink once I'd gotten there.

Unreached, a dream doesn't fit into the panorama view of life-as-is. The dream stands in contrast to the Com-Ed bills, and foil-wrapped sandwiches, and snooze-button parts of daily life. And in that contrast is the steady assurance that this isn't all there is.

"And it's not very sympathetic to spoil everybody's enjoyment as you're doing now."



That's why forty-five balloons and a lawn chair is as potent a dream as walking on the moon, or moving to the city, or the house you're going to build your folks when you make it. And it's also why they're all equally vulnerable. This is the dirty secret of dreaming: what happens after. I'm not sure there's a dream, however great, that isn't emptied as it's fulfilled. Once a dream is converted into an accomplishment, it becomes part of the daily panorama. And that question of whether there's more is back. You get used to the view from the new house, or of the city block. And even a moon rock, tucked onto the shelf next to the cereal boxes and the bills, must blend in eventually.

Larry, having flown, would be more qualified to speak on this, the blending in. But the second

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important difference between Larry and I is that he is dead, and I am alive.

Larry's gravestone is at Forest Hill Memorial Park, twenty-two miles from his crash site. It reads:

LARRY WALTERS

APR 19, 1949 – OCT 6, 1993

LAWN CHAIR PILOT

“BELOVED”

His other nickname was “Lawnchair Larry.” In his bio, Google calls the Lawn Chair an airship. Larry called it “Inspiration 1.” While I get that “Airship Larry” isn't as alliterative, “Lawnchair” seems like an unfair nickname for a guy who got himself to sixteen thousand feet. He had tethers, and a parachute, and thirty-five gallon jugs for ballast. But still, the chair is part of what matters. Larry couldn't have flown a plane, his eyesight was too bad, but if he had, no one would have remembered. It was the sheer improbability of it, of him.

Maybe it's the young and stupid part of me that thinks it's the recklessness of Larry's lawnchair that matters, that is “big.” In ten years, or fifty, maybe I will realize that the “Beloved” on Larry's epitaph is more important than his nickname. But in a way, that is just as scary. I think that's why I went back to this idea of flying as college loomed. Moving on from high school felt like the next step toward an inescapable resignation to a life as good as it was small, and that's a resignation I'm not ready for.

On landing, Larry told the *Los Angeles Times*, “I had this dream for 20 years, and if I hadn't done it, I would have ended up in the funny farm.” There is an urgency there that I, with all of my luck, can't seem to muster. There is still some part of me ready to grab balloons and a chair and go charging off into the clear blue sky. But I don't, and I think that I'm stayed by something more than the weight of adulthood and the wisdom I thought was supposed to come with it.

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At twenty-one, I'm usually sure everything will be okay. I forget my bike helmet most days. I walk home alone in the dark. But I'm scared that I won't find another dream, or that it will be the wrong one, or that once it's done, I won't be able to find another. I wonder if the fulfillment of a dream is always followed by a fall, not an Icarian plunge, but a slow descent back into a life that's no bigger than the one you left.

Right after his flight, Larry gave Inspiration I to a neighbor kid, and multiple sources say he regretted it. The Smithsonian asked him for the chair, but I wonder if he wished for it back even before that. He hadn't taken any pictures; he told reporters he was too startled by the view. Maybe, years later, he wanted proof.

