

## The Misadventures of Donald and Paco

### Hot Air Ballooning!

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By

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Bam! Donald dropped the case of Duct Tape he purchased at Loosely a Dollar store on the trunk of the old Pinto Paco was buried under the hood changing the oil on. “Eiyee!” Paco reflexively jerked up, believing some unknown malfunction with the engine had occurred. He pulled back out of the engine compartment. He took off his hat and rubbed the spot on the back of his head that had challenged the integrity of the hoods steel.

Paco, still unaware of the source of the sound and perhaps considering the dullness of his mental activity (the result of a late night at Slinky’s Tavern), asks, “What’s with the box of tape?”

Donald beamed with enthusiasm at the opportunity to present that he had signed them up to compete in County Balloon Race, held each year in July. “We’ll build our own balloon!” He exclaimed with great bravado.

“What?” Paco stood a bit taller.

“We can build our own balloon. How hard can that be?”

“I don’t know,” Paco still rubbing the back of his head.

“Look, I got plans from the library.” Donald held forth a hand full of magazines. “They show how to fly a balloon, have a lot of pictures and dimensions. We’ll use them as our blueprint.”

“We will?” Paco’s now scratching the top of his head.

“Come on. I left beers on the back steps. Let’s drink a few and go over the details.” Donald spun on his heel and marched to Paco’s house. Paco wiped the grime off his hands across his pant legs (coveralls so greasy that Esmerelda his girlfriend refused to wash them, advising him to take them down to the car wash and blast them; until then, he was ordered to leave them standing on the back porch). He flipped his hat back on and followed his friend, thinking that maybe a few beers might perk him up.

As usual with these two, one beer begets a second, then another, then another..... Esmerelda found them napping, heads planted on the kitchen table. Paco’s right hand was still wrapped around a can of beer. Between them lay a magazine about hot air ballooning opened to an article on how they are built. A smirk crossed her demeanor as she considered what hair brained idea Donald was foisting on her man. Imagination is a wonderful gift, for most people

she thought, but not Donald. She planned to query Paco after dinner when the fog of the alcohol will have lifted a bit.

“Mom had a couple tarps in the storage shed.” Donald explained, dropping them on the ground they’d cleared for their construction site. Paco was rummaging through one of the five storage sheds he used *for his collection of valuables* (Esmerelda’s words). He pulled three big tarps out and was sure there was one more somewhere in the piles of stuff.

They realized it was not practical to sew the tarps together, hence the case of Duct Tape Donald had purchased. After initial efforts to construct a balloon shaped envelope it was determined that a square shape one would be more practical. Using scrap lumber they constructed a sizable fixture to drape the tarps over and tape them together. After several days and a couple of cases of Old Milwaukee, the balloon was beginning to take shape, until they ran out of tape. Donald made a run to Loosely a Dollar and picked up two more cases.

Two more days work they finished the taping the envelope together when Esmerelda pointed out. “You realize the tarps are quite porous and will not hold hot air very well?”

After several beers and significant deliberation, the future balloonists concluded that wrapping the entire balloon with Duct Tape was the solution. Fresh out of the tape, the Loosely a Dollar Store Manager told the boys he would order more. Donald said they needed eight more cases, an amount that would surely get the Plant Manager, at Shurtape Technologies, Hickory, North Carolina, attention. The store manager said he would call when their order arrived.

Back at the house, Paco asked. “What’s next?”

Donald rolled his eyes to the sky. “Ah, we need a? What do they call it...a gondola?”

“A boat?” Paco reaching into the cooler for another beer, turned his head and stared at his partner.

“No. It’s what they call the basket thing that hangs down from the balloon. We need to make one. Let’s go to the lumber yard, see if they have some scarp pallets we can nail together. Yeah, that’ll work.”

Paco said. “Ok.”

Three days of foraging the various possibilities Paco and Donald acquired five pallets suitable for building a gondola. They spent the afternoon straightening old nails and tacking the pieces together into a four-foot high by four-foot-wide box. Paco rustled a variety of scrap rope from his hoard which they used to attach the gondola to the framework of the envelope. The men toasted and Donald said. “We need to get a bottle of wine to christen the ship before its maiden voyage.”

“What?” Paco looked at Donald.

“You know, how a ship builder does before they put their ships to sea.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, but first we need to hook up a couple of LP tanks to burners to pump hot air into the balloon. How many tanks have you got? You still have the grill we used at the restaurant?”

Paco looked down at the index finger of his left hand. The one missing the tip. “Yeah.”

“I’ll get the one from my mom’s grill. We need to get them filled.”

“Ok.”

It was late at night when they completed the hook up of old grill parts and bottle gas tanks to the balloon. An observer might question the quality of workmanship given the state of these two’s beer tempered mental acuity. It’d been a long day.

“We’ll light er up tomorrow.” Donald directed.

“Ok.” Said Paco.

It was early morning when Donald stood banging on Paco’s back door. It took three rounds of the thundering pounding to roust Esmerelda out of bed. When she pealed the back door curtain back and saw Donald, she returned to the bedroom and shook Paco awake. “What?” He slurred and wiped a hand across his face.

“Your pal’s outside,” Esmerelda said. She put on her bathrobe and headed to the kitchen to make coffee, very strong coffee.

Donald sat down at the table across from Paco and plopped down a bottle of wine and a beat up, red football helmet, complete with facemask and chin strap.

“What’s that?” Paco said.

“A helmet for the pilot.” Donald spun the helmet opening to face Paco.

Esmerelda giggle as she poured the coffee. She knew what was coming.

Paco asked. “Who’s the pilot?”

“Gotta be you.” Said Donald.

“Why?”

“Well, you’re lighter. There’s only enough room for one of us in the gondola.”

“Uhhhh...I don’t know.” Paco scratched the top of his head. Leaning against the kitchen counter, Esmerelda shook her head and sipped at her coffee, thinking nothing good could come from this.

“Come on, it’s not rocket science. We light up the burners until there’s enough hot air in the balloon and up it goes. We’ll tie it down, so it doesn’t go very high. Then, shut off the gas and down it comes, you know, slowly drifting down as the air cools. Piece of cake.” Donald explained with complete confidence.

Certain there was no way in hell that contraption was getting off the ground, Esmerelda tapped Paco’s chair with her foot. “Man up, Paco. You’ll be a real Neal Armstrong.”

Paco turned toward her. “Who?”

“The astronaut. You know, went to the moon. Kids in the neighborhood will be idolizing you, making you a hero.” Esmerelda chirped.

Paco’s eyebrows furrowed as he tried to interpret Esmerelda’s encouragement.

Donald pressed on. “Yeah, right, Paco. Do it for the kids.”

Held defenseless because of a nagging hang over, Paco relented. “Ok.”

“Get dressed. I’ll meet you out at the balloon.”

Paco got up and went to get his trusty coveralls standing on the porch.

“First, we light the burners, wait until there is enough hot air and the balloon starts to raise. Get a rope and tie the gondola to the fence.” Donald wet his finger and held it out before him. “Good. No wind. Should go straight up.”

Paco looked up at the gray clouds and said, “Ok.” He tied a rope to the gondola then secured it to the neighbor’s chain link fence.

Donald pulled a utility lighter. “Turn on the gas. I’ll light the burners.”

Paco bent over the lip of the gondola. Donald leaned toward the balloon mouth to light the burners. Paco muttered, “They’re empty,” just as Donald pulled the trigger.

The silver taped envelope gave a big fart and shot through the neighbor’s fence, jerking the gondola and Paco, who had flipped into it, along behind. The convoy careened across the neighbor’s backyard through the next fence, skidding to a stop in the McGregor’s backyard.

Donald had been blown backward onto his back. He lay brushing at the flames dancing off his glove and shirt sleeve.

Esmerelda heard a wummmmp and felt the house shudder. She turned to look out the window over the sink. The balloon and Paco were gone. “I’ll be damned!” She bent, tried to look higher to see if she could see the balloon.

Barbara McGregor shot to her feet like she had been sprung from a catapult. “Geezus, Jimmy! Did you see that?” She pulled her reading glasses from her nose as she shuffled around the kitchen table.

Jimmy seated with his back to the window to the backyard, lowered his paper. “What’s that you say, Barbie?”

Barb pointed out the window. “They got the tomatoes, Jimmy! The bloody buggers took out the whole row, they did.” She scampered back around the table to the stove and snatched a fifteen-inch cast iron skillet off the burner.

“Where you goin with that?” Jimmy laid the paper on the table.

“I’ll teach those buggers to mess with my tomatoes.” Barb stormed through the back door, stomping down the steps. She saw the perpetrator crawl out of a box laying on its side. He stood up with his back to her, dancing a jig and flapping his hands against his thighs.

Elbows swinging and knees hiking like a Heisman running back she clopped toward her target. As she approached, she unloaded a two-handed forearm swing that would have impressed Serena Williams. It connected with the back of his red helmet spinning it a quarter turn on his head and spinning him to face her. Barb reared back when she saw the greasy front of his coveralls on fire. “Geezus, let me help you with that.” She muttered and unloaded another forehand, snuffing out the flames, bending the victim to a bow, then she clocked him on the crown of the helmet, laying him out. He screamed, “Eeyie!”

Barb stared at her work. “That you, Paco.”

With a fuzzy slur, Paco said. “Yeah.” Smoke feathered upward from his coveralls.

Donald staggered into the fence opening. He looked at the remains of his grand design, and said, “Well that didn’t work out.”

Paco raised his head, his left eye peeking through the ear hole, said. “Yeah.”