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As Long As It Flies

When I was growing up, I loved anything that could fly. I would have loved it more if it could be me that was flying, but that would have to wait a few years. I may have started with balsa wood airplanes, but probably when I was younger, my father brought home a helium balloon, most likely from the local carnival that was in town for the week. It was a lot of fun for a short while, but as expected for a little boy, I eventually let go of the string, and off it went to the blue yonder. I predictably bawled my eyes out, then went to look for a new balloon to replace the one that had a mind of its own. I picked out a fresh balloon from the closet, and handed it to my father to make another flying balloon for me. He said it had to have gas in it to make it fly, so I reminded him that we had a very big can of gas in the garage. He had to tell me that gas for the lawn mower wouldn't work to make a balloon fly. Looking back on the episode, I'm just grateful he didn't laugh at me.

So I did better when I was older, and balsa wood airplanes were available from the five and dime stores in town. The little airplanes were very cheap, and they didn't last long. The gliders were often stepped on by our young clumsy feet and were crushed, or if they escaped that, they were abandoned on a neighbor's roof after an otherwise successful flight. Some airplanes had plastic propellers that worked by winding up a long rubber band that was attached to it. A little too much enthusiasm resulted in winding up the rubber band too much, and that made the airplane snap into a dozen pieces.

In junior high, a friend introduced me to model rocketry. It was fun and I built a handful of kit model rockets that flew well. They didn't fly away or explode, which is what one might expect for a hobby that involved high speeds, pointy objects, and children in the 1960s. The last rocket I built had a camera in it. It didn't stand a chance of working right, but the idea of it was exciting enough.

While I was in high school, another friend convinced me it was possible to make a hot air balloon with a plastic bag that comes from the dry cleaner. We didn't have any directions on how to build it, so we had to experiment by trial and error. The hardest thing was trying to figure out how to make a frame for the bottom of the plastic bag that would be light enough to make the whole thing actually fly. We made a square frame with plastic straws to keep the bottom of the bag open, then we made a cross brace of thin strips of balsa wood, and taped it to the straws. Then we got birthday candles to make the air get hot for the balloon. The trick was to provide sufficient heat to make the balloon lift off, without the weight of the candles keeping the balloon on the ground. We settled on thirteen half-candles, which were stuck on the balsa wood with a little melted wax. "Stuck" is the operative word here, because when the candles burned low, the wax keeping them attached to the frame melted, and the candles dropped off one by one, hurtling down through the pitch black sky while they were still lit.

When we achieved success, and the cleaner bag actually rose up in the air, we found that we had to send the balloons up at night when there was no wind, otherwise

the plastic bag would collapse. Incidentally, if the bag from the dry cleaner had any printed advertisements on the plastic, and most bags did, the candles lit up the bag even more, and were very visible even when several hundred feet up in the night sky. After all the candles either burned out or dropped off, the balloons would go black, and we never knew where they ended up.

My friend and I sent the balloons up every night for two weeks, when we gained unnamed notoriety. The local newspaper wrote a short article on the front page in bold print: "UFO Spotted Over City." Several eyewitnesses reported seeing it- one said it was chasing his car, and one even said it was "dropping little green men."

I suppose I could have sent a correction to the newspaper to refute the "green" part, because the candles clearly burned more of a yellow color and they were certainly not green. But this was no time to spoil the fun. We never did 'fess up, and tell the newspaper that the little green men came out of a plastic bag from the dry cleaner.