

Paige Otto

Douglas Hesse

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Polished Writing 1

### What Goes Up Must Come Down

There are at least eight different species of falcons flying over North America on an average day. On October 15<sup>th</sup> of 2009, there were nine.

I was ten years old, and ecstatic. It was the annual four-day weekend that happened each October for parent-teacher conferences. I looked forward to this long weekend each year, not just because it meant two extra days off of school, but because of the birthday parties. Half of my close friends happened to be born in October, which meant a four-day weekend was three, sometimes four, slumber parties in a row. It was a big weekend. Each year I prepped myself for the back-to-back celebrations by squeezing in some extra naps, ensuring I wouldn't be the first to fall asleep. That was one way to guarantee a whipped cream face.

Thursday of the long weekend looked like a series of appointments my mom would tote me between. Driving back from the dentist, a weird announcement came on the radio. Something about a weather balloon floating in the sky. My mom looked at me confused and turned the dial back to Easy Pop Hits.

"Did you hear about the boy in the balloon?" This is my dad's greeting to us at the pizza restaurant we meet him at for lunch. Our blank stares encouraged him to launch into the full story, as it had taken place thus far. Earlier that morning, about 11 a.m., a storm chaser called the

police after one of his experimental weather balloons floated into the sky—with his 6-year-old son inside.

TV's in the restaurant broadcast breaking news about the boy in the balloon. It was only when I saw the boy's name, Falcon Heene, that I made the connection. This family lived in my neighborhood. The kids went to my school, Falcon was in kindergarten with my little brother. I sat across from Falcon's older brother, Brad, in my third-grade class. I remembered watching an episode of WifeSwap not even a year earlier that featured their family. My family didn't watch that show, but we recorded the episode the Heene's were on. Their "mom" for the week struggled to contain the three boys because they were used to running amok around the house and living without formal rules. It was so weird to watch this family I know be on a reality TV show. I knew they were an unusual family. Now I was invested.

As soon as we got back home after lunch, I rushed to turn the TV on. At this point, the balloon and its passenger had been floating in the air for over two hours. Camera crews across the state had tracked the journey from Fort Collins towards Denver. I sat cross-legged right in front of the TV, on the edge of my seat. My mom scolded me, saying my eyes would be ruined if I sat too close. I scooted back a foot and continued to watch intently. My family watched as the balloon floated high in the air, just a silver dot in the video footage. I remember thinking it looked like the UFO from the Brady Brunch episode where Greg pranks his siblings with staged UFO projections. The balloon soon began its descent towards the ground. My stomach dropped. Would the impact hurt him? Would they be able to save him in time? My mom debated these very questions with my grandma on the phone.

Around 1:30p.m., the balloon landed in an empty field near the airport. It was a soft landing, considering a human body was inside. Rescue teams ran towards the silver dome. I held my breath, terrified of what they might find.

News anchors watched in disbelief. Firefighters exchanged confused looks. I rocked back in forth in bewildered excitement. The weather balloon was empty. At first, I didn't believe them. How could he not be in there? How could someone just disappear? Eventually, one news station camera got close enough to show the audience the empty balloon, which was now covered in holes the rescue crew had poked tentatively.

The news covering turned to alternative theories. He had fallen from the balloon from 15,000 feet in the air. There was a different weather balloon that he was in! He escaped the balloon before it took off? The conspiracies spiraled. Back in Fort Collins, the Heene family was being interviewed about their missing son. My classmate, Brad, was on TV—I couldn't help but think it was awesome, even though I knew it wasn't for a good reason. I looked at my little brother and wondered how hard it would be to stuff him in a flying object.

My friend Bea calls a little while later, asking if I want to come help her and some neighborhood kids look for Falcon.

“We think he's in the field by school!” she shouts excitedly.

I of course agree. It's not every day you get to search for a missing boy in your backyard. My mom is hesitant, but not as much as I am persistent. That's kind of our dynamic.

I arrive at the field by our school to find Bea running around barefoot. She has chaotic energy that I sometimes find amusing, like in this instance, but often times find annoying. We spend the next hour traversing the neighborhood, screaming “Falcon, Falcon!” I know we aren't going to find him but put my full effort into it anyway. We finally make it to the Heene's cul-de-

sac. We pretend we're going to visit our other friend who lives on that street but actually hide behind the bushes and watch the cop cars, firefighters, and news crews come in and out of the house. Cars can't get through because there are so many trucks and vans piled up in front of the house. I've never felt so alive.

My mom attempts to pick me up from this neighborhood, though I have to walk to the end of the street to get to her car. She's been watching the news and reports that they still haven't found Falcon. The TV is still on when I arrive home, and I resume my watching position. In the midst of an interview with the county sheriff, a commotion ensues, and I hear a shriek in the background. The camera pans to a shaken Falcon, tightly embraced in his mother's arms.

The next half hour is a string of fragmented interviews, or really interrogations, of the Heene family. What I gather from these bits and pieces is that Falcon had been hiding in the attic for the better part of the day. It seems he ran up there to hide after his father had yelled at him for messing around with the storm chasing equipment (like the weather balloon). Apparently, he would hide frequently when he thought he was in trouble. The focus then turns to why the family thought the boy had been in the balloon in the first place. My classmate, Brad, says he saw Falcon get into the balloon and then didn't see him again. It appears to be a simple misunderstanding and accident—but there are a number of odd things that I struggle to resolve for myself.

Falcon is asked why he didn't come out of the attic when he heard his parents yelling his name. His response was that it was "for the show." His father butts in with an excuse about Falcon confusing the interviews for a show. Then there's the strange fact that the parents called 9News before they called 911. This is the part my dad gets caught up in. He argues that if someone was actually worried their child was flying through the air, they would immediately call

911. This seems like a convincing argument, so I agree with him. Why would you call the news station first?

When Monday rolls around, the Heene boys are not at school. My teacher has to hush the class numerous times throughout the day for whispering to each other our theories on what \*actually\* happened. During math, my tablemate tells me it was all a hoax. He smiles smugly, saying his dad told him that. I ask him what a hoax is.

“Ya know, like it didn’t actually happen. Like they were messing with us.” He says.

In geography, my friend tells me she thinks they were keeping Falcon in the attic for days before the balloon took off. I don’t like thinking about that, so I tell her I don’t believe her. I wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, but I didn’t want to believe that it was completely cruel.

The Heene’s are rarely at school for the rest of the year. Whenever Brad is in class, I feel awkward and don’t know what to say. I want to ask him what actually happened, but something stops me. It doesn’t seem like that would be a nice thing to do. Instead I stick to staring at him when he isn’t looking, as if focusing hard enough on his face will tell me the answers I want.

As time goes on, the gossip fades to the background and the focus turns to who hugged on the playground and who won wallball at recess that day. Every so often there are news stories about “Balloon Boy” and his family, highlighting new interviews with the parents or new facts that have come to the surface. Besides these reminders, the world has mostly moved on. At the end of the school year, I see Mr. Heene in my classroom. It’s the first time I’ve seen him in person. I remember thinking he was much taller than he looked on TV. He was helping Brad pack up his barely used school supplies from his desk. All of the colored pencils were still perfectly sharpened, his notebooks mostly empty. I wonder what his dad was thinking in that moment. I gawked at the celebrity in my very own classroom until my mom hurried me along.

The Heene's moved to Florida shortly after. I hope the kids got the fresh start they desperately needed. The Balloon Boy hoax got lost in my memories for many years, until in 2019 the ten-year anniversary was covered by several local news stations. It was bizarre to think back on the ridiculous prank and how close I had been to it. Of course, everyone who is from Fort Collins remembers this event in some capacity. I'm always shocked when people from all over the country know about it too—it's wild to think that an event from my hometown made national news. My boyfriend was surprised to learn Balloon Boy was from Fort Collins, saying he assumed that something that crazy had to have happened in Florida. Honestly, I agree. I never would have guessed that Balloon Boy would be the thing to put Fort Collins on the map. We have a great state school, trendy breweries, a downtown that Main Town USA in Disneyland is based off of. Yet one of our greatest legacies will be the day that a kid named Falcon allegedly soared the skies in a weather balloon.