Birthday Balloons for Grandpa
To my family and friends,
who remind me on a daily basis,
you are never too old to follow your dreams.

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first met Grandpa when I was two years old. I don’t remember it very well, but I have seen pictures of us together. Grandma and Grandpa used to come visit us every summer and stay at our house for two whole weeks. It was always the best part of summer for me because I would wake up and spend those days with Grandpa.

Before Grandma and Grandpa went home, we always made sure to take family pictures. Mom, Dad, Grandma,
saw him a few times in my life, he was my favorite person in the whole world to play with, and he was my best friend. I know I am only eight years old, and will meet a lot of people in my life, but I don’t think anyone could ever be as cool as my Grandpa.

As I sat on my bed watching the fluffy white clouds play hide-and-seek with the sun, I wondered if Grandpa could see me from Heaven. Sometimes, when the clouds changed shape, I could see his face looking at me. Like the times we used to lay down on the front lawn at his house, and point out the different cloud shapes.

“What are you looking at?” came a voice from the hallway.

It was my sister, Holly. As I turned toward the door, I saw her standing just outside my room wearing her yellow ballerina outfit, holding a brush in one hand and one of her dolls in the other. Holly was in love with the color yellow. She always said that yellow is a happy color. No one in her ballet class had a yellow outfit, and during her recitals she liked to stand out for everyone to see

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her. Holly never goes anywhere without one of her dolls, either, and they always dress in the same color.

“Tied giant balloons to a chair and floated up into the sky. But then birds flew by and popped them and he fell to the ground.”

Looking at Holly, I remembered Mom saying it would be Grandpa’s birthday in two days. “This week will have a sad day for Mom,” I told my sister.

“What’s going to be a sad day for Mom?” Holly questioned.

“Grandpa’s birthday is soon. We have to think of something to do to make Grandpa’s day special for Mom.”

We tried to think of a way to make Mom feel better. There had to be something I could do to make Grandpa’s day special for her, even though he isn’t here anymore.

Looking back at the clouds, I suddenly had an idea. “I’ve got it!” I said, jumping off my bed.

“Got what?” Holly asked.

Running downstairs, I went to find Mom so I could tell her about my plan. Holly chased after me, shouting, “Got what, Andrew? What do you got?”

Mom didn’t hear us come into the kitchen. She was staring out the window looking up at the sky like I was doing a few minutes before. I stood there for a minute, wondering if she was thinking about Grandpa, too.

“Mom, what are you looking at?” I asked her. Mom turned away from the window and placed a card on the
Ben was 15 and okay for a brother, but I got along better with my sister, even though she annoyed me sometimes. After I climbed down the tree and went upstairs, I ran down the hallway to see if Ben was in his room. When I got to his door, I could hear his music blaring outside his closed door.

“Ben, can I talk to you for a minute?” I shouted.

The door opened and there stood Ben looking annoyed, as usual. “Yeah? What do you want?” he asked
me. Ben was a lot taller than me, and he always seemed to use his size to try to scare me.

“Uh, well, I was wondering if I could use your computer to research something.”

“Go use the family computer downstairs! You don’t need to be using my stuff.”

“Come on … please? It will take like five minutes.”

“What do you want to look up? And why can’t you use the family computer downstairs?”

“I want to research something about balloons, and I don’t want anyone else to know right now. It’s going to be a surprise for Grandpa’s birthday,” I said.

Ben looked at me and let out a big sigh. “Fine! You have five minutes. I’m going to take a shower and by the time I come back, you’d better be done.”

“Thanks, Ben! You’re the best.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get all mushy on me.” I watched him grab his things and head over to the shower. “And don’t chat with any of my friends online.” He yelled as he closed the bathroom door.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled. “Like I would want to talk to any of your weird friends, anyway.”

Sitting at Ben’s desk, I opened up his laptop. The picture on the background was a picture of him and some of his friends on the football team.

Of course he is going to have a picture of himself on his computer. What a dork!

I clicked on the shortcut to the Internet browser and typed in, “balloons floating to Heaven.” A bunch of pictures of balloons floating in the sky came up. That didn’t really work. So I erased it and typed in, “people using balloons to float.” I saw the first picture of a man who was floating almost 200 miles in the sky using a chair and some balloons. I sat staring at the picture, and got a funny feeling in my stomach.

It can be done! This picture shows a lot of balloons tied to a chair. But I won’t need a chair. I can attach the balloons to myself and I am just a kid, so I won’t need as many balloons as this man used.

Closing down the computer, all I could do was think about making a trip to Heaven to visit Grandpa. It would be easier than I thought, and if everything worked out, then I could get there just in time for his birthday.

“Dinner’s ready!” Mom announced.

I walked into the kitchen and saw pizza on the counter.

“Pizza! My favorite!” Holly shouted, jumping up and down.

“Mine, too,” Mom replied. “It’s one of the times I don’t have to cook!”
“Why don’t you come in, Andrew? I am sure you are tired from your long trip. Come on, you can help me paint these trees and we’ll add them to the train board.”

I opened the door all the way and stood there staring at Grandpa. I didn’t know what to say, and I was having a hard time believing it was really him.

“Hey, Andrew, did you bring any of my favorite candy with you?”

Smiling, I nodded. Yes, I had brought them with me. I started walking toward Grandpa, but suddenly I couldn’t wait any longer, and I ran as fast as I could across the room and jumped into his arms.

“Grandpa!!” I shouted as I jumped into his arms, hugging him tightly around the neck.

“Andrew, I am so happy to see you! I have been waiting for you.”

“You’ve been waiting for me? I tried to wait to see you, but I just couldn’t anymore. I missed you so much, Grandpa!” I kept on hugging him.

As Grandpa put me down, I saw the silver chain of
his pocket watch dangling out of the pouch on his jean jacket. Grandpa said every train conductor should have a watch to keep track of time. He said it was important to be on time no matter what your job was, but especially when you were in charge of taking people to their destinations.

“Look!!” I continued, “I brought my LEGO® bricks to play with. Here’s your candy, and these balloons are for you, too. Those are for your birthday. I just need to get something to cut the balloon strings off of me. Do you have scissors in Heaven?” I exclaimed.

Grandpa smiled. “No, we don’t need scissors.” And with those words, the balloons came off and gathered into Grandpa’s hands.

I must have looked shocked, because Grandpa chuckled, patted my back, and said, “Let’s tie these balloons to the back of the chair, shall we?”

I nodded in agreement and walked over to the table.

The train was still circling the track as Grandpa sat down on the bench. He looked up and patted the seat next to him. As I walked over and climbed into the chair beside him, I saw the passenger car we were working on just before he died. Everything in Grandpa's shop looked exactly the same before he left, and it felt like we were at his house and not in Heaven at all.

“Grandpa, this is Heaven, right? This room looks just like your train shop at your house. But, how can it be in Heaven and at home, too?”

Grandpa looked at me and smiled. “Well, Andrew, Heaven is a lot like my house back home. Heaven is my new home now, and the things I loved and that were special to me are here in Heaven, too.”

“Like me, Grandpa? I was special to you at home, and now I am here.”

Grandpa took my hand and held it between his. All of a sudden, the train whistle blew again, as if it was trying to remind us it was still there.

“Yes, Andrew, just like you,” he answered. “Why don’t we get to work on our city? I am almost done getting all the pieces in place, and having you here to help is a special gift for me.”

Looking at the board, I noticed the city looked like the place I lived back home. There were houses and cars, there was a building for the bank and library, a gas station, and grocery stores.

Grandpa handed me a small house that looked just like my home. “Why don’t you finish painting this house, and then we can find a car to put in the driveway?”

“Okay. I will paint it the same color as my house,” I said as I reached for a paint brush and brown paint.
Once I had the house painted, I added the house number on the front door. “How does this look, Grandpa?”

“It looks just like home,” he replied, and he took the house and placed it on the board, right next to my friend Matthew’s house.

“Look, there! We’re almost finished building the city. We have the neighborhood you live in done. And the roads are finished. I think there’s only one thing left to finish, here.”

“What’s that, Grandpa?”

Grandpa patted my leg and replied, “Let’s put some cars on the engine.”

I walked over to the shelf that had all of Grandpa’s train cars on it. I browsed through everything and picked out six other cars to attach to the engine that was already driving around the track. I picked out two passenger cars, a coal car, a fuel car, and a railcar.

Grandpa looked at my selection. “Those are great choices, Andrew. We can add those to the engine and then finish up by adding the street signs and a school.”

“WAIT! Grandpa, I forgot one of the most important cars. We need a caboose for the end of the train.”

Grandpa looked at me and said, “I haven’t been able to find the caboose car since I arrived here. I think it may have gotten lost.”

Smiling at Grandpa, I reached for my backpack. “It wasn’t lost, Grandpa. It was at my house, so I brought it with me in case you needed it.” I pulled out the caboose and placed it in Grandpa’s hand.

He traced the train with his fingers and smiled. “I remember when you and I bought this at the train store, Andrew. It was the last car we needed to finish our very first train set. Do you remember?”

Looking at Grandpa, I could see his eyes twinkle again.

“I remember. I was five years old, and it was the first time I got to work in your shop at home. Grandpa, if I leave this here with you, does that mean it won’t be at my house?”

Grandpa shook his head. “Not at all. My shop is still at Grandma’s house, isn’t it? And my shop is also here, in Heaven. I think it is safe to say you will see the caboose when you get back home.” Grandpa took a handful of candy and gave some to me. We sat there watching the train go around the track with all the cars attached to the engine. I was going to talk to Grandpa about not going back home, but I didn’t think this was a good time yet.

“Grandpa, where is our regular engine? The one that says ‘A & G Railroad’ on it?”

“Well, I’m not sure about that. I thought I had all my cars here, but just like the caboose, I haven’t been able
“Yes, Andrew. You just sit here on my lap and sleep. I will hold you while you dream.”
“I love you, Grandpa. You’re my very best friend.”
“I love you too, Andrew. You have always been very special to me. Always remember when you are sad, I am looking down from Heaven and sending you all my love.”
I reached up and gave Grandpa a big hug. “Night, Grandpa. I promise I won’t sleep too long.”

Chapter 8

It didn’t seem like I slept long at all, but it was so hard to wake up.
I figured it was because I didn’t want to wake up. Because I knew when I did, it would be time for me to leave, and I would have to tell Grandpa goodbye.
Sometimes, though, I guess we have to do things we don’t want to do. Grandpa told me that when I was younger. It’s funny how Grandpa’s words always come back to my mind whenever I need to hear them most.
As I opened my eyes, I saw the bright light again. It was shining just like it did when I first woke up in Heaven.

But something was different. It didn’t quite look or feel the same. I could smell bacon cooking and I could hear Holly singing in her room.

It was then that I realized I wasn’t in Heaven with Grandpa anymore, and that the bright light was the sun shining through my bedroom window.

I sat up fast and screamed, “NO!!!!!!!”

I never got to say goodbye to Grandpa.

I never told him one last time that I loved him, and how much I would miss him.

I wanted a few more minutes with him.

I wanted one more hug.

All of a sudden, my bedroom door opened and Mom walked in.

“How are you?” she ran to me. “I heard you scream. Did you have a nightmare?”

“No, I didn’t have a nightmare, and this couldn’t have been a dream, it was real. MOM!! I saw Grandpa. I was in Heaven, and Grandpa’s shop was there. He was working on his trains and then we went outside to play with our LEGO® bricks. He told me to tell you he loves you …”

“How is Andrew?”

“Andrew, honey, I think you were dreaming about Grandpa. Today is a hard day for all of us. It is Grandpa’s birthday—his first birthday since he died. But it is okay; we are doing something special to celebrate and remember him. I bought those balloons, and after breakfast today, we all will be going to the beach to let them go. We will send up birthday balloons for Grandpa, so he knows how special he is to all of us.”

“MOM!!!!! IT WAS NOT A DREAM!!! It was real! Remember yesterday when Ben and I went to the store to get a soda? Well, I bought balloons and M&M’s for Grandpa, and last night when everyone was asleep, I snuck out of the house and took the balloons I bought at the store yesterday and tied them on myself so I could float up to Heaven just like the guy on the Internet. I wanted to visit Grandpa on his birthday. I would still be there right now, but Gabe said I needed to come home. Oh, Mom, Grandpa looks so much better. He doesn’t look sick anymore. He wants all of us to know every time we think of him, he feels our love all the way up there.”

“Andrew, I know you miss Grandpa very much, and it would be so nice if we could visit him in Heaven. But, sweetheart, it’s just not possible. Sometimes dreams feel real and it is understandable you would want to be with him today. But having a dream about visiting him in Heaven …”
On my way to the car, I decided to grab my backpack and take it to the beach with us, in case I found any cool shells to add to my collection. Everyone was by the car waiting for Mom to get the balloons in place when my best friend Matthew came outside.

“Andrew, you’re back!! I thought you were going to stay with your Grandpa? Did you get all the way to here. He has his trains, and when I first got there, he was working on them just like he used to do when he was alive.”

“That’s great to hear. Grandpa sure loved working in his shop, especially when you were there to help him,” Grandma added.

“I think we are all ready to go to the beach. Andrew, why don’t you go get your brother and sister and let them know to meet us at the car?” Mom said as she was getting things ready.

As I left the kitchen, I thought about telling Grandma what Grandpa told me to say, but it didn’t feel like the right time yet. So I went upstairs to let everyone know we were leaving. As I walked down the upstairs hallway, I remembered something I wanted to take with me. I went over to the shelf in my room that had my trains on it. I grabbed the A & G Railroad engine and put it in my pocket. I would send a special surprise for Grandpa when he got the balloons today.
Okay, everyone. I thought it would be nice to take just a couple of minutes and attach your note to the balloons for Grandpa. When we are finished, we'll count to three and then let our balloons go.

Everyone nodded in agreement, and we sat down in the sand to write our notes.

Dear Grandpa,

I wish I were still in Heaven with you, but I understand why you needed me to come home. I miss you every day, and I'll never forget all the times we were together. You will always be my best friend, and I will never forget you.

Happy Birthday, Grandpa. I love you.

Love,
Andrew

P.S. I am sending you one of the A & G Railroad engines, so we can use it when I get there. I think it will be a really long time before we work on the trains together again, but I know one day it will happen.

I took my note and tied it to the balloon string, and then began tying the train engine to the balloon, too.

“Hey, Squirt,” Ben said. “Why are you tying that train engine to the balloon? You know the weight of the
Kathi Denn is retired Navy wife, a mom of 4 children, and a grandma to 7 grandchildren who has been married to the love of her life for 38 years. KatieMae is the endearing nickname her Dad gave her when she was a kid, and has stuck with her ever since.

Her hunger and desire were born inside of her to write after one of her short stories was published in the school newspaper in the fourth grade. Over the years she has written poems, short stories, letters to her
children, and continues to write and share her words with the world.

Whether it be a smile as she walks by a stranger or an encouraging note mailed to someone who is going through a rough patch, KatieMae strives at least once a day to make a positive impact in someone’s life. She is an encourager and a believer that people can do anything they set their minds to regardless what this world may throw at them. Sometimes there will be roadblocks and detours, but it’s important to press on and continue towards our dreams.

*It is my hope that you find something to encourage you in your day, so you can be an encourager to others you come across. We never know when one kind act or one word of encouragement could change someone’s life forever.*